



RACING

AMERICAN STYLE

BY WES FLEMING #87301



Ten years ago, you couldn't have gotten me interested in motorcycle racing if you dipped the bikes in chocolate and paved the track with gold. Race bikes were so far removed from the riding I did (and still do) on a day-to-day basis that I just couldn't find any connection.

Then I met Nate Kern.

Nate made his reputation racing BMW motorcycles, especially the R 1200 S. My former local chartered club, BMW Bikers of Metropolitan Washington, had a number of N8! fans, and we organized rides out to Summit Point, West Virginia, to cheer for Nate and watch the races. It was the club's enthusiasm and Nate's infectious passion

for the sport that got me paying attention to racing.

On the rare occasions I could find motorcycle racing on TV, it was MotoGP or World Superbike (WSBK). Great races, but very few Americans. It was fun to cheer for Loris Capirossi, and it's been a lot of fun to watch the rise of Marc Marquez the last few years, but those circuits lack that hometown team to root for.

Enter MotoAmerica.

Legendary motorcycle racer and AMA Hall of Fame inductee Wayne Rainey decided a few years ago that the USA needed a premier racing circuit. He and some colleagues set about working with the AMA to establish such a circuit and make it

work. After the demise of the AMA Superbike Series and the unwillingness or inability of World Superbike and MotoGP to stage more events in the United States, MotoAmerica—now in its second season—has stepped up to run a premier professional motorcycle racing circuit populated primarily with American riders and staging all of its events in the U.S.

One of the appeals of MotoAmerica is that it serves as a funnel to push America's best and fastest riders on to international competition. When more American riders compete in World Superbike and MotoGP there will be more of a home team to root for and who knows, maybe even another Wayne Rainey someday.

MotoAmerica races are split up into five classes. At the slowest end of the spectrum—not that any of these bikes could be considered slow in the classic sense—are the circuit's youngest riders. They compete in the KTM RC Cup, and they ride identical, single-cylinder KTM RC 390 motorcycles. The bikes are simple and the same, which enables the riders to build their skills in a highly competitive environment dedicated to the physical art of racing, rather than trying to outmaneuver each other technologically.

Building on the idea that skill, rather than technology, can be the focus of a racing series, MotoAmerica also features two classes based on stock motorcycles of 600 and 1000 cc displacement that basically anybody can buy at their local dealer. In the Superstock classes, only a few modifications to the bikes are allowed, and they are basically bolt-on changes, such as suspension and electronics modules. The engines and transmissions must be as supplied by the factory and be widely available to riders in general.

In the Superbike (1000 cc) and Supersport 600 classes, MotoAmerica rules allow all sorts of engine modifications, from polishing connecting rods to lightening crankshafts. While all race bikes can be expensive, it's the Superbike and Supersport motorcycles that come with high-dollar price tags and, quite often, factory and sponsor support.

Many of the riders in the Superstock classes are known as "privateers" in the

racing world. While they may have sponsors, they're pretty much doing things on their own. This is where Jeremy Cook enters the picture.

Cook is one of only two BMW riders in MotoAmerica. Along with airline pilot and former Suzuki and Ducati factory rider Steve Rapp, Cook has naturally drawn the attention of BMW riders in the U.S. The MOA sponsors Cook, enabling him to



travel from race to race and transport his motorcycles, spare parts and supplies in a large enclosed trailer. His other sponsors include Bob's BMW and Schubert.

Cook is a Marine Corps veteran who, after getting out of the service in 2004, needed something to keep himself busy. He was misbehaving on motorcycles on the street with his friends and recognized that behavior wasn't constructive. He took a chance on a track day and enjoyed it so much he got licensed and started racing the very next weekend.

"Unfortunately, the second race of my second year I had a massive highside at the top of the roller-coaster at Virginia International Raceway, which resulted in a med-evac flight to Duke [University], shock trauma ICU for nine days as they tried to save my right arm, and six months of physical therapy. I swore off racing but shortly found myself looking into race schools," Cook said.

A chance meeting with Nate Kern at the inaugural MotoGP races at Indianapolis in 2008 led to Cook putting a deposit down on an S 1000 RR at Bob's BMW in Jessup, Maryland. Cook's next step was a rain-soaked California Superbike School week in which he split the riding between his Suzuki GSX-R1000 and brand-new S 1000 RR. After selling the Gixxer, he put in a season with the Championship Cup Series as an amateur, winning several regional and track championships. As an Expert the following season, he was able to get enough points to earn his AMA Pro Supersport, Daytona Sportbike and Pro Superbike licenses—just before MotoAmerica took over the series.

"MotoAmerica is BIG!" Cook said. "The TV coverage and number of fans and spectators that show up add a lot to the stress."

The last round of the season takes place September 9-11 at the New Jersey Motorsports Park, located south of Millville, New Jersey, next to Millville Airport, a former Army Air Corps facility used to train P-40 and P-47 pilots during World War II. NJMP is a 500-acre facility that sports two tracks

The start.



called Thunderbolt and Lightning, named after 1940s fighter planes. Thunderbolt is the main track; at 2.25 miles long, it features three long straightaways and 12 turns.

Race weekend is grueling for the riders and their crews. It starts on Thursday, when the teams trickle in from all over the country in cars, trucks and RVs, many of them pulling trailers. Tents and canopies go up and the work begins. There are meetings and tech sessions the riders must attend, but Friday is when the action starts. Each class, the single-cylinder KTMs, the 600 cc and the 1000 cc bikes, takes to the track for 30- or 40-minute practice sessions spanning the bulk of the day. The teenagers competing in the KTM RC Cup have their first qualifying session to see who gets to race the next day. Most teams spend Friday night going over the bikes and talking through the practice sessions to identify difficult portions of the track and work on improving their chances in the races.

Saturday is the first day of action, but it starts with qualifying sessions for the Supersport and Superstock 600 bikes, which are broken up into two groups to minimize the number of racers on the track at any one time. The big bikes practice again in the morning, and the KTM kids have another qualifying session. After a lunch break, the day's Superstock 600 last chance qualifier kicks off, an eight-lap sprint to not only qualify for the first of the class' 16-lap races, but to set the grid (starting) positions as well.

After the 600 last chance qualifier, the big bikes take to the track for two 15-minute sessions called Superpoles. Which Superstock riders compete in the Superpole sessions is based on the fastest times in the Superbike practice sessions. If a Superstock 1000 rider's fastest practice lap is within 107 percent of the fastest Superstock 1000 rider, he's in the races, but to get into the Superpoles, he has to be within 107 percent of the fastest Superbike rider. Each Superpole session has a small number of riders, perhaps 10 or 12 at most.

Following the Superpoles, the racing starts. The KTM RC Cup's first race takes to the track for nine laps. Race one for the Supersport and Superstock 600 riders follows the KTM race. Finishing is important, and finishing as high in the standings as possible is paramount because a limited number of positions receive points for the



Jeremy Cook on the starting grid.

race, and it's the overall point standings that determine the champion at the end of the season.

Sunday is race day through and through, and it's generally the day with the most spectators as well. Gates will usually open between 7:30 and 8 a.m., with warm-up sessions beginning not long after fans are let into the spectator areas. Warm-up sessions last 15 minutes, long enough for the riders to get mentally prepared for their races and to make sure the bikes are still handling at peak efficiency.

Tension in the pits starts to rise after the final Superstock 600 qualifying session, and the Superbikes hit the track for their first

18-lap race early in the afternoon. They line up on the grid according to their times from the Superpole sessions (or practice sessions if they didn't qualify for Superpoles) and get the green flag for the "sighting lap," a quick trip around the track just to remind them of the bumps, hills and turns they're about to face. They line up again, and the grid swarms with mechanics, coaches, umbrella girls (and guys) and photographers.

The bikes start and race officials clear the grid. Riders rev their bikes and wait for the red lights to go out—and they're off! Eighteen laps later some of them have crashed out, many of them are disappointed, but



somebody has won, racking up those all-important championship points.

After Race 1 ends, it will be several hours before Race 2 happens. In the meantime, the 600 cc bikes take to the track for their second 16-lap race and the KTMs get their second 9-lap race in as well. Closing out the weekend's schedule is the main event, Superbike/Superstock 1000 Race 2. The grid is the same from Race 1, but riders who crash in the first race and either can't get their bike repaired or don't have a backup bike find themselves on the sidelines watching their friends and colleagues set their minds to the task at hand.

A thousand things, a million maybe, will go through the racer's mind before the green flag drops. Tire choice: hard, medium or soft? How much air pressure? The temperature setting for the tire warmers. Chain

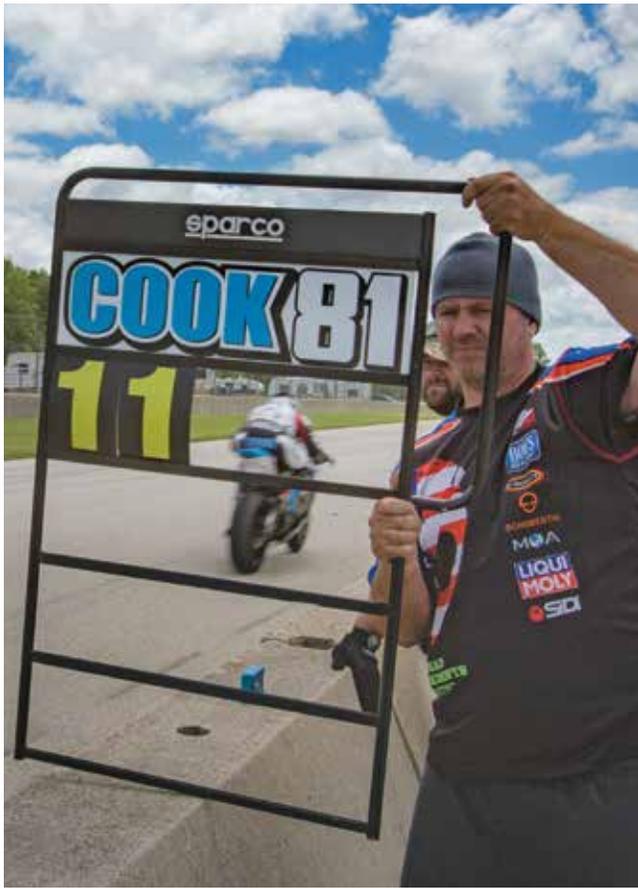
tension. Suspension setup. Hydration for the human and coolant for the machine. That feeling in the pit of the stomach might be hunger, but it might also be fear. They visualize each turn, each step of the way, passing and staying smooth, operating the motorcycle's controls in a clean, efficient manner to maximize speed. On the grid, every rider sees him or herself crossing the finish line to the waving of the checkered flag without any other rider in front of them, knowing they've secured victory that just 18 laps ago wasn't assured to anybody.

The lights go out, the green flag flies and Race 2 begins. It's only the matter of a few dozen minutes before everybody knows who won, who lost and who crashed.

When Race 2 ends and the interviews are over, track employees will begin the process of cleaning up the grounds and making sure

the spectators safely exit the facility. Racers strip off their leathers and the teams start stowing their gear for the long drive they'll start that evening. Some will go home; others will travel directly to the next event. If it's the last race of the season, like the one in September at New Jersey Motorsports Park, they'll all head home and start preparing for next season.

Some of the racers in the KTM series will move up to 600s, and some of the 600 cc riders will move up to 1000s. Superstock riders will become Supersport or Superbike riders. The top riders in Supersport and Superbike might entertain offers to race in other circuits, maybe even circuits that travel all over the world. The only thing that is known for sure is that MotoAmerica will be back in 2017 and the action will be as fast and as exciting as ever.



Looking to the future

Jeremy is staying busy as he preps for the 2017 racing season. There's his job, his work towards a double masters' degree, training for triathlons, getting ready to enter the Naval Reserve, and his personal life (what there is of it) competing with his desire to undergo more training through the California Superbike School program. "It's hard to juggle all the things in the adult world," he admits, "but the biggest thing is to remember that we're all human and you can only do your best."

The cost of being a privateer can be difficult to overcome. "MotoAmerica has done a good job of regulating costs to make things as economical as possible," Jeremy says. "But it still requires a large amount of money to get through the season. I'm older, and with my background I can market with the best of them, which has helped me with sponsors. I like to learn about the products I use and tell others about them. I'm able to use my age as an advantage to allow me to focus and make sure those that are giving me support get my support."

Jeremy has copious praise for MotoAmerica, saying, "They have done an amazing job, especially with the odds stacked against them with the decline of road racing in the United States and the poor job Daytona Motorsports Group did to keep our sport alive. Organizing the ever-growing TV package they've provided, as well as the purses and the list of circuits we get to race on—especially those partnered with DORNA for MotoGP and World Superbike—is unbelievable for only their second year." 🙏

Far left, Cook on the track at Barber. **Left**, A member of Cook's pit crew gives time updates. **Below**, Jeremy gathers his thoughts before a race.

