

Joe Kopp Reports: Indy Mile, AMA Grand National

I knew this was going to be a pretty busy weekend, as they had an Endurocross National the night before on Friday, then our mile race on Saturday, then the Moto GP race on Sunday. I really wanted to race the Endurocross, but then again I knew that would probably not be the best idea with the points battle I am in for dirttrack right now. You usually crash many times a night while racing endurocross, but ooh is it fun and CHALLENGING! So Rob and I went and watched the Endurocross on Friday night, and I sized up my competition for later in the year when I go to Las Vegas for the season finale Endurocross, November 20th.

The Indy mile is probably the most fun track we have all year long during practice, as in practice, you can usually hold the throttle wide open the entire lap. Well I have been able to do it many times before on my Harley XR 750's, but I would be racing the Ducati tonight, and it definitely has more top end speed, so I was wondering in the back of my mind if I would be able to hold the throttle wide open on this monster of a bike? I think the top speed down the straight on the Harley is probably 135mph here, and the Ducati might only be 5 to 10mph or so more, but that little bit of extra speed I knew was going to feel like way more than that. Can I do it, and even if I can, would it push me into the corner so hard that I would have to gather up control of the bike for too long which would slow down my overall lap times too much? This was the first track that I have been to with the Ducati that I knew I might be able to run wide open with, but could I and if so, would it work?

We line up in practice/qualifier session one and it's Sam Halbert first, then myself, then Johnson, Mees, Coolbeth and so on. I'm telling myself to just try it once, as I knew I could do it on my Harley, no doubt in my mind, but on the Duc? We roll onto the track and I let Sammy go a little, then I start grabbing gears and head into turn one. No problem this time, but I only had a half a straight run at the turn too. hahaha. A little different! Right away I caught Sammy in the first turn and just blew around the outside of him and to the front I was. Now I'm charging down the back stretch and here comes turn three. I did not go in there wide open as I knew I needed to see what the track condition was everywhere before I went for it. I entered the turn and noticed there was lots of traction and it was in great shape, so it was time to hammer down! I blast down the front stretch and charged it into turn one, still not wide open on corner entry, as I just was not too sure yet on whether I could do it. It's kind of like one of those things that if you can do it, then it is a big confidence booster for yourself and what you are capable of in certain conditions. But man, like I said, this Ducati felt like an animal down the straight compared to what I remember on my Harley's here in the past. I get out of turn two and charge down the back stretch on my second lap, and I am telling myself to try it in turn three, wide open! I charge it into turn three and just left her tapped, WIDE OPEN! After a split second of thinking, "ooh shit, this is not gonna be good", my back tire stepped around and helped me get the bike turned and away we were! I made it, WIDE OPEN! If you ever want a good thrill ride that kicks butt over any roller coaster ride you will ever do, try doing that on a Ducati at Indy. It was like, YAH baby, that's what I am talking about. Once I made it through that first corner I went for a few more laps, and this bike was workin' I'm telling you. I came in and ended up having the Fast time of the day so far.

Then in the next session they went out there and watered the track right before we went out. I knew the track was starting to dry out and get hard in places and needed water, but it looked like maybe a little more time was needed for it to soak in before we went out there. They sent us out anyway, and right away I felt it pretty slick coming off turn two. Then I felt a few greasy spots down in turn three and four too, and I was not going to bust my butt because of this. So I kind of took it easy for this session and came home in the 6th spot. Then in the last session we had tried a change to the bike as the track was definitely getting slower and drier, and I came home in the 5th spot. So overall we ended up 6th fastest for the day which I was happy with as my first sessions lap times were very fast. I knew once they watered and fluffed up the track for the heat races later on today, that we would be right in the ball park.

The crowd at Indy is always pretty interesting, as they have the Moto GP race the next day, so alot of the European fans and racers come over to watch us on the mile. I've heard it many times, that "The Mile" is the best show of the weekend from many fans. But beings I was racing the Ducati this year at Indy and Nicky Hayden was the Grand Marshall for our event, who also races Ducati's in Moto GP. This really brought the attention to our pit area, plus the fact that as a surprise, Nicky was going to do a few laps for the crowd on my back-up bike later on in the night was going to be interesting too. Anyway, there were lots of Italians rolling around our pit area all night long, as Nicky's whole crew from his team was there. I tried to talk with a couple of them, but not too much luck in understanding what they were actually saying. hahaha

I was in heat race one with Bryan Smith on the Kawasaki, then Jared Mees, Weidman, Jethro Halbert, Schnabel and others. At the flash of the light, I got the holeshot and blasted through turn one and two. As we go down the back stretch, here comes Smith on that Kawi, as he blasts by me going into turn three. We both hammer through turn three and four and as we go down the front stretch I pull up and try to draft back by him. As I pulled up along side him, he took back off! Dang, I thought my Duc was fast, but that Kawi is way faster! So I was not able to draft back by him, but at the same time I felt pretty good through the corners as my bike was working great. Lap after lap I tried to close the gap on Smith, but he was just too fast right now. Smith ended up getting the win, with me riding a pretty lonely second by myself and then Mees in third. We had the fastest heat race time of the night too, so that told me we were close. This got me in the Dash for Cash and put Mees out which was nice as the Dash points are very valuable.

Now it was time for Nicky to go out and do a few exhibition laps on the Ducati. It looked like he was having some fun as he had her hammered around the turns, but at the same time we all knew he could not afford a fall down as tomorrow was his big day at the GP.

For the Dash we tried a couple of things to the bike, just to try and make it that little bit better. We went out to the starting line and sat there for the rider introduction and when that was done we fired up the bike, but when my bike fired, the throttle started sticking it seemed a little. Then within a few seconds it went from a slightly sticking throttle, to revving dang near wide open? What was happening? I shut it down and put my hand up for help which you get two minutes to work on your bike. Short story, we did not get the bike fixed in those two minutes, so I was forced to sit out the Dash. I was bummed, as I work my butt off to make sure I get in these Dash's, then this happened. But that is part of racing. So anyway Carr won the Dash, followed by Sam Halbert, Smith, Johnson and Bonsey. That was cool to see Carr pull that one off as he was going very fast today! I noticed in the Dash that Smith was not near as fast as he was earlier in our heat race and practice, so this told me the track was probably getting pretty dry and slick, which I felt would favor my Ducati later on.

At a mile track like Springfield the track usually does not ever change that much, but at Indy, the surface is a lot looser, so you always have to stay on top of just how the track condition is, whether it is loose or starting to groove up, and just how much moisture is. And with it being a mile size track, it is just very hard to see very much of the track up close to inspect it unless you are riding around it. I always ride around tracks on my pit bike, but this one is hard as the inside rail is so far away from the track in most places, making it hard to see. The Dash is the perfect time to go out and get a really good feel of just what it is probably going to be like in the final. If you know what the track condition is like, you can go hammer down right off the start, but if you are not sure, then you might have to take it easy for a lap or two while the others that know what it is like are going for it. So points are nice in the Dash too, but just getting the chance to see first hand what the track is doing is VERY important. I was bummed I missed out on that part.

Once back in the pit area, the crew got the bike going again, as it was something little that caused our headache on the starting line. I ended up keeping the changes we made to the bike for the Dash for the Main event, as they were not huge changes, just small ones that I felt would still be good.

Now it's Main event time. I had a really good starting spot in about the middle of the line, but I knew it was perfect for what I wanted as the outside was drier but closer to the groove once you got going. But I felt the moisture in the middle would help me get out of the start, then I could deal with it after that. I was still kind of guessing what the track was like, but either way, I knew if I got a good start that I had to go for it right away. At the flash of the light the Ducati ripped out of there and the holeshot was mine! I charged it into turn one and found it to be pretty dry, but still a little moisture in places. As I ran down the back stretch the first lap Carr went drafting by me. I told Chris right before the start, that lets get together and see if we both can't get away from these guys, and he was up for that, but plans like that are always easier said than done, especially on a mile track where drafting is involved. Anyway for the first few laps, it was just Chris and I going back and forth, and it really felt like this was how it was going to be, as I felt I had something for Chris, but at the same time I knew the track would get drier with each lap, and that might play into his advantage with his Harley, but I was ready to fight for it. Then on lap 4 the red lights come out as someone had crashed behind us I guess. I guess it was Bonsey, as he was up and ok but unable to make the restart.

For the single file restart it was Carr with the point, then myself and I am not too sure of the exact order behind me, but they were all back there. Carr picked the far outside to start with as I would have too if I was riding my Harley, but it was very dry slick out here and I was hoping I could get my Duc hooked up off the first few feet. Once we were rolling I knew I would be fine, but I had to get her rolling first. At the start my rear wheel just lit up and I tried to jump out to the groove, but quite a few guys got by me right then. I went from second all the way back to around tenth in the first straight. Once back here in the pack I noticed it was much dustier entering the turns than I had seen all night long so far, which made entering the turns kind of spooky. In the next few laps I was kind of loosing the pack in front of me, which was Mees, Jacobsen, Sam Halbert, Weidman and the rest as Carr, Smith, Johnson and Coolbeth were right in front of them.

After quite a few laps I could see that I was ever so slowly starting to inch back up on them, but they had quite a big gap on me by now, probably around two seconds or so and making up a tenth of a second here and there makes this catching process very slow, but you just have to keep chipping away at it. The track was pretty much dry and grooved up around the lower part of the track by now, which was still pretty racey. Most of the race I was completely by myself, but around lap 19 I finally had caught some of them. In the next couple of laps I got past Weidman, then Jacobsen, then Mees. With two laps to go I was getting very close to Sammy, then on the white flag lap I slipped off the groove down in turn three and lost a little time I had just made up on him. Smith ended up getting the win, followed by Carr, then Coolbeth, Johnson, Sammy and myself. I felt good to be able to come back through the pack like that, but I really wish that restart had went a little better. Ooh well, as that's racing!

Next weekend we have a big one. A double header at Springfield with the shorttrack on Saturday then the mile on Sunday and I'm going to go there and show them who wants it the most. My Hondas a ready for the shorttrack and we have a new secret for the mile on the Ducati. Time will tell.

Until next time, G'Day!

Joe