



FIRST LOVE LAST RIDES

On clearing his desk, SuperBike's Dave Bradford unearthed an old lantern. A quick spit and polish later and he'd been granted three wishes: a GSX-R750, a free track, and a bunch of riding buddies. Hey presto, disaster awaits!

Words: Dave Bradford Pics: John Noble

Can you imagine being told you'll never be allowed to ride a bike again? That's what happened to me at the end of 2006. I was diagnosed with a genetic eyesight defect as a result of which my retinas are committing suicide and gradually squandering my peripheral vision. Although I was unaware of a problem with my sight, I failed the strict visual fields test for driving, so it was bye-bye licence.

The last time I rode a bike was in December 2006, on my then long-term, a Kawasaki Z750. It was cold and damp, and the occasion was too imbued with sadness to really enjoy. Getting over my addiction to riding bikes has been tough, but I'm gradually coming to terms with it, meting out my frustration on physical sports like mountain-biking and running. I've also decided to go back to 'school' to study for a Masters degree, while freelancing to pay the bills. Action is the best response to misfortune; you can't outrun your demons for ever, but you can get a head start.

Despite the distractions, there's one craving that

still curses through my veins – the yearning to ride on track. I started doing trackdays in spring 2006, shortly after joining *SuperBike*, but I was instantly hooked. Many of you have found this out for yourselves, so I'm sorry, but to those who haven't, putting a bike to its true purpose on track isn't just incomparable to other types of biking – it's a complete revelation, like no other thrill on earth.

Shaggy dog story

So, being declared a permanent non-starter has been the toughest slice of cold turkey to chomp through. (You need a road or ACU licence for UK track-days, and the ACU eyesight standards are the same as the DVLA's. In other words, I have a cat in hell's chance of getting back on track.) Or so I thought...

Shortly after my diagnosis, I wrote a newspaper piece telling my shaggy-dog story in the name of 'human interest'.

A series of coincidences followed. The article was picked up by a documentary film maker, Piers Sanderson, who was looking for someone with my condition on whom to base a film. He called me, we met, and I figured I had very little to lose from having a camera poked in my face every now and then. Piers came along to a hospital appointment and, after chatting to my perennially upbeat ophthalmologist, he became hell-bent on arranging to film me riding on track. I thought it was a long shot, to be honest, but I wasn't about to discourage him.

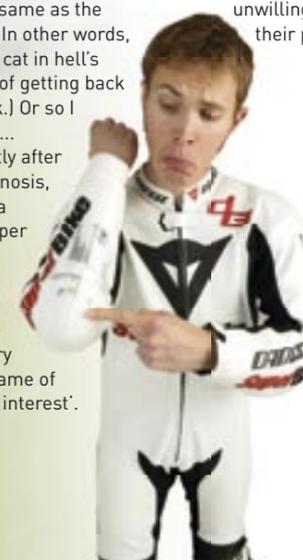
After getting a series of knock-backs from litigation-fearing circuits unwilling to open their pit-lanes

to a bloke with dodgy eyes, Piers got an encouraging phone call from Rockingham. They were willing to do what others weren't, and agreed to give me free reign for a whole morning at the end of September. I was free to take along anyone who was willing to ride at their own risk (that'll be us then – *SuperBike* staff). Oh-fucking-yeah, Rockingham, you most definitely rock!

Take your pick

The next question was what bike do I want to ride? OK, it's an enviable dilemma maybe, but what do you choose to ride, out of all the bikes on the planet, for what might be your last ever outing on track? I had a rough idea what I was looking for: nothing too intimidating or tough to get to grips with, but something fast and light with a reputation for being all things to all men. The answer leapt to mind like a lightning flash, and universal agreement from Simon, Al, Kenny and JP cemented my choice: it had to be the GSX-R750. Suzuki's press office kindly obliged, and, of course, I couldn't go out in a blaze of glory

■ Crash damage? What crash damage? For sale, one set of leathers. Used once. One careless owner.





Competitive dad? Old man Bradford (below) does Dave (right) on the brakes. Dave blames dad



“Oh fuck, my bike’s about to skittle my old man and turn a shit situation into a family catastrophe.”

without a flashy new set of personalised leathers. Dainese appeased my prima donna-ish demand with a dazzling white Laguna suit, and the dream was all but complete. All that was left to do was pray for sunshine.

Dad rocks

When the day of reckoning arrived, it looked as though my prayers fallen on hostile ears. Rain and gales had swept across the country overnight, and the scene outside the window of our Market Harborough hotel room was grim to say the least. By the time we got to the track, though, things were looking up – slightly. The rain had almost stopped, but the wind was freezing and the track was soaking. Our privileged domain for the morning was Rockingham’s mile-long, four-corner handling circuit, perfect for getting to know in a short space of time. After a few minutes pacing around, my Dad, who had come along with his ZX-6R, declared that conditions were OK for getting in a few early laps to learn the track. Like an excitable kid at the seaside, a bit of cold water wasn’t about to stop him taking the plunge.

At this point, I should have ignored his reckless haste and waited for the

strong wind to blow the track dry. But after eight months of waiting, patience wasn’t going to get a look in. Getting kitted up and swinging a leg over the beautiful black Gixxer was like returning home to long-lost love, stirring up a strange combination of faded familiarity and deep-rooted longing. Out I went, and sat on the tail of my Dad, full of nervous excitement despite the cautious pace. The sun was shining now, and glistening off the wet track. We circulated a couple of times, consciously keeping it snail-slow through the turns. And then, calamity struck.

Heading towards the final right-hander, my Dad shut off and got on the brakes earlier than I was expecting. Thanks to my edgy nerves – but also because I didn’t realise how little grip was available – I grabbed a handful of brake. Before the thought, “Oh fuck, the front’s locked up”, reached my brain, I was sliding down the track, thinking “Oh fuck, my bike’s about to skittle my old man and turn a shit situation into a family catastrophe”. Luckily, the GSX-R’s

grinding bodywork panels scrubbed off just enough speed to avoid becoming a ZX-6R-bound bowling ball. And that, in a nutshell, was my first ever crash on a track – remarkably dumb and avoidable, but with an impressively lengthy slide down the Tarmac.

Sportsbikes redefined

Good fortune sprung forth in the form of Jayne on her GSX-R600, who turned up freezing and soaked to

the skin, but graciously agreed to loan a footrest and brake lever. (I live in fear of her ‘calling in’ such a momentous favour!). By the time Dave the Goat had completed the

what I thought I knew about sportsbikes. The power is just right – plentiful, but not a scarily excessive – and it behaves with unbelievable compliance. It lets you off all sorts of ham-fisted mistakes with a tolerant, unerring precision which assures you that you’re not nearly in danger of troubling its limits. If you think you need a faster bike than this, you’re either clinically insane or you should be racing for a living.

The day draws to a close when the fuel light comes on, and it’s well past our deadline to vacate the track. Coming in and facing the camera for a final summing up, I’m lost for words (and I can barely do any better now). Suffice to say, it has been great, this biking lark, and today topped it off majestically. If I never get chance to ride on a track again (although I’m not giving up hope), then at least I can say I had my fix, savoured the thrill, and laid the beast to rest with a final day in the sun. **BT**

MASSIVE THANKS

To Rockingham, for the track. Suzuki, for the GSX-R750 (sorry about the damage, thanks for the bill - Ed). The Motocom-Bikestop-Dainese alliance for the kit. And to Piers Sanderson for making it all happen.