



Top: No race morning is complete without a run for coffee and tires. Middle: A subtle reminder on which way to shift. Here you can see the quick-fill fuel cap, yellow overflow tube and radio button on the left handlebar. Bottom: The changing weather conditions caught many riders out, causing much of the race—including much of teammate Duke's stint—to be run under caution.

TRIAL BY FIRE



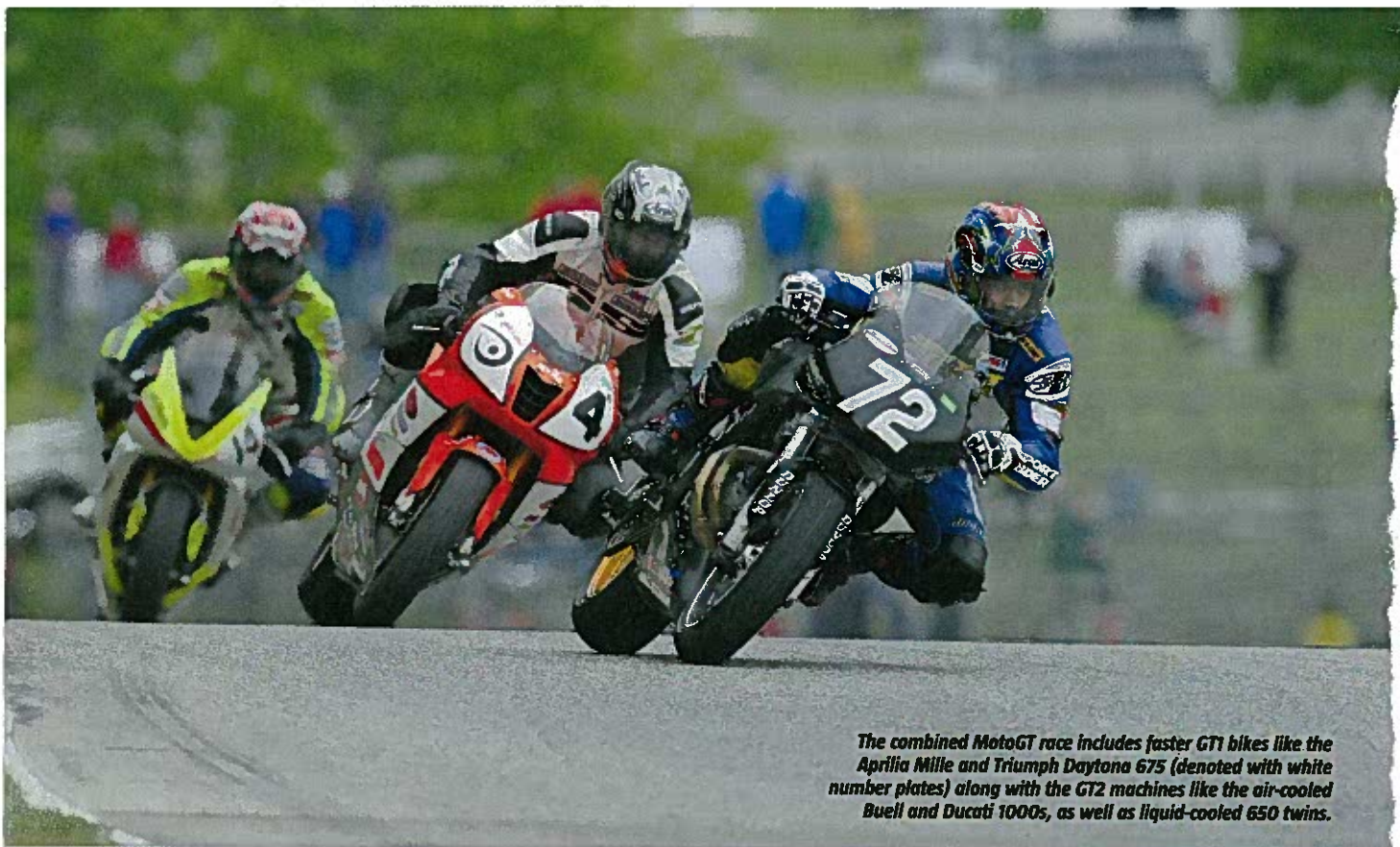
SR jumps into the deep end as the New Guy competes in his first professional race

BY TROY SIAHAAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN J. NELSON
AND TROY SIAHAAN

PITPASS

10:45am IT'S 15 MINUTES BEFORE THE START OF THE AMA MotoGT race at Road America and there's chaos and long faces in the James Gang/Hoban Brothers pit. All week long the weather prediction for today, Saturday, called for rain and the high a "balmy" 54 degrees. To make matters worse, droplets had just started to fall from the sky. Now it was a crapshoot as to which tires to run. At the last second, my Buell XB12R Firebolt was fitted with rains—a tire I had absolutely zero experience with—then I jumped on and connected my radio. "Good luck," said Matt King, my crew chief. "I'll need it," I thought to myself.

And so began my first professional race with the AMA. But before we go further, let's unravel the pieces that lead up to this point. Like most crazy story ideas we get at the



The combined MotoGT race includes faster GT1 bikes like the Aprilia Mille and Triumph Daytona 675 (denoted with white number plates) along with the GT2 machines like the air-cooled Buell and Ducati 1000s, as well as liquid-cooled 650 twins.

magazine, this one started with a simple phone call. This time from Paul James, Director of Product Communications for Buell. "Troy, how would you like to team up with Aaron Frank from *Motorcyclist* and ride my old XB12R racebike from last year in the MotoGT2 class for the upcoming two-hour AMA round at Road America?" Needless to say, it didn't take long for me to return his call and accept his offer.

THINGS NEVER GO AS PLANNED

Originally Frank, from our sister publication *Motorcyclist*, was slated to be my teammate. He's spun plenty of laps around

the place and together we made for a strong team to fly the company banner. Unfortunately, family obligations the day of the race meant that he had to back out. In our search for a replacement, Kevin Duke, Editor-in-Chief of *www.Motorcycle.com* kindly stepped up to the plate (not a very tough sell, to be honest).

With our rider lineup settled the next major hurdle was going through the rigmarole of AMA credentialing. I'll spare the rant, but the fact that a blood sample wasn't required is a minor miracle. Eventually all the required paperwork made its way to AMA headquarters in Florida, but

as our flight for Wisconsin left Los Angeles, neither Duke nor I knew if licenses would be waiting for us when we got there.

THE BUILD-UP

No rider is successful without the help of a solid crew behind him, and come Thursday practice we finally met the ones who got suckered into helping a team of motorcycle journalists disguised as AMA racers—a daunting task to say the least. Led by Mike Kirkpatrick, he and his team clearly weren't fazed by the task at hand (or at least they didn't show it) and displayed the preparedness and professionalism you'd expect from full factory teams. It was also at this time that we were introduced to our steed for the weekend, affectionately known as "Chief."

At first glance it seems the only difference between the standard XB12R Firebolt and this one was the lack of lights, mirrors and turn indicators. And that's largely true; with a horsepower restriction of 95 horsepower, our engine was largely stock, save for a Buell race kit exhaust and ECM (Engine Control Module). A race kit XBRR swingarm, like the one used on the ill-fated Formula Xtreme racer, extends the wheelbase slightly but allows for the chain-drive conversion. A Penske rear shock and modified fork internals keep the spec Dunlop GP-A tires on the road, and an Öhlins steering damper calms headshake. To catch spilling fluids, a mandatory bellypan was also fitted.

Prior to our arrival in Wisconsin, James had asked us which shifting



AMA's spec tire, the Dunlop Sportmax GP-A utilize multi-compound technology for optimum grip leaned over and stability while upright. Here, one can clearly see where the two compounds meet.



Dunlop's standard front rain tire (top) works in conjunction with the rear to evacuate water as quickly as possible and actually provide knee-dragging lean angles under full wet conditions. In drying conditions, the soft tread blocks flex and disintegrate from the heat buildup, making for an ill-handling bike.

method we'd prefer: standard or reverse. The bike was already set to a reverse shift pattern—which I preferred—and Duke proclaimed he was comfortable with that setup as well. So it was left alone. A decision we'd soon regret...

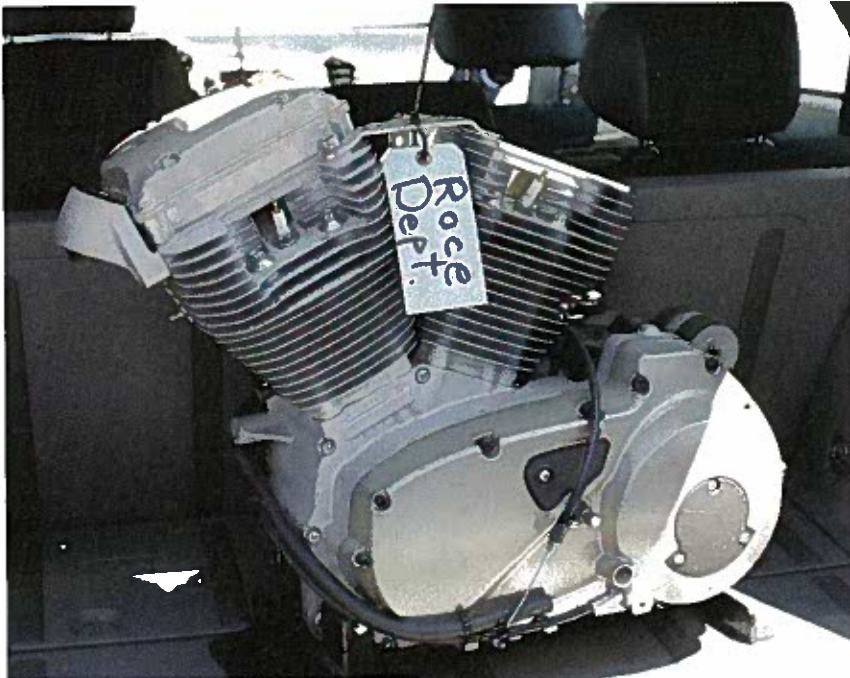
THURSDAY DRAMA

With zero time on Chief, we decided to alternate sessions during practice to set the bike to our liking, with Duke going first. After our first sessions on the bike we noted that steering felt marginally slower than the stock bikes; probably a result of the slightly longer wheelbase. We also discovered that the Öhlins steering damper was cranked to almost full stiff, which made it really tiring to steer. And while we were complaining, we also voiced to the team how soft the six-piston caliper felt compared to the stock bikes we rode just days before. Turns out the eight-pistons weren't equipped on the Firebolts until 2009, but because the upgrade wasn't in effect when this bike last raced, we were stuck with the six-pots.

For Duke's next practice session all was going to plan when suddenly, on the cool-down lap of the session, a faster rider made an inside pass through the chicane. Spooked, Duke mentally reverted back to the street-shift pattern he's been used to all along. His foot then went under



The aftermath of an accidental downshift.



After a few phone calls, Duke and I took delivery of this new engine direct from Buell (above). But not only were we given the wrong engine, it didn't have any valves (left).

meant for parts, its history was unknown and it was likely the engine for an eight-hour race the previous year. With our day of practice down the drain the decision was made to make the four-hour round-trip to East Troy to grab the fresh, new engine. Upon our return, King feverishly went to work. Not more than ten minutes later, as he removed the valve cover, did we hear more troubling news. "Guys," he said with a look of disbelief, "we have a problem. This engine has no valves!" Sure enough, as the rest of the team huddled around, it was clear as day—the cylinder head was bare. No valves. No springs. Nothing. To add insult to injury, James was quick to point out, "that's the wrong engine anyway." Apparently there was a mistake made at the shop and we were given an engine for a different model XB. "That one has different mounting points and a different ECM."

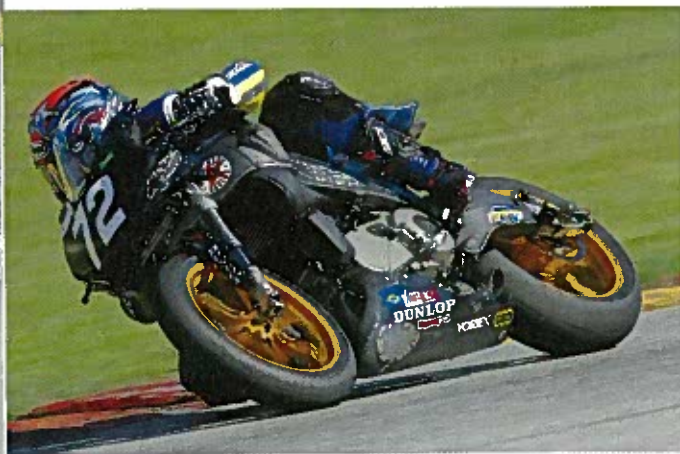
As our weekend of gambles was shaping out, we had no choice but to install the spare parts engine from the trailer and hope for the best. King and Kirkpatrick worked long into the night and when we returned the next morning there was the number 72 machine, finished and ready to ride.

FRIDAY FRUSTRATIONS

I crept along at a moderate pace during Friday practice, weary of what could go wrong. But as the competitive urges

the lever, clicked up in what he thought was an upshift—but was really a downshift—and the rear piston sucker-punched a valve. We were in trouble.

There was hope, however. A few phone calls revealed that there was a spare engine with zero miles back at the Buell race shop. The alternative was to install a spare engine Kirkpatrick brought with him. Originally this engine was





In true privateer fashion, the team suspended the frame via tie-straps to the support beams of the canopy to aid in lowering it onto the engine.

started brewing, the Suzuki SV650 of team MIM/Repsol snaked past me. Not knowing where I stacked up against my fellow competitors I decided to follow. I figured if the engine was going to quit, better to find out sooner than later. As I followed the

orange Suzuki into turn one, the brakes felt worlds different than what I had practiced on earlier. Turns out that while Duke and I were on our field trip for engines, James and the crew sourced an eight-piston caliper for Chief. And since current

production models now came with them standard it was now legal for our bike. The difference was drastic and it showed in my times; I lapped a whole three seconds quicker than I had the day prior.

Qualifying wouldn't mean much over two hours in a field of seven. Since I was the quicker of the two riders, the plan was to have me go in the beginning of qualifying and send Duke on his way to use the rest of qualifying as additional practice. Amazingly, I had lost those three seconds I found during practice. And unfortunately, Duke wasn't able to better my time.

Appalled and frustrated with my qualifying performance, all that was left to do was wait and plan our race strategy.

INTO THE DEEP END

We calculated Chief could run 45 minutes under green flag conditions before needing fuel. Being a two hour race, the team decided I would start—and under ideal conditions—run for 45 minutes, pit, run Duke for 45 minutes and then I would close out the last half hour. Of course, race day conditions were anything but ideal.

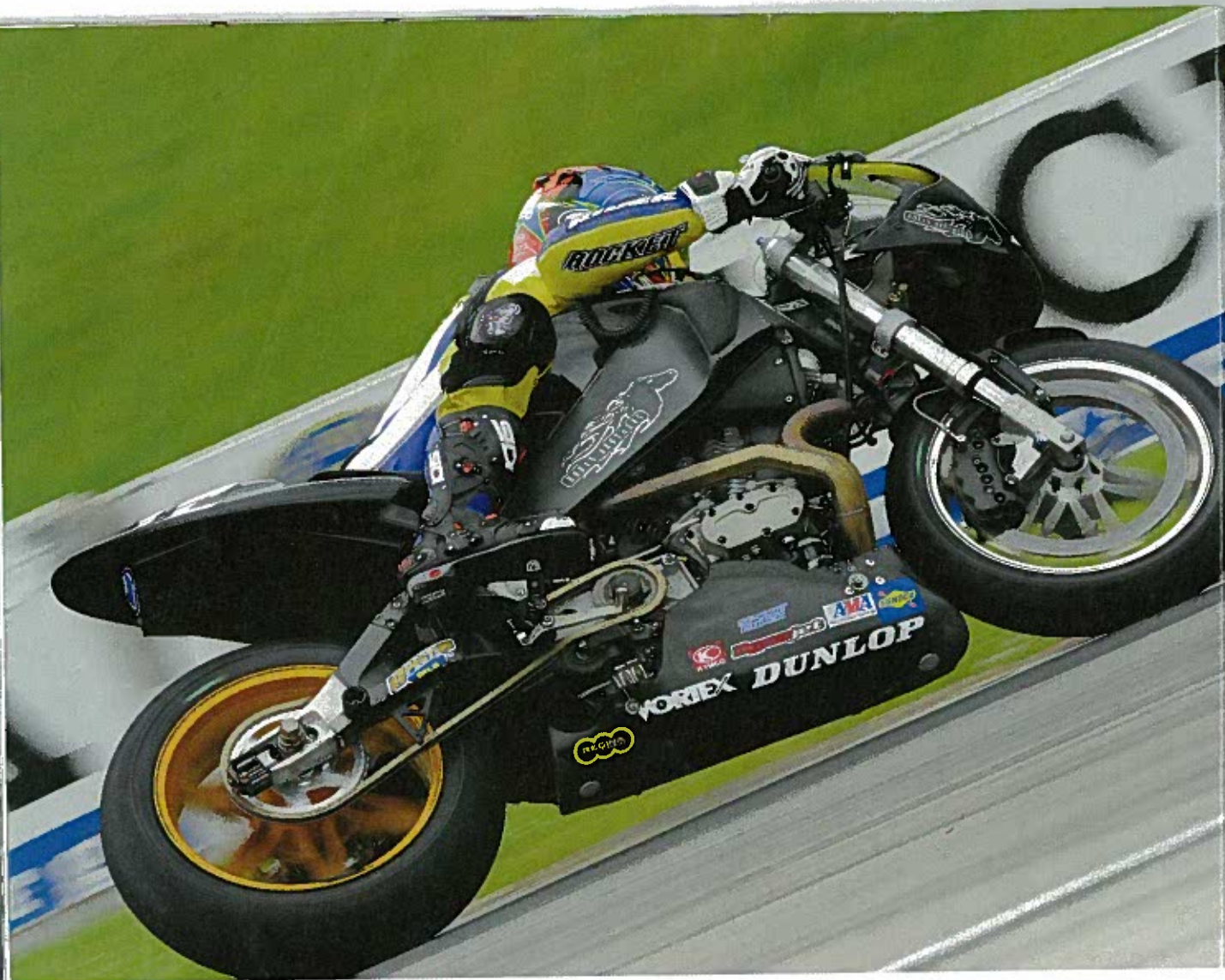
And this brings us back to where we started. With rain drops looming, the morning decision to grab a set of Dunlop rain tires was looking like a good idea as we made a last-second decision to put them on the bike. All I could do now was hope for rain...

The rain didn't come, and it didn't take long before I knew we made the wrong move with the tires. Through the Carousel the tread blocks on the side of the tire would flex so much I'd get uncontrollable headshake. Without a quick-change front wheel setup a tire change would cost us two minutes in the pits—an eternity. Since all the bikes ahead of us started with the same tires I decided to soldier on for as long as possible. Eventually it became too much. Seeing my times gradually get slower and slower, King made the call to change to the dry tires. Looking back, it's a decision we



Kirkpatrick (left) and King demonstrate proper technique in engine installations. The two worked late into the night to finish the transplant in order to make practice Friday morning.





should have made from the start. With a drying track and the proper tires I could string together some quick laps. With confidence brimming, everything was in line to claw back some time to the leaders.

Then the droplets started falling again. Hurdling down the front straight yellow flags were waving—a GT1 class bike was on its side in the gravel trap with the rider walking away. This brought out a full course caution and as the field lined up behind the pace car, my strategy changed from race mode to self preservation mode. With the changing conditions attrition would be the name of the game, and if we could keep it on two wheels and limit the time in the pits, the chances of someone ahead of us falling were in our favor.

I tried to radio to the crew to let them know I was gambling and staying out on the dry tires. After a long, dead silence I looked down to see my radio cable dangling by the side of the bike. Somehow I had disconnected myself. Thankfully, the pace car period afforded me the chance to reach with my left hand and connect the radio cable to the receiver on my helmet—all while circulating around the track. Radio connection back in order, King

asked me how the track was. “Too dry for wets and too wet for dry’s,” I replied back, “but I’m staying out on the dry tires.”

Being a four-mile course, track conditions would vary from one end to the other. With such uncertain conditions, smooth inputs would be key to finishing. Eventually, King would radio for me to pit for fuel and a rider change. As I was circulating, Duke made the decision to fit the bike back to rain tires for his stint, and as I made my way to our pit the team worked feverishly to fulfill his request. Finally with a moment to relax, the team informed me we were currently running in fourth place and that my times were among the highest of those also on dry tires. It was also at this time that I looked over at the clock—12:30pm. I had been on the bike for 90 minutes!

For Duke, the switch to rain tires was the right choice as the heavens started to open just as his stint began. Unfortunately, opportunities for him to take advantage were foiled as others got caught out by the rain—forcing the latter stages of the race, including the final lap at 1pm to be run under caution. And that’s how our dramatic race ended. With a final lap behind

the pace car that was anything but. Nonetheless, we still carded a fourth place finish for our professional debut. Amazingly, Frank Shockley and Ryan Elleby aboard the Touring Sport Paul Smart 1000DS Ducati not only won the class, but the overall race. Just as surprising is the James Gang/Hoban Brothers GT1 entry of James and Jeff Johnson winning their class, their first victory aboard their new machine.

THE AFTERMATH

Without a doubt the conditions we faced for our AMA debut were the most difficult any racer has to deal with. Our crew of Mike Kirkpatrick, Matt King and the rest of the team who helped make this weekend a success can’t be thanked enough for all of their hard work. After our first engine gave up the ghost, no one knew if the spare would even idle—let alone last the whole race distance. Instead of frowning, everyone rolled up their sleeves and went to work. Defeat was not an option. It was a weekend we won’t soon forget, at one of the most majestic tracks in the country. If ever the invitation is offered again, Buell, you know where to find me. Only this time, let’s keep the bike standard shift from the start. 🏍️