



RING OF FIRE

RICK BROADBENT

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

In *Ring of Fire*, the first book to cover the whole of the MotoGP era, Rick Broadbent gives a breathless behind-the-scenes account of the acclaim, heroism, pressures and danger of life at 200mph. At its centre is Valentino Rossi. Brilliant, eccentric, brave and above all fast, the Italian megastar has left motorcycling records trailing in his wake.

Ring of Fire also looks back at the sport's tradition of romance, reprobates and debauchery, interweaving the story of Rossi's hero, Mike Hailwood, a legend who launched a mesmerizing comeback of his own. By turns funny, sad, shocking and uplifting, it brings us face to face with the extraordinary cast of characters that make up this white-knuckle sport. *This is the fast lane and they all dance in a ring of fire.*

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Ring of Fire

The Inside Story of Valentino Rossi and
MotoGP

Rick Broadbent

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'Racing is life. Anything that happens before or after is just waiting.'
Steve McQueen

PROLOGUE

THE BIG SLIDE

THE RACER WAKES and climbs into his leathers. He zips himself up and walks, bow-legged, from the hut, helmet in his hand, his thick brown hair like a lion's mane.

This is Japan and this is his home. The mind of the racer is blinkered, all rampaging thoughts crystallizing into the need to go faster, harder, better. The most dominant season in the 250cc class is already fading to sepia in the record books. This is the big time and he cannot think of his son, barely a week old, back with Makiko. He does not think of his wife because from the corner of a large, brown eye he can see Valentino Rossi, the world champion, in neon yellow and orange. This is his year and this is his stage. Faster, harder, better.

He likes Rossi. The previous month they had toured the Honda factories in Japan and been feted as gladiators. They shook hands with the workers, the people with slower, softer, sadder lives, and had their backs slapped by little men with power. They had got drunk together at the Eight Hours. Hopelessly drunk. And he had fallen asleep in his own vomit. Now his gloved hand catches Rossi's. They nod and look over a wall to the people and the yellow metal of a roller coaster writing thrills in the sky.

The engines spark into thunderclaps. They are louder now. The old 500cc bikes have given way to beastly 990cc four-stroke MotoGP machines. Faster, harder, better. Soon these

men will top 200mph in races, striving to tame the acceleration like rodeo riders. Loris Capirossi, the Bolognese Bulldog, will even reach 215.86mph in a test at Barcelona. Unimaginable. The senses of the spectators are pummelled, but these men make a routine of the extraordinary. So they ride and lean and scrape their knee-sliders on the tarmac. They go so quickly that the outer world is dulled to a soft monotone and washed canvas. They concentrate and look for the opening.

This is Japan and this is his home. Where he grew up. And where he falls now. Where the colour and noise and danger explode into an incandescent rage. The race goes on. The marshals drag him from the track.

Rossi is oblivious. He is thinking of winning. Only of winning. It is why he is so good. Even at speed his mind is sedate enough to see the yellow flag. Focus. Think. Ride. He could try to go faster but he does not. Know the limit. Seek it, touch it and draw back. Bargain with your bravery and your reason. Be the fastest, the hardest and the best.

Rossi wins. That bastard Biaggi is second. Fuck him. Fuck them all. He has started the new season at the top. He is the man to beat. Capirossi is third. A tough little street-fighter, he will need to scrap and brawl and believe to beat him this year. It is 2003 and Rossi will be king.

So they celebrate and pop the champagne corks. 'Kato fell, the helicopter took him,' the Dorna press officer tells them. It happens. This is racing, a miasma of broken bones, shredded skin and frayed nerves. Only later do they find out Kato hit the wall. Daijiro Kato, the Samurai of Slide, Daijiro Kato, the man Rossi had got drunk with. The wall that they all knew was too close, the wall that means they will never again return to Suzuka. They hear that his heart was revived at trackside. That the marshals pulled him from the circuit without thinking about neck and spinal injuries. And the race went on regardless.

And when two weeks later, with his wife and children red-eyed with pain and what-ifs by his comatose body, he dies, the riders will be so angry that they will form a safety commission. And then they will go to South Africa for another race. They wear No. 74 badges (his official race number) as a memorial and then forget. They think of winning. Only that. Faster, harder, better.

What goes through your mind when you crash? 'Your arse' was what Barry Sheene said and 28 metal screws in his legs gave him some insight. How do you spot a motorcycle racer in a restaurant? 'He's the one gripping his fork with the first two fingers of his left hand' was what Kenny Roberts said. King Kenny who came along and dethroned Barry. That is sport. It is all human drama wrapped up in ephemera. Today's superstar is tomorrow's veteran, the limping figure hanging around in the background with the dodgy table-manners.

But the young do not think about that. They are here for the moment. This bloody brilliant, dangerous moment. When you ride a motorbike you have to live in this moment because it is all that keeps you from disaster.

And Hopper and Shakey are living for the moment as they steal out of the paddock and into a nearby field. They are in the mood for a laugh. It is 2005 and they are rising stars. They are in the big time and they are relishing the moment. 'Come on, Shakey,' Hopper drawls, the California man with East End parents. So they walk into the Tuscan countryside where the fans gathered on Thursday, waiting for the latest instalment of the Rossi and Biaggi feud. Rossi's fans wore yellow, like his old livery. Biaggi's wore red, like his eyes. The battle lines were drawn, firecrackers exploded and people shouted, 'Fuck Rossi! Fuck Biaggi!'

Hopper and Shakey make their way through unseen. They come to a clearing and Hopper knocks over the drum. Madness but fun. He moves in a circle and pours petrol in

his wake. Then he stands in the epicentre and flicks a match. The flame sprints around him. 'Shit!' he cries. 'Jesus!'

The following week Hopper the thrill-seeker arrives on the grid in Barcelona. His face is redder than the shirts at Scarperia or Biaggi's eyes. His nose is badly burnt. He laughs off an enquiry from Suzi Perry, the glamorous BBC presenter. How could he explain? This is motorcycle racing and it is what they do. This is the fast lane and they all dance inside a ring of fire.

CHAPTER ONE

ESTORIL, 2006

IT IS THE unusual that makes sport such an addictive drug. For months and years you watch unspectacular events that soon become forgotten little histories, but you always hope. The sports fan is an archaeologist digging through dust and ruins for naked drama, and the enduring thrill is you never know when you are going to strike it rich.

So as I talk to Iain Mackay in the paddock at Estoril in Portugal, an ugly racetrack prone to showers blowing in off the Atlantic, we cannot know that we are about to witness a sequence of events that people will never forget.

Mack is a die-hard Celtic fan who lives in Amsterdam and works in Honda's press department. A font of all knowledge, he speaks in conspiratorial tones, the words barely making it out from beneath his grey moustache. He thinks Nicky Hayden will win. 'If I didn't I wouldn't be here, would I?' he laughs.

But Hayden and Honda are up against it. Just a few races ago, when he won on home soil in the United States, he held a commanding fifty-one-point lead over Valentino Rossi.

But then his RC211V was hit by the clutch problem that has sabotaged his starts and led to this dramatic denouement. Rossi, the charismatic seven-time world champion, has whittled the lead down to a fragmentary twelve points with only two races to go. He has been making confident noises in the build-up to the Portuguese

Grand Prix too, praising his Yamaha team and telling everyone that he feels great.

Hayden is less convincing. In his last four races he has finished ninth, fourth and fifth twice and, despite Mack's softly spoken confidence, the consensus is Hayden is limping towards the line in need of both a tourniquet and a corner turned. 'It's the biggest race of my life,' Hayden says in his Kentucky brogue, the look he gives the pressmen as pointed as his designer sideburns.

Earl Hayden is nervous too. In the old days, back on the farm, when the summers were baking the land and threatening their very existence, he would take his sons Nicky, Tommy and Roger Lee out into the fields and they would raise their hands to the heavens and rub their fingers. 'Pray for rain, boys,' he would say. 'Pray for rain.'

Earlier this season, Earl had done the same thing in Australia when Nicky's clutch problem had seen him drop from first to eighteenth on the very first lap. They needed something to soften the blow and so he went out into the pitlane, raised his hands and rubbed his fingers. The rain came and washed away some of the pain. Nicky recovered to fifth as the conditions worked to his advantage. Now Earl was watching by the wall again, his lucky No. 69 ring on a crossed finger.

Rossi v. Hayden, Honda v. Yamaha, this afternoon v. Earl's pained nerves. It was the crunch, the moment Earl had waited for and the one he had dreaded. This paddock, with its zipping scooters weaving in and out of punters on behind-the-scenes tours, its gargantuan trucks and lackeys washing dismembered parts, its broolly dollies and their PVC hot pants, was free to enjoy the pressure. But not Earl. This was a million miles away from Second Chance Autos and his days spent stripping tobacco. Earl could barely think that, within an hour, his son might be the 2006 MotoGP world champion.

Basi Pedrosa was just as anxious. Her son, Dani, had already had a successful debut year in MotoGP. A world champion at 125cc and 250cc level, Pedrosa had long been billed as the new Rossi. Pedrosa had just turned twenty-one and was Honda's blue-eyed boy, a remorselessly pragmatic Spaniard who punished himself every morning with 800 sit-ups. His time was coming and, although it would take a major turnaround, he still had a mathematical chance of winning the title. That was one reason why Honda said there would be no team orders. Team-mates they might be, but Hayden and Pedrosa had been told to race hard. Satoru Horiike, the managing director of the mighty Honda Racing Corporation, had almost bristled with indignation when the subject of a team plan had been raised. Basi just hoped things would work out for her son. The next hour would suggest she did not hope hard enough.

At 1.50 p.m., with the clouds thickening overhead, Rossi crouched down by his bike. It was a beautiful combination of cutting-edge technology and aesthetic craftsmanship. The YZR-M1 had been revolutionized by Rossi. When he walked out on Honda in 2003 to join Yamaha, they had been a struggling factory, devoid of inspiration and even the inclination to usurp Honda. But by the sheer force of Rossi's will and the motivation of paying him £6 million, they had become the best almost instantly. When Rossi had won his first race for Yamaha in a redneck South African afterthought called Welkom, he dismounted and kissed his bike. He called it 'her' and would often creep out of his motorhome late at night, wander through the deserted paddock and slip into the garage to see her. Sometimes they would even sleep together.

The cameras clicked in his face but Rossi was in his zone. This was all part of a time-honoured routine. Nobody could get to Rossi when he was on the track. It was his release from the life that meant he called himself a creature of the night. He said everything was more peaceful at night, softer

and slower, like a parallel universe. But now it was early afternoon in Estoril and his world title was hanging by a thread. So he thought of winning. Only of winning. Faster, harder, better than Hayden.

Rossi was on pole position after dominating the previous day's qualifying session. Colin Edwards, his team-mate, was next to him in matching yellow. Then Hayden. The Doctor, the Texan Tornado and the Kentucky Kid. The title of a documentary filmed at the United States Grand Prix was now the front row for the climactic scenes of the World Championship. Twelve points. Gossamer. Confidence surged through Rossi. Earl Hayden felt sick.

They circled on the warm-up lap and the crowd roared. Everywhere you looked you saw yellow, signifying deference to the Rossi phenomenon. He had debunked the myths of motorcycle racing and dragged this sport from the ranks of working-class petrolheads into the mainstream, from the back of the waltzer through the hall of mirrors. The only tattoo Rossi had was a small turtle on his stomach, a joke against himself and his rivals. He was very much the modern sports hero, an unattainable Everyman.

Then at 14.01 the red lights went out and the engines roared. For everyone concerned those first tenths of seconds are torturous as they yearn for the speed to kick in. And when the pack found some shape it was Rossi who led, but Hayden was not far behind. The clutch had not got him this time. It was race on. The title on the line. Earl Hayden on the very edge.

It was febrile fare from the opening corner. Shinya Nakano went down on the lime-green Kawasaki and did not move. The cameras cut away quickly and that exacerbated fears in the press room. Some wondered if the race would be stopped. Rossi, Edwards and Hayden pressed on regardless, thinking only of winning. The TV screens suddenly showed Nakano being carried away on a stretcher. His arm was held

up and twitched. Suspended consciences gave way to satisfaction and lust.

On the fourth lap Hayden dived down the inside of Pedrosa at Turn 6. It was a courageous, aggressive move that let Pedrosa know exactly what this meant to the older rider. 'They touched!' someone said. 'They bloody touched!'

And then it happened. As they came to Turn 6 on the next circuit, Rossi led from Edwards, with the Repsol Honda pair of Hayden and Pedrosa in swift pursuit. Too swift in fact. Pedrosa braked late and started to move up the inside of Hayden. The inside of the man who would be king. Inside and out.

It was the season in three seconds. Pedrosa went in too hot, ran up on to the blue and white zebra strips and fell. As he did his mighty RC211V, with its 260-horsepower, 990cc engine, extended swing arm and orange wheel trims, preceded him. The glorious machine ploughed into Hayden who was swept away in a torrent of fear, anger and sparks.

It took a nanosecond for Hayden to have the implications sear through his brain. He signalled frantically to marshals to help him, but it was all in vain. Pedrosa was already walking off. He looked behind, as if contemplating going over to apologize, but thought better of it and waved an arm, almost dismissively.

Hayden knelt down. He buried his face in the gravel and beat the ground with a fist. Then he was up and raging. Striding away with tears in his eyes, his face contorted, his mouth screaming, 'That's fucking bullshit!' He knew that was it. The hopes and dreams erased in one moment of rank incompetence from his putative team-mate. 'Fucking bullshit!'

In the press room there was disbelief. It was one of those extraordinary moments. Digging for drama amid the dust and gravel where two Hondas lay like dying carcasses on the Serengeti. I caught Mack's eye as he walked sullenly

from the room, his hands in his pockets, no doubt anticipating the furore that Pedrosa had caused.

Rossi's Yamaha team rejoiced in the message hung out on their man's pitboard. 'HAYDEN OUT. EDWARDS 1.0'. Rossi saw the words at 200mph and his heart skipped a beat. As if that was not enough, we then had the race to end all seasons, as Toni Elias, another Spanish fledgling, slithered his way to the front on disintegrating tyres. Never one to settle for second best, Rossi overtook him on the last entry to the chicane. Elias responded. So did Rossi. The lead changed hand four times within a stuttering crescendo before Elias won by inches and two thousandths of a second. It was a photo finish, but Elias knew he had his maiden triumph, while Rossi took defeat well, his disappointment tempered by Honda's internecine implosion.

In most sports those who have made a heinous error or suffered some terrible setback will hide away behind PR men and the safety afforded them by the cult of celebrity. But within an hour Pedrosa was sitting, pale-faced, in the Honda hospitality suite explaining his act. 'I am so sorry,' he said. 'I went to see Nicky to apologize. He was very angry. I was not trying to overtake. I just was going too fast. I have never hit another bike in my life, in practice or anywhere, and it has to be like this. I can't believe it.'

It was impossible not to feel his pain. I had been there early and watched Pedrosa sit at a table with his cheek in a flat palm. Beside him were Basi and Alberto Puig, the former racer who now mentored him. This supremely gifted sportsman looked like a naughty schoolboy. Around him the hospitality men went about their business, replacing great plates of cheese and sausage and peppers. Mack stood in the background, feeling Dani's pain too. Checking his watch.

The timing went awry. Suddenly the melee around Pedrosa disentangled. Everyone swarmed to the other side of the same hospitality suite. A radio man fell in the rush. 'Hayden's here!' someone yelled. So, as Pedrosa completed

his heartfelt apology to a disappearing audience, Hayden vented his raw feelings to a hungry pack.

‘I know he hates this, he hates this situation, but I don’t know if I can forgive him,’ he said, mirror shades hiding watery eyes, his voice cracking with disbelief. ‘I can’t say next week I’ll come back and it will all be OK because these chances don’t come around every day. I know he’s hurting, but so am I.’

A noisy Italian TV man was speaking loudly into a camera as this epistle from the heart was read out. ‘Shut up!’ Mike Scott, a large, ursine veteran for *Motorcycle News*, demanded. ‘Shut up!’ He was quite right to do so. Nobody wanted to miss this. It was the ultimate in sporting voyeurism.

The Italian departed and Hayden shied away from the trickier questions, the blunt ones designed for instant headlines. Could he continue to ride in the same team as Pedrosa? ‘I don’t even want to go there,’ he said. ‘People have been trying to drive a wedge between us all year. I know he’s not dirty, but this hurts like hell. You know, the world title is on the line and we should have had a plan.’

That was a reference to Honda’s refusal to issue team orders and perhaps tell Pedrosa to go easy with so much at stake. It was something Rossi was also referring to simultaneously in the podium press conference. ‘For sure Colin helped me more than Pedrosa helped Hayden,’ he laughed. So did everyone. ‘Our team is a magic place,’ Rossi gushed. ‘Everyone gets on so well and works together. It’s a really nice place to be.’

By Honda’s cheese and sausages, the hypocrisy of the bystanders was laid bare as they expressed concern for Hayden. ‘You know I don’t sign his cheques, I can’t tell him what to do,’ he lamented. And that was it. There was a race left in Valencia but everybody knew 2006 was over. The pressmen gave Hayden a round of applause. Others laughed with Rossi. Pedrosa crept away and was later in tears. It had

been the first foot he had put wrong all year, but it was a clown's foot in a minefield.

Wash away all my guilt; from my sins cleanse me. My sacrifice, God, is a broken spirit.

Basi hugged him. It was an unfathomable finish to a season and, as the wounded and the well-fed dispersed, it seemed certain that the rematch in 2007 would be special.

But then they came to Valencia ... for the final, supposedly straightforward, race ...

Do not spurn a broken, humbled heart.

I spoke to Mack in the press room on Friday and he looked crestfallen. Ashes to ashen. Rossi was relaxed, exuding the confidence from knowing he could finish second and still win another title. Hayden sat in Honda's hospitality suite once more and tried to grin and bear the lingering pain. 'Did you go home and stew for a few days after Estoril?' I asked him. 'Man, you don't chew yesterday's breakfast,' he said. 'But if I don't win on Sunday I don't know whether I'll ever get over it.' They were not the bullish words of a would-be hero. If Hayden lost the title and did not improve next year, he was facing the scrapheap. You sensed he knew it too.

On Saturday it got worse. Although he had declared that Valencia was not one of his favourite tracks, Rossi broke the lap record to qualify on pole position. Hayden did not even make the front row, struggling back in fifth place. It would take a miracle now.

The tension of two weeks ago had given way to a mutual love-in between Rossi and his people. There were 200,000 of them at Valencia that Sunday, crammed into the dusty bowl, engulfing the twisty, low-gear track and wondering what post-race stunt Rossi would come up with this time. Last year, he had marked his seventh world crown by posing

as Snow White with seven of his friends. So what of the eighth wonder?

And then the red lights faded to black and all the pre-race predictions and confidence were banished. Hayden immediately barged past Rossi, touching him with his knee, leather on leather, spirit on spirit. Rossi seemed shaken or maybe he was just biding his time. Ahead of him Pedrosa ran wide to allow Hayden through. No team orders, just a gentlemen's agreement, Hayden would later say. It went against the grain with Pedrosa, but another calamity could blight his career for ever. Already they had been printing Wanted! posters in the newspapers putting a price on Pedrosa's head.

And then, on the fifth lap, the same lap in which Hayden and Pedrosa had come together in Estoril, *salvation*.

The scenes that followed would never be forgotten. They meant that when darkness descended on Valencia and the riders departed, Hayden for a family meal, Rossi into his night, and some of the others to the all-night paddock party at Spooks nightclub, the stench of newly spawned revenge filtered through the trucks and suites and empty stands. The greatest racer of them all sipped on a beer, shook his head and contemplated the reckoning.

CHAPTER TWO

BEGINNINGS

FIVE YEARS EARLIER the self-styled king of motorcycle racing wore a No. 1 pendant and named his Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs after his rivals. He was aggressive, rude and suffused in confidence. But the trouble with Carl Fogarty was that when he crashed at 150mph and joined the ranks of ex-racers, the act lost its relevance. From being a bloody-minded star Fogarty was rendered merely bloody-minded.

It was March 2001, and I sat with him in Ducati's hospitality tent at the first round of the World Superbike Championship in Valencia. He was restless and anxious. Neil Hodgson, a former bricklayer from Burnley, was making his debut in the series and was being billed as the man to take over Fogarty's mantle. 'Neil's one of the favourites,' Fogarty said before adding the poisoned caveat, 'but he's been weak and fragile for five years and can't possibly have the heart. Is he the new Foggy? You're joking. The world's not ready for another Carl Fogarty.'

Valencia is an ugly circuit with square concrete buildings painted a muddy yellow. Few turned up for the superbikes so the vast rows of concrete seats framed the track like a Venetian blind. In Spain it has always been the 500cc World Championship that is the ultimate in two-wheeled racing; only in Britain, where Fogarty's fame added 20,000 to the sales of *Motorcycle News* when he was on the cover, did World Superbikes hold sway.

Fogarty gave me a lift back to our hotel. Neil Bramwell, a freelancer for the *Independent* and friend of Fogarty, was next to me. 'Are you ready for this?' he asked. Bramwell knew Fogarty well, having ghosted the autobiography that confounded literary critics by leaping to the top of the *Sunday Times* bestsellers list. The drive was hair-raising. Fogarty took what seemed incredible risks and circled corners with an apparent disdain for self-preservation. He lost his way and performed an illegal U-turn. I shut my eyes and my head was thrust against the side window. My knuckles were white. Fogarty grinned. If he couldn't shake up the world then he could at least put me through the tumble drier.

'I went to the Ducati team launch in Milan,' he said when we had adjourned to the bar of the Sidi Saler, nestling in the dunes of the Albufera Nature Park. 'I sat in the front row and, when the curtains went back and the riders were on the stage, I felt a lump in my throat. I should have been where they were sitting. It will be the same on Sunday. I was the best in the world at doing something and now I can't do it. That's depressing. I never actually enjoyed racing, just winning. It was twenty years of my life, gone.'

It was hard to imagine the tumult of conflicting thoughts in Fogarty's head. He had been forced to retire at the age of thirty-five and the future was an unknown. Success is transient and heroes come and go. Fogarty wanted to believe that the world could not cope without him, but it was still turning. Hodgson would race for his GSE Ducati team in the first race of the season the following afternoon, while Chris Walker, the other leading Briton, had signed to race for the Shell Advance Honda team in the 500cc World Championship. 'The funny thing is Neil suddenly got better after I'd crashed,' Fogarty mused. 'He wasn't in my shadow any more. But if he's going to take it to another level then he's got to do it soon. When Barry Sheene retired there was no one to take it over and the interest at home dropped off.'

Now I'm gone, Neil has two years to take it on or bike racing will die in Britain.'

Fogarty was happy to ignore the members of other teams who were loitering in the lobby and bar of the hotel. He was a slight, wiry figure who walked with the semi-arthritic gait of the old racer, the result of too many crashes and broken bones. 'You do think, "Christ, what am I going to do now? What am I good at?"' He could not stop wishing it was different. 'I couldn't have carried on,' he said, almost apologetically. 'The pain in my shoulder is too bad. Doctors have told me it will never be right and you need your arms to throw a superbike around. I'm lucky. Some people end their careers in a box. I can live a normal life and see my kids grow up.'

Would he cope without the attention? 'I don't miss the fame because I never craved it. Someone like Barry Sheene was into self-promotion. He wanted the trappings of success, but I don't want to do aftershave ads. All I ever wanted was to win and go home.'

His manner of peppering his speech with sideswipes at other legends was a default setting. Fogarty did not know why he was like this, but perhaps it stemmed from the perception that he was undervalued. He did not crave fame, but respect was his lifeblood and the irony was he set about achieving that by disrespecting those he deemed lesser beings. Colin Edwards, the reigning World Superbike champion, had recently posted a question on Fogarty's website. 'Do you actually like anyone other than yourself?' Fogarty had the skin of a rhino but a sensitive core. 'I was never a hell-raiser,' he said. 'People thought I was because of the way I raced, but when I put on the helmet I changed. I hated everyone, but it wasn't really me. I played up to it. People say I'm more mellow now. I think I am. I always had trouble switching off from racing. I took my work home and could be difficult to live with.'

The desire to win and fear of failure were instilled by his father. George Fogarty was a racer and could be a volatile figure himself. John Cooper, the racer known as 'Moon Eyes' because of his distinctive helmet and best known for beating the great Giacomo Agostini at the Race of the Year at Mallory Park in 1971, once told me an informative story. 'We used to stay in a hotel on the Isle of Man for the TT and there was an amusement arcade next door,' he recalled. 'A lad came in and said the arcade boss had just locked the young Carl in the office. George was up and out of there immediately. "Why have you locked up my lad?" he said. The boss said he had been jumping all over the machines and he had warned him. He said it was only for ten minutes. Teach him a lesson. George didn't care. He took a swing and knocked him flying. Then the henchmen jumped in. They had George on the floor and he shouted, "Don't hit me, I'm a TT rider!" I think he got done for GBH. That was George. He fell off at the bottom of Bray Hill and, fucking hell, he was lucky. He was doing 150mph when the forks slipped down and spat him off. He was rolling and rolling and the bike burst into flames. He hardly hurt himself. Les Graham did the same but hit the wall.' Les Graham died.

Crouched over a pool table, pendant dangling, a date to go house-hunting with Michaela, his wife, and Ruben Xaus, the up-and-coming Spanish rider, in the diary for Monday, Fogarty was a man at the crossroads. 'I quit at the top and that's the way to go,' he said, but you could taste the uncertainty. 'There's also a lot of confusion about what's happening in bike racing. Yamaha are developing a four-stroke GP bike and that seems to be the way forward. But you can't have two four-stroke championships. Nobody knows what's going on. All I know is that, without me, Sundays will never be the same.'

The following day Hodgson crashed after barely covering 12 kilometres of his much-vaunted debut. I could envisage Fogarty smiling at the pretender's fate. He chose the

aftermath to announce that he was in talks to run a Ducati team in the World Superbike Championship. Paolo Flammini, the World Superbikes boss, said, 'His future should be in superbikes and we are proud and happy for him to stay in the family. He is a very special person.' Flammini also tried to defuse the concern that the series was in trouble because the 500cc championship was to allow four-stroke engines. 'A million people came to our races last season,' he said. 'Two billion watched on television. Our website gets a million hits during a race weekend. That does not sound like a championship in trouble. It will be more of a danger to themselves as they will lack the resources to convert.'

The 2001 season marked a new beginning. The rivalry between the 500cc World Championship and World Superbikes served to confuse the layman, the departure of Fogarty had robbed Britain of its pivotal figure and the sport was crying out for a hero. The 500c title had been won the previous season by Kenny Roberts, a softly spoken American who inspired ambivalence and was not as good as his dad. Would Sundays ever be the same?

I went to Suzuka for the Japanese Grand Prix and to search for a new hero. I met Chris Walker, the man who had the British superbike title in the bag the previous year until his engine blew up at Donington Park. Like Hodgson, he lacked the piratical menace of Fogarty, but when I mentioned that his predecessor did not see the same hunger in Walker's eyes, he deadpanned, 'You look into Foggy's eyes and you think he's on drugs.'

Hodgson had been the same. 'Carl's never one to blow smoke up your arse,' he had said. On that Friday in Japan Walker was upbeat after turning down a move to Suzuki in World Superbikes. 'All over the world GP racing is bigger than superbikes,' he said. 'There is only one reason why superbikes are so big at home and that is Foggy.' He then belied Fogarty's claim that the new generation were too meek and mild to fill his boots, by saying, 'The bottom line

is you need the right package. Foggy would not have won his titles if he didn't have a great bike, and there are a lot of riders with a glint in their eye who haven't got a prayer.' Time would show that Walker came into that category as he was battered, bruised, knocked unconscious and then sacked in mid-season. He would suffer from Bell's palsy, leaving his face in a frozen grimace, and would put tampons in his helmet to soak up the sweat. Michaela Fogarty bumped into him during his darkest times and said, 'Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were Chris Walker.' The transition from next big thing to next best was complete.

But you never know which way sport will turn. On 8 April 2001, motorcycle racing was in a state of flux and turmoil, epitomized by the jarring fortunes of the best British riders. Walker joked that he had the No. 8 bike so that people would be able to identify him when he was upside down, but what the sport really needed was someone to turn it upside down and inside out. Like Fogarty, it needed to be rejuvenated. He had given Hodgson two years to save it from a premature death, but he was looking in the wrong place. If you asked Fogarty who was the greatest racer around then he would ignore the gammy arm and say, 'It's still me.' But it wasn't. Not any more. That day in Suzuka would prove that. After that Sunday, nothing was the same again.

It was already known that Valentino Rossi and Max Biaggi regarded each other with mutual antipathy. They were contrasting figures. Rossi had just turned twenty-two while Biaggi was pushing thirty; Rossi was the fun-loving maverick from Tavullia, a small town of 7,000 close to the Adriatic coast, Biaggi a prickly, urbane figure from Rome; Rossi was the son of Graziano, a former racer with a two-foot ponytail who slept in the back of his beat-up BMW at races, Biaggi the boy who was reportedly abandoned by his mother as a child. 'He's a crazy bastard, but then you would be with his background,' one Italian journalist told me.

They had been chipping away at each other for years. Rossi later pinpointed the genesis of their feud as the Malaysian Grand Prix of 1997 when, as a teenager, he was riding in the 125cc class and Biaggi the 250cc. 'No,' he did not want to be regarded as the Biaggi of 125s, Rossi told the Italian press. 'It's going to be him who dreams of being the Rossi of 250s.' It was a throwaway remark, but Rossi claimed Biaggi reacted badly when the pair met later in the trackside restaurant at Suzuka. 'Wash your mouth out,' Biaggi is alleged to have said. Others have different recollections, one former Yamaha team member saying Rossi and his crowd were being irritatingly rowdy and Biaggi merely shouted to them to keep the noise down. 'Max said that Valentino could never get over the fact he had been spoken to like that in front of his friends,' Ali Forth, the Yamaha press officer at the time, remembered. 'Max said *that* was the reason Valentino hated him so much.'

In 2001 Rossi was already a star-in-the-making. He had won the 125cc and 250cc world titles and finished second to Roberts in the 500cc class in his debut year. Biaggi, a four-time winner of the 250cc class, had been third. That rankled with the Roman. However, Rossi's popularity went beyond speed and success. With him the substance was suffused in style, and teenage Italy had been seduced by his quirky nature and asinine stunts. From popping into a Portaloo on his victory lap in Spain in 1999 to the ever-changing bouffant - the neon blue, the foppish mane, the Max Miller monk - Rossi's rise had bucked the stone-faced stoicism of Biaggi.

He had also resisted no opportunity to slight Biaggi. The love of mockery had caused uproar in the excitable Italian media at the way Rossi had chosen to celebrate a win at Mugello at the Italian Grand Prix in 1997. Newspaper reports had linked Biaggi with Naomi Campbell, then the biggest supermodel in the world, and he himself had pricked Rossi's interest by saying the glamourpuss would be among his

guests at Mugello. Rossi had been the owner of a blow-up doll since the previous year, planning to use it for a celebration at some point. Now the chance was too good to waste and his Fan Club, a group of loyal fans and drinking buddies, egged him on. And so Rossi celebrated by giving a pillion ride to a blow-up doll with the moniker 'Claudia Schiffer' scrawled on the back. It was a crude but colourful thumbed nose. Rossi would claim the media misinterpreted the prank and Schiffer was a pun on the word *schifo* meaning 'gross', but the target was clear.

Their colours highlighted the contrast, the neon yellow of Rossi's Honda NSR and the crimson rage of Biaggi's Yamaha. 'Many people can win races, but few can win the title,' Biaggi said. The profundity underscored Rossi's lighthearted behaviour. It made it hard to be in both camps. The fans were divided into red and yellow legions and even hard-bitten journalists took sides. Roberts, Garry McCoy and Loris Capirossi were among those presenting added opposition to the duel, but it was clear from that dramatic day in Japan in April 2001 that this was to be a high-speed arm-wrestle between two sworn enemies.

The start of any season is always flushed with heightened expectation and myths ready to be made and shattered. Capirossi, riding the satellite NSR for Sito Pons' tobacco-backed team, was the first away with Biaggi in febrile pursuit. Rossi was down in the pack, but as the cavalcade snaked its way around Suzuka, he scythed a path towards Biaggi. Capirossi, a teak-tough brawler with a pit-bull physique, drifted backwards with a damaged rear tyre. Walker, meanwhile, had already gone, into the back of the pack and footnote status, his debut a fleeting cameo in one of the most talked about races for years, the cold pain strangling his body later diagnosed as a broken shoulder. Sete Gibernau, another who would come to play a leading role in the Rossi story, also fell. And then came the moment when the bickering and bad-mouthing spilled over into

violence. Rossi slipstreamed Biaggi, pulled out and was edging level. Biaggi's will to win and overt hatred for his compatriot clouded his judgement for a nanosecond. The red bike disappeared beneath a red mist and Biaggi appeared to elbow Rossi off the track. Rossi was stunned. Furious. Scared. He tried to control his bike on the grass that lined the straight. He was travelling at 150mph. By the time the crowd had gasped, Rossi had saved himself and was back on the track. No harm done. The race went on.

Rossi was now in the danger zone because the calmness needed to risk life and limb had been replaced by raw anger. 'Fuck Biaggi!' he muttered. Later, in an interview with Monty Shadow for Laureus, he would explain how everything is beautiful at speed. 'Racers take some serious hits. It is a violent way to tell you how fast you are going. It is extremely important to stay calm. As paradoxical as it sounds, the faster you ride, the slower your movements must become, because speed exaggerates everything, automatically doing the rest of the work for you. This is one of the aspects that fascinates me the most; when you are racing and you exceed a certain velocity you start to feel like you're moving faster than everything around you. You feel faster than reality.'

After a brief hiatus, when his emotion seized control of him, Rossi was in this state of heightened reality. He had lost ground so he put his head down, swore and raced. Like never before. 'Speed; too fast, too furious; fast food, fast forward, speed-boat; fast-lane; flat-out; survival of the fastest; I live for speed.'

Biaggi held Rossi at bay for two laps and then the younger man sailed past on a fast right-hander. Everything slowed. Sound, motion, his movements now calm. He lifted his left hand off the handlebars, turned back and raised a finger at Biaggi. Ignorance causes fear, he would say. Moving slowly. Thinking fast.

Rossi increased his lead and now the mayhem was in his wake. Tohru Ukawa crashed and Biaggi was fighting with McCoy and the Japanese duo of Shinya Nakano and Norick Abe. All were on Yamahas and Biaggi was damned if he was going to let them beat him. There were no more elbows, just hard, aggressive racing and the last place on the podium by a mere two-tenths of a second.

The aftermath of that race was strange and showed how divided the press corps had become when it came to the Italians. Many in the media initially sided with Biaggi, suggesting Rossi's overtaking manoeuvre had been dangerous, with plenty more dismissing it as a lot of fuss about nothing. Race control shared that approach and decided there was nothing worth reporting. More startling still, both Honda and Yamaha made no complaints. It was, then, left to Rossi to voice his disbelief by confronting Biaggi and telling him to get a gun next time and shoot him. Biaggi, who generally treated Rossi as an irritating child, ignored him.

Honda preferred to bask in the glow of their five hundredth GP victory. A party was held in one of the function rooms next to the offices and media centre. Rossi was there, along with Mick Doohan who topped the list of winners with fifty-four. Rossi was down in thirty-ninth spot with just three wins and there were some at Suzuka who were somewhat sniffy that a relative novice should have hit the winning runs. Rossi had a beer, chatted with Doohan and then departed into the night. 'There was a bit of fear all right and so I gave him a little wave,' he said of his spat with Biaggi.

Biaggi had already given his version of events at the press conference. 'There was a lot of body contact and I touched Rossi, Haga and Ukawa, but they were legitimate racing manoeuvres,' he said. As the Honda party progressed, and canapés were munched beneath grainy pictures of legends