



# #56

Words: Glen Williams Photos: Alick Saunders / fotoCD

We check out the Suzuki GSX-R1000 Superbike of hard-charging  
Feilding racer - Craig Shirriffs.

A chance to grab a ride on the very bike that Superbike Craig Shirriffs is campaigning in the 2011 road race nationals was hard to turn down. The opportunity arose when our paths crossed at a recent Manfeild track day being run by the good guys at MotoTT. The weather was ideal, the track was clean and the bike had been prepped by Craig's stalwart pit crew Rhys Baird and Kris Shirriffs.

Now – let's get things straight, Mr Suzuki's K9 model GSX-R1000 is a formidable weapon even in stock trim – but this bike has had its engine fettled by specialist engine builder Ray Clee and some extra ponies have been added to the stable via the addition of race camshafts, increased compression, race ECU, and a Yoshimura handmade performance exhaust from the USA. Öhlins suspension is used both front and rear and the Swedish gear includes some of the very latest piston and dampening developments hidden within the TTX36 rear unit and 30mm Nix front cartridge system.

#### Familiar Ground

Sitting on board the big Gixxer bought back a familiar feeling of days gone by, when I used to race earlier models of the GSX-R range. Whilst for me that was quite a few haircuts ago, this bike was still not that different ergonomically and I could feel the direct lineage straight away. In typical GSX-R fashion, it has you sitting tall and proud on top of the bike with legs splayed around the tank/frame/air-box in front of you somewhat barrel-like. Whilst the barrel analogy might sound a little harsh – the ride position is in fact a deliberate

Our man Glen enjoying Shirriffs' Gixxer



act of design with the Suzuki locating your body in a position of power and enabling you to utilise its high centre of gravity to help steer the bike quickly and better dominate the bars.

Thumbing the starter produced an instantly recognisable Suzuki purr emanating from down below in the engine department. This was very much the calm before the 200hp storm of course. Of note, whilst still in the pits and sitting on the bike, was that the quick action throttle fitted had a nice light action, and the quality Brembo brake master cylinder had a neat left hand mounted remote adjuster for simple one touch control for the brake lever

span. The steering damper was also on a pretty light setting, which in my experience often means that there was a good chance that we had a pretty well behaved beastie in our hands.

A road pattern gearshift as opposed to a more 'racer traditional' reverse race pattern shift is used by Craig and that suited me just fine. The pit-crew had set the bike in 'A' power map mode, which gave us full power to play with and minimal intrusion when/if rev spikes occur (as might happen during wheel-spin). The system is not officially a traction control device – but it does, to a degree, work like one.

Interestingly Craig says he normally races the bike in B mode himself, which gives him pretty much the same maximum power output but a slightly less aggressive power curve. Craig actually knows of some top Aussie racers that even use C mode with great success. We do need to keep in mind though that the race ECUs A, B and C settings bear little resemblance to those that are found on the standard road bike. The race ECUs three settings are all very high in outright horsepower and they simply have

some minor subtleties that allows a racer to choose a delivery curve that suits their corner apex and exit style.

#### We Need Warp Speed Now Scotty

So time to take a deep breath but keep my eyes wide open and see how the bright yellow #56 bike goes, snick her into gear and we're off. Like my test ride on Sloan Frost's BMW S1000RR a few months back (BRM # 76), the trip down pit lane and first warm-up lap was easy-peasy, cruising around on a nice summer's day with less than 10,000rpm on the dial producing a bike as tame as a puppy-dog, and all was good in the world. However, that is not what we were here to do and it was time to let this particular big-dog eat, so I fed it some throttle and bugger-me if warp-speed didn't instantly appear on command.

This fact quickly highlighted that this might be a good time to start concentrating on what I was doing as a bike with this sort of mumbo does not treat fools lightly. Immediately noticeable was that the bike had excellent fuelling and a lovely connection between the throttle and rear wheel, with power being delivered

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at a rate relative to how fast and how hard you turned the grip on the right; not all bikes are like this with some seemingly having a mind of their own.

One of the drawbacks of opening the throttle to the stops in a straight-line on a bike like this though is that the straights suddenly become a lot shorter, and seemingly narrower than they were before. Not to worry though as Craig's GSX-R had some front anchors on it that were well up to the task in the form of stock mono-block callipers and 310mm twin front discs matched up with the aftermarket Brembo master cylinder giving totally fade free and consistent performance. Under heavy braking the bike exhibited a slight 'squirrely' feeling, almost like it had a few pounds of pressure missing from the front Dunlop slick, but on the other hand it could just as easily have been my snatchy technique of grabbing the brakes, unsettling the balance of the bike compared to how the machine handles with one of New Zealand's best riders on-board.

A bike like this arrives at your corner turn in points in a serious hurry and requires you to make sure you have your sh#t together by the time you begin your cornering action. This K9 GSX-R steered predictably and

with moderate effort into the turns even whilst trail braking heavily and once on the side of its tyre it felt at ease and well balanced. Feedback from the front I would rate at 8/10 and from the rear 9/10. Craig comments; “We have been steadily working on fine tuning the suspension set up and chasing that magic ‘feel’ that all racers try to attain, as that will breed confidence and with that comes corner speed.” When getting on the gas the bike had no propensity to ‘lift up’ or run wide, it simply drove in the direction you wanted to go with the prodigious power keeping the front wheel lightly skipping over the surface out of the turns and, for that matter, most of the way along the straights – making it wise to keep any over-energetic rider generated steering inputs to an absolute minimum.

The instruments are easy to read (assuming you take the time to look away from the blur of scenery that's going on in front of you). The big-dial tachometer and bright shift lights glare back at you, telling you it's time to select the next gear. In typical Suzuki fashion the gearbox is a snick-snick affair and the New Zealand made Tectonics quick shifter system, which can have a different time cut-out set for each individual gear, worked faultlessly.

#### Strengths & Weaknesses

Without doubt the big Suzuki's strength is the way it makes its power and how much there is to play with. The Suzuki's straight-line performance gives its pilot a fighting chance to be very competitive out on track, and this has been proven over recent years with Andrew Stroud and Robbie Bugden dominating the



Superbike titles for the last few years on these machines. Another strong point is how the bike puts the power to the ground; with its well-sorted chassis you can genuinely maximise the potential of this engine and turn as much of the horsepower as possible into forward motion. It's difficult to ruffle this chassis' feathers especially when it is combined with Öhlins' finest gear, which together do there damndest to keep tyres in full contact with the tarmac. If I had to pick a weakness it would be the initial turn-in effort required and the slightly wooden feedback from the front end, which I am sure will be much improved come race-day. Craig did make comment though that the K9 series was substantially more nimble than the K7 model he previously raced – and whilst I haven't test ridden a K7, it's pretty safe to take Craig's word for it.

Craig, aged 37, is up against some stiff competition this year but I think he has one of the best weapons of choice in the K9 GSX-R to challenge for the hon-

ours of the New Zealand Superbike title. It will be Craig's fifth attempt in the premier class and myself and the team at BRM wish him and his sponsors LG Electronics, Documentary Channel, Dunlop, Alpinestars and Haldane Suzuki the very best of luck for the season.

BRM



Craig sits in 6th place after 3 rounds of 6