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Honda

Honda Road Racerhead v.3 #42

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By CJ

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"So, how's the qualifying in Nepal?" Fellow journalist **Dennis Noyes** was the one to pose the question that got me temporarily out of Kathmandu, and although I'm still in Asia, I'm finally at a motorcycle race after far too long away. And while the MotoGP championship had been clinched long before I arrived in Kuala Lumpur (minus my luggage) on Wednesday night, there's plenty to talk about two days before Sepang's Polini Malaysian Motorcycle Grand Prix on Sunday.



Will Biaggi be back in MotoGP—and back on a Honda—in 2008?

Andrew Northcott photo

Of course the biggest bombshell was yesterday's news in the Italian press that **Max Biaggi** and Gresini Racing are discussing the possibility of their joining forces in 2008. It's early yet, and the move is anything but a guarantee, for a number of reasons: First, there's the question of money. When Alstare Suzuki failed to re-sign Max for World Superbike next year, the reason given by team boss **Francis Bata** was that the Roman's asking price was too high, and it would seem unlikely that a satellite team—even a MotoGP satellite team—would have much deeper pockets.

Then again, we're talking here about Italians, a people who are famously capable of finding solutions and financing when necessary. Also, the prospect of Biaggi and **Alex de Angelis** on the same team would be likely to help land a big Italian sponsor, and anyway, perhaps the enticement of returning to Grand Prix for another shot at the premier-class title that has thus far eluded him would be enough to convince Mad Max to lower his asking price. Besides, according to Italian newspaper La Gazzetta dello Sport, Biaggi and Alstare weren't really that far apart in terms of money (800,000 euros versus 600,000 euros), so that likely wasn't the reason for their split. FGSport boss **Maurizio Flammini** is said to be trying to find a solution to keep Max in WSBK, without much luck.

It would be a big turn-around. During an exclusive interview for our July issue, when I asked him if he would like to return to MotoGP, Biaggi said the following: "Honestly, I've lost a bit of interest in MotoGP. To give you an example, last Sunday, when they were in Istanbul, I was out on a dirt track bike—I didn't even see the race. In 2006, I didn't miss an occasion to watch the races, but this year, I still haven't seen a race from start to finish. I've lost some interest, and I prefer to dedicate time to things I like."

When I expressed incredulity, Max continued: "Really, I'm fine where I am—truly. Obviously, I'm always open to anything that could happen—I have no prejudices—but honestly, I'm in this championship, and I would be shocked if I did something different. I really like where I am."

Still, that interview was conducted in April, and it seems that Biaggi is once again interested—and for good reason. Gresini is without question the top satellite team on the grid, and very often they've proven to be better than many of the factory teams. Since it's almost inconceivable that Honda would build two lemons in a row, the bike should be competitive, and because Gresini will still be on Bridgestones—and Repsol Honda will likely still be on Michelins—**Fausto's** outfit could be very, very strong if the Japanese rubber still has the edge. Veteran Biaggi and young de Angelis could make for an ideal combination, and it would be great for the sport (Dorna CEO **Carmelo Ezpeleta** has gone on record as being amenable to the scenario, and **Nicky Hayden** admitted today that a return by his former teammate could well boost interest).



Randy de Puniet surprised everyone by notching the fastest time today.

Andrew Northcott photo

Max himself was quoted on **Paolo Scalera's** always-well-informed website www.qpone.com as saying: "For the moment, I would prefer not to make any statements. I can only confirm that I won't race for Suzuki. I can add that I think this year has demonstrated that I still have a desire to race and to know how to put my heart into it."

But (and this but is bigger than **J-Lo's**), what about Honda? During the latter part of the 2006 season, the relationship between Max and the marque deteriorated publicly and embarrassingly, and the conventional wisdom is that #3 was blacklisted by Big Red—perhaps even by the Japanese in general. (After being dropped by Honda at the end of '06, he failed to land a ride with Kawasaki when Bridgestone refused to supply an additional rider with tires.) When I asked Max about this during the aforementioned interview, he said "I don't think Honda helped me—not even a tiny bit—and honestly, I don't know why.... Let's leave it at that."

On the *other* hand (and then we really will move on to other topics), Gresini Racing reportedly released Toni Elias for '08 earlier today.... The first big 2008 test, which follows on the heels of the November 4 Valencia finale, is starting to look pretty interesting.



Road Racerhead Archives