



Valentino's vacation 'The Doctor' recovers from surgery

Perhaps the biggest story in motorcycle racing 2010 will turn out to be Valentino Rossi's crash at the Mugello MotoGP event at the start of June.

Taking it easy at the start of a practice session for round 4, Rossi was apparently too polite in traffic, slowing to let some of his fellow 800cc premier class participants past. When Rossi returned to his normal pace, the story goes, his spec Bridgestone rear slick had cooled, and the top bike racer in the world got pitched from his works Yamaha entering a seemingly nondescript left hand sweeper.

The same evening as his crash, Rossi underwent two and a half hours of surgery to repair his damaged right tibia. The "exposed fracture" was cleaned and then pinned, and two days later another surgery session used 15 stitches to permanently close the wound.

Now MotoGP faces a crisis – how to survive without Rossi? This issue has been a concern for quite some time, ever since 'Vale' got serious about World Rally and Formula One car racing opportunities. Cynics might suggest that Rossi's interest in four wheeled employment was partially about leveraging the series organizers as well as his sponsors and employers. However there is no doubt that Rossi was already pondering his post bike racing career prior to his big tumble at Mugello. At least Yamaha can take comfort in the fact that the injury to their hero Rossi has already made team-mate Jorge Lorenzo the champion elect.

In Supercross, both the top guns in the world, Chad Reed and James Stewart missed the majority of the 2010 season due to crashes. This is not unusual for the current stadium dirt bike world, but MotoGP has been very lucky of late in terms of putting its star power out on the track, week in and week out.

Not that long ago, the premier class in Grand Prix was for 500cc two-stroke racers and pre-electronic aids, many of the top guns were out of action due to injury for much of the season. Mick Doohan, Wayne

Gardner, Kevin Schwantz, Eddie Lawson, Wayne Rainey – all the superstars missed big stretches, seriously affecting their overall performance in the record books.

This is the reason that no one thought the records from the 'Classic '60s' era could be broken – riders like Giacomo Agostini had little real opposition for much of their career and could stack up the wins without having to ride their rare factory bikes all out. It wasn't that tough for an MV Agusta factory racer to beat a grid of privateers on single cylinder machinery.

Not only is Rossi the signature rider for motorcycle sport in the current, modern era, he is also a major health anomaly – before Mugello he had never missed a GP. Since his debut in the 125cc class for Aprilia in 1996, Rossi had competed in every round.

Rossi has often ridden hurt, and although relatively slight of build, there is no doubt that he is very tough physically, and almost unbeatable mentally. Still, a lower leg injury with surgery and hardware is not easily overcome.

Not only is Rossi the most flamboyant GP racer of all time, but his impressive starting record means that most of the fans have had a chance to see him in action. His incredible popularity is a focal point for series and event organizers, since everyone is worried about the hangover coming once Rossi's party is over.

It doesn't help that the major economic downturn has affected all the manufacturers, teams and riders, except maybe Rossi. But everyone's potential earning power will decrease further once Rossi leaves, since the whole grid is measured in a percentage of Rossi's dollars.

No one knows how long Rossi will be out, and organizers are hoping that he might return in time for the very busy fall MotoGP schedule, with five races in six weekends starting in October. So the best case scenario is that the World Champ will



PHOTO BY LES KALMAN

miss nine rounds, and that's a very optimistic time frame.

Rossi was already dealing with a shoulder injury suffered in early season dirt bike training. So 'The Doctor' put some positive spin on things, explaining that the shoulder should be "100 percent when it is time for my return." He also explained that he would work to improve his language skills and catch up on his reading during his convalescence!

By the time of round 7 of the MotoGP season in Catalunya at the start of July, Rossi's 'A' Fiat-backed Yamaha squad will have to field another rider in place of Rossi – it has a contractual obligation with series organizer Dorna. Of course, with the feature class rider count already dangerously low, the individual event promoters are currently short of both their top draw, Rossi, as well as a full grid. Rules require 18 entries, and at the British round 16 racers took the start.

The rules require Rossi's seat to be filled, and it will be tough for Yamaha to come up with an available rider who is able to compete at the sharp end of the MotoGP grid. Logically, Yamaha would promote one of its racers from the 'B' Tech 3 squad, Americans Colin Edwards and Ben Spies.

Veteran Texan Edwards has survived the Rossi team-mate experience, but has already stated that there is "zero percent chance" of taking Rossi's ride. Superbike World Champ Spies is the obvious choice, but the rules restrict rookies from moving to the 'A' team – is this a perfect example of "force majeure?"