

It won more races than any other bike.
It was arguably the only full-factory machine out there in British Superbike, so why didn't the HM Plant Honda Racing CBR1000RR Fireblade win the title?
And will sticking a fat bloke on it really give us the answers?

Flashing Blades

Words: Bertie Simmonds Images: James Wright/Double Red & Scott Grimsdall

Road bike magazines may tell you that the GSX-R1000 is the daddy, but many of us still buy the bikes that aren't quite the best performing machines out there. It could be that they look nicer, or flatter the rider a little more. In the case of the CBR1000RR Fireblade it's both. It's not as scary as the GSX-R and it looks like an RC211V if you squint. Little wonder then that it sits just behind the GSX-R in terms of outright sales in the UK. In race terms there's also plenty of Fireblades on the British Superbike grid, but the two machines that are taking it really seriously are the HM Plant/Honda Racing Fireblades. This is a full-factory effort which is aiming to win Honda's first British Superbike title in almost two decades.

Weighing up the merits of arguably the most successful British Superbike of 2005 from atop a large, wet grassy hillock was not the way I wanted to end my first session on Ryuichi Kiyonari's HM Plant Honda.

It was no fault of the bike that we ended up on possibly the only raised bit of land for miles around - Cadwell Park being one of the few bits of elevated real-estate in an otherwise traditionally flat county of Lincolnshire. But I have to admit, it was my fault entirely.

I plead to the jury that this was simply a by-product of the utter and all-round brilliance of the best two-wheeled machine I have ever placed my capacious gluteus maximus on.

The HM Plant/Honda Racing Fireblades, are - to all intents and purposes - HRC factory bikes.

Last year the bike came direct from Japan to lift the British Superbike title. Armed with rising Japanese star Ryuichi Kiyonari and consistent BSB stalwart Michael Rutter - as well as the only direct factory input from tyre giants Michelin - the team failed to take the title. Instead, John Reynolds and the mighty GSX-R1000K4 did the business with Rutter second and a fast-improving Kiyono laying down

his marker for 2005 with a dominant double at the final round at Donington Park.

For 2005, it's been said that the bikes - while still HRC's finest - are now more made from kit parts available to all. Each part still seems ruthlessly efficient if the first half of 2005 was anything to go by. In an awesome display by the two Honda riders, the pair won nine of the first twelve races. But injuries to both Kiyono and Michael - and the remarkable fight-back and performance of an on-top-of-his game Gregorio Lavilla and increased effort from Dunlop - finally saw the championship go the Spaniard's way at the final round at Brands Hatch.

But, barely a week later after the Kent season-ender, I'm standing amongst the damp leaves at Cadwell's Hall Bends looking at (and sod the arguments) THE most successful British Superbike of 2006. Sure, it didn't take the title, but it took the lion's share of wins: 14 to Ducati's nine and Yamaha's one.

It's also probably THE most expensive motorcycle to race in the UK series, with estimates of its worth fluctuating anywhere between £150,000 and £250,000.

I'm pretty familiar with Fireblades. And FireBlades (capital 'B' before 2004, y'see?) I've ridden loads of them - on road and track. Hell, I've even written a book about them - it went straight to the Amazon bargain bin, but the ISBN number is 1-859... (that'll do Bertie - ED). Okay, okay, you get the picture? I've even got a 2005 model at the moment, which came along as the base-model for our back-to-back assessment.

Sauntering out nonchalantly on the CBR1000RR on Pirelli Dragon Evo Corsas gently scrubbed in by a certain Mr Rutter, I'm instantly hit by just how user-friendly the Fireblade is. As small and as suppository-like as litre sportsbikes are now getting, for big guys like me, Honda still know how to build a one-size-fits-all philosophy into their machines that the likes of Kawasaki and Suzuki would do well to imitate.



Price Breakdown

HM PLANT HONDA RACING CBR1000RR FIREBLADE

It's difficult to actually break down the cost of the whole bike as the four bikes used by the HM Plant team have been costed at £1 million, including all the development that's gone into them. But, you can get official kit parts from Padgetts, many of which are used by Honda Racing. We've done our best to track down the kit parts, but in some instances we've had to source alternatives or guesstimate the cost.

	Price	Contact
2005 Honda CBR1000RR Fireblade	£8500	Honda UK (0845 2008000)
ENGINE/PERFORMANCE		
Engine direct from the factory. But a similar tune-up with associated parts and datalogging equipment would cost in the region of	£15,000	01924 478491
Or Padgetts offer three power-up kits, which when used together offer a superbike-spec engine:		
No 1 - Contains inlet and exhaust cams, spark plugs, stiffer inlet valve springs and stiffer clutch springs	£1074.99	01924 478491
No 2 - Contains inlet and exhaust valves, high compression pistons and rings	£2744.88	01924 478491
No 3 - Contains different cams again, stiffer inlet and exhaust valve springs and the cam chain tensioner	£1218.56	01924 478491
Kit Akrapovic Exhaust Muffler	£683.34	01924 478491
Kit Akrapovic Exhaust System	£3914.49	01924 478491
CHASSIS		
Kit Steering Damper Assembly	£506.19	01924 478491
Kit Swing Arm	£897.39	01924 478491
Drive Chain Adjuster (with quick release system)	£1951.47	01924 478491
Kit Link	£130.46	01924 478491
Kit Link Arms	£96.54	01924 478491
Rear Caliper Hanger	£335.08	01924 478491
Rear Caliper Assembly	£383.68	01924 478491
Kit Front Wheel (16.5x3.5)	£2177.95	01924 478491
Kit Rear Wheel (16.5x6.25)	£2989.20	01924 478491
Kit Sprocket Carrier	£1495.16	01924 478491
Kit Rear Disc	£418.36	01924 478491
Kit Rear Showa Shock	£1636.92	01924 478491
Kit Sub Frame	£1124.56	01924 478491
Kit Fuel Tank	£3701.00	01924 478491
2 X Standard Brembo 2 pad radial calipers (these will fit standard forks)	£1301.00	01924 478491
Standard 19x18 Brembo master cylinder	£220.42	01924 478491
WP fork re-valve to Superbike spec	£1200.00	01507 327509
Michelin tyres (nope, not the top-notch factory stuff)	£250.00	017 82 401853
BODYWORK AND MISC		
Race fairings	£300 approx	various
Seat units	£150 approx	various
Paintwork	£800 per bike	various
Approximate total cost	£50,163.21	

The whole plot just seems to fit as I swing around the Lincolnshire track's seductive curves. Out from the wide, flowing sweepers of Coppice along through Charties, Park and through to Mansfield the bike can enjoy itself. Plenty of torque means you don't really have to be prodding on that gear-lever unless you really want that rear tyre to spin in the cold, damp conditions. With useable torque from 5000 revs, you can revel in the sort of flexibility only a 1000cc capacity bike can give. Those radial Tokico brakes are impressive, giving plenty of feedback from that front tyre - just what you need in these decidedly dodgy conditions.

Cadwell is a brilliant but bipolar kinda track: You've plenty of space and run-off in the first half, however, heading from Mansfield, The Mountain and into Hall Bends and beyond and you feel the flora, fauna and walls creep in claustrophobically when you're hauling on the loud handle.

As I pull in and hand the standard bike back, I realise I'm about to head out on this Jeekyll & Hyde of a circuit which is still decidedly damp and on perhaps the most powerful (and certainly the most expensive) bike I've ever ridden.

Standing in the holding area, waiting for one of the other guys to bring the HM Plant 'blade back to me, I'm getting the feeling of waiting outside a kebab shop for a fight. You know the feeling... You're there minding your own business and then someone starts on you. I've got that same feeling of channelled fear, adrenaline and inevitability of it all as the bike comes into view, barking 'do you want some?' through the underseat Akrapovic exhaust.

The black beast arrives and I swing a leg over it before Les Pearson - Rutter's chief mechanic for the last two seasons - tells me they want to bump start it rather than use the starter. Right. OK, so I ask if the gear-change is road or race way around but they don't hear me, instead they begin pushing.

Sod it. Up into second or first, and we'll soon find out... Judging by the laughter behind me and the velocity with which I arrive at Hall Bends, I soon realise the gearbox is race style - one up, five down.

Initial impressions between the road and race Fireblades are that they are a complete world apart. Truly, they are... These things really are night and day. Any MotoGP elitists who sneer and call this production racing are muppets, truly they are. This bike belongs to a 'silhouette' class of racing. Squint at it if you will, look at it through a pair of tights (stockings if you're kinky) but that's about it. Every part of the road bike that panders to comfort or ease-of-use is removed from this machine. It's a pure race machine wrapped in the clothes of a road bike.

The Honda Racing 'blade feels high at the back (as you would expect from a quick-turning race bike) but also somehow narrower

TOP TIPS

Track settings for a 2004/2005 Blade:
Front - preload fully in max, rebound 2.25 turns out from max, compression 2.25 turns out from max. Rear - preload as standard, rebound 3.25 turns out from max, compression 1/4 clicks out from max



than the standard bike. I've got cramp for the first few laps, despite my normal pre-track stretching, so yes. It's cramped compared to the road bike, too. Turn-in is something you're not prepared for, even coming straight off a bike like the standard CBR1000RR. The steering damper looks the same as the road bikes, but it's always on and not being controlled electronically. For the first three laps I was fifty-pencing it through every corner, until my mind got used to the set-up. That's fine and you do get used to it, but the first time you open that throttle in anger is when you realise these two bikes are very different animals. I was trying to register a 100% throttle opening on the datalogging to impress Kiyo's chief mechanic Adrian Gorst, who claimed journos rarely 'have the balls' to do so, but I wished I hadn't bothered.

What followed my first throttle to the stick opening out of Barn was rewarded by a bit too much flesh and bones being shoved backwards violently as a series of small explosions in the metal heart of the HM Plant bike propel you forward at a rate of knots not seen on a road bike, you then spend the rest of the straight trying to get the whole thing back into shape for the first turn. I tried not to look at the tacho, but you've got silly acceleration below ten grand and bloody stupid above that. Okay?

Let me tell you this: Kiyo and Rutter are heroes for simply hanging on to this bastard of

a bike. In fact, when you remember that back at Snetterton Rutter salvaged fifth and third-placed finishes despite having one broken and one displaced clavicle (that's collarbone to me and you) it marks him out as a true hero. I wouldn't want to have to ride this beast with a broken finger nail. But this is what these guys do. They earn their bloody money.

Flat-out down the grey, uninviting Lincolnshire Tarmac and the HRC 'blade is lining me up for a sucker punch. I've been around Cadwell a few times and I'm suddenly trying to pick braking points that I've used on dry days on a bike with 90 horsepower less. It all became painfully obvious as I tipped into Coppice for the last of my first five laps. The bike gave a little wobble, enough to make me realise my mistake. Put simply, I was going way too fast for my meagre capabilities. I'd been lulled into going faster simply by the fact that the bike is so capable.

I'm sure the bike could have got round the corner and into Charties, but the thought of possibly cocking it up and handing a damaged bike back to Adrian and the Honda Racing crew made the decision for me.

Instead I decided to turn the HM Plant Fireblade into a £250,000 off-roader - and all without a berm or a knobbly in sight.

With my brain frazzled by the sheer speed of the bike beneath me, I fail to find neutral and the bike cuts out and I decide not to try



TOP TIPS

Ditch the standard steering damper on the track. When you're going quickly the HESD damper makes the steering heavier and slows steering down a tad. Try a WP damper or similar

bump starting the thing back down Coppice, for fear of the marshal's wrath. Instead I take a breather and wait for the recovery truck.

In the couple of minutes I'm sitting there alone with the bike, it gives me time to take stock of the whole situation. I've ridden a fair few bikes on the track over the past 10 years, and as big and powerful as they've been I've never been suckered into mistakes like that, not even during my 'short-lived' four-start race career.

I know, I know. I obviously wasn't trying hard enough before and maybe that's true, but it runs deeper than that. The thing is; this bike is so good, SO GOOD, that it actually encourages you to go faster.

It makes you feel better than you actually are. In fact, that's proof-positive of the blood-line of the basic Fireblade, which in stock form is the one bike out of all the 1000cc sportsbikes that really flatters you and goes easy on you – even if its race cousin is a little harder on you.

Lunchtime and a chat with Gorst reveals that while the HM Plant bike is a completely different animal from the road-bike, some similarities exist.

Gorst himself has worked with some of the best. Aaron Slight and Colin Edwards were his Castrol Honda 'charges' while previously he'd

worked with Keith Huewen and Terry Rymer as well as Scott Russell. Meanwhile in the Suzuka Eight-Hour he's worked with the likes of Sete Gibernau, Alex Barros and the late Daijiri Kato. "The Fireblade is a good road bike," says Gorst. "I've ridden a few of them. It surprises some people to know that we use a stock frame off the production line. No bracing or anything, it's standard. The kit swing-arm that we've run this year is very close to the road bike's. If you look at them you'll see the castings are the same. There's some modification to the chain blocks so we can shorten or extend the wheelbase but that's it. The chassis on the standard bike is very good. We have a choice of rear suspension linkages but with a number of tracks being up and down like a real road – Cadwell Park, Brands Hatch and Oulton Park are prime examples – we sometimes use a standard road linkage. In fact at Brands and Oulton we've won with the standard linkage."

So just how close can the man or racer in the street get a Fireblade like the Honda Racing bike?

Gorst explains: "Someone can go racing and buy the shock or kit swingarm we have and have same as us. Our riders tested the kit forks but preferred the factory ones we used last year – maybe because the kit ones needed a bit more setting up. We use the kit subframe, and tank cover. We also machine a number of bits in-house, like footpegs, disc carriers, shock mounts, linkages, things like that, generally copies of the factory stuff we've had. The motor is fairly easy to get horsepower out of, in fact some engines from other teams that we've had on the dyno have produced more. We've found that you don't need a lot of horsepower, you just need 'good' horsepower as on the average UK track you're

Strengths & Weaknesses



It's a measure of how well these two guys get on that when I chatted to Michael Rutter and Ryuichi Kiyonari about the Honda Racing/HM Plant CBR1000RR Fireblade, they were still having a laugh – despite just a day earlier the weekly newspaper talking of Rutter's split with the team.

Either way, these two guys have a lot of respect for each other. So, Kiyo, how has your bike improved over the last year? "I think, it has got faster. Much faster."

Michael smiles: "The strengths of this bike is that it's pretty quick, sometimes the quickest thing out there, especially Kiyo's bike! There's always a special bike for Kiyo!" Michael laughs! "Just joking, there's never really a great deal in it," he says, but spotting his mechanic Les Pearson, he can't help but add loudly: "Kiyo has much better mechanics than me!"

Rutter adds: "It's got more torque than before but it could do with more to match the opposition. Also, the bike itself was a bit stiffer last year with all the factory chassis parts. That suited me I think, more than the kit stuff this year."

For Kiyo, the big improvement in his performance was knowing all the tracks – and being a year further into knowing the UK and all its idiosyncrasies – as well as spending a lot more time on the CBR1000RR in Japan between Christmas and the start of the 2005 British Superbike season.

He said: "The tests gave me a chance to fully understand the Fireblade that we raced. I consider it to be an improvement on last year's bike and I just enjoy being on a racetrack with it because it's so easy to ride."

Tyres have also proved to be a big issue in BSB, with a real tyre war happening over the past two seasons. Rutter: "In the first half of the season the Michelins were better, but in the last part of the season then the Dunlops seemed to come on strong. I do believe that if me and Kiyo wouldn't have picked up the injuries then we could have been first and second in series in whatever order. If Lavilla had a few bad races maybe things would have been different but that's the way it goes."



on 100% power maybe three per cent of the time. We've tested more power, but rejected it. Instead the power delivery needs to be smooth and therefore easy to ride. We go to Japan to do schooling on the motors, but we look after them in the UK, everything on them is pretty straightforward. Thing is, 1000cc bikes are easy to get power out of - they're nowhere near as highly tuned as the VTRs or the RC45s that we had. We even use standard road bike con-rods which shows how good the base bike is: It's very, very good. Our engine is special with special parts but it's nothing radical: It's just well put together. We've got the same cycles as other Honda engines. We can run 3000km before major changes, so it can do an Eight-hour race but we will look at the top-end regularly. It's a better bike than the VTR and RC45 that I've worked on - as you would expect, as it's developed later than those bikes."

Session two and I'm really looking forward to my final five laps on the HM Plant Fireblade. I now know just what to expect and I've got the hang of the race gearbox. No 100% throttle openings here, instead I'm going to just ride the thing and enjoy it. Brakes thankfully match that man-size motor, with the Brembos hauling the bike down nicely into Park, after the machine has punted me down the back straight. In fact, as I make the quick direction change through the Gooseneck, you feel that the whole chassis plot is - as you would expect - beautifully balanced. The joy about well-sorted race bikes is that harmony is the key word. The brakes can harness that motor, while the lightweight wheels, Showa suspension and kit Marchesini wheels and Michelin wets give more feedback than an episode of Points of View. Handy, as the odd drizzle of rain has kept the track damp in some places.

Suddenly, my thoughts of this being an animal are almost gone. Like the track we're on, there's two sides to this machine. You just

have to get used to it. Shame I haven't got a warm, dry track and a whole day, but by now things are much more relaxed and I shave a further three seconds off my lap without really trying. In fact, there was one - albeit brief - moment that I actually felt I connected and I mean fully connected with the bike. As I flew down the start-finish straight and peeled into Coppice, Charlies came over the horizon in a splash of light as the late afternoon sunshine finally permeated through to the cold, Cadwell Tarmac. Bathed in the afterglow, I clipped apexes and opened the throttle and everything clicked - even if the lap times are a world away from Kiyos! But, for the man in the street, take it easy, don't try so hard and the bike will cosset you to a better lap time. Getting off the Honda Racing Fireblade just begs the question: how good is the Ducati/Lavilla combination to have beaten this bike and the two talented riders that were riding it?

For me, this brief sojourn onto factory superbike tackle will doubtless mean that throwing a leg over my track day Kawasaki ZX-7R will not have the same allure as I doubt I'll ever get the chance to do this again.

Damn... I'm hooked. After all, as Smokey Robinson once sang 'a taste of honey is worse than none at all.'



Thanks to

Scott Grimsdall at Honda UK for inviting us and supplying the standard machine as well as a CBR600RR and a CBR125R for 'a laugh'. Adrian Gorst, Les Pearson, Michael Rutter and Ryuichi Kiyonari for their time and James Wright at Double Red for taking snaps in bad conditions and not moaning too much about it.

Massive thanks also to Bill Woodthorpe at Padgett's for help with the pricings.

Tech Spec

Honda CBR1000RR Fireblade (standard)

ENGINE:	16 valve, liquid-cooled inline four
DISPLACEMENT:	998cc
BORE X STROKE:	75 X 56.5mm
COMPRESSION RATIO:	11.9:1
TESTED POWER:	153.8bhp @ 11,100rpm
TESTED TORQUE:	79.5lb @ 8500rpm
CHASSIS:	aluminium beam frame
FRONT SUSPENSION:	Fully adjustable 43mm inverted forks
REAR SUSPENSION:	Fully adjustable Unit Pro-Link monoshock
FRONT BRAKES:	Radially-mounted four-pot opposed calipers with two X 310mm discs
REAR BRAKE:	Single-piston caliper with 220mm disc
WHEELBASE:	1410mm
SEAT HEIGHT:	820mm
DRY WEIGHT:	179 kilos (claimed)
FUEL CAPACITY:	18 litres
IMPORTER:	Honda UK (01753 590500)

