

RACE FEATURE // BEN SPIES //



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2009 saw Ben Spies rock-up in Europe and demoralise the opposition. We caught up with the Texan after his WSB romp-fest

Ben Spies is talent epitomised. It oozes from every orifice, and his elbows, sparking jealousy from wannabes and drilling fear into rivals. In his maiden trip overseas, Spies conquered the World Superbike championship

and made various regulars look silly, un sentimentally taking the title away from fan-favourite and perennial nearly-man, Nori Haga.

He's used to such trickery. He built his career with Suzuki in America, competing in Superstock, Supersport and eventually AMA

Superbike, and Spies was the only true threat to then teammate, Mat Mladin, who himself had dominated Stateside. Spies annihilated Mladin with three championships on the bounce and fled across the pond to continue his quest towards MotoGP, switching

from Suzuki to Yamaha in the process. So how was the change of manufacturer and machine?

"It wasn't just adjusting to the R1 after years on a Suzuki. It was Dunlop to Pirelli, America to Europe, and AMA to WSB. But I didn't really have any real



Hands up if you're super-stoked. Spies and his Yamaha homies celebrate in Portimao

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difficulties, just more differences to sort, and it wasn't as if I hadn't been to Europe before.

"I had to adjust my riding style a little to suit the Pirellis and just try to get used to what the Yamaha does differently. There's a lot of stuff the R1 does differently to the Suzuki. I wouldn't say worse,



A slice of Fast Bikes helped Ben win the championship too. "Yeah, it was good that Chaz (Davies) came down to hang out before the final round, because it kept my mind off of things. Things were a little weird after Magny Cours, I was ill, so it was nice to have a week off just chilling



Ah, so that's where Ben Spies gets his 'Elbowz' nickname from

“I COULDN'T BELIEVE WE WERE EVEN IN THE TITLE CHASE”

but they're just very different motorcycles and have very different tendencies."

Despite his change of scenery, 'Elbowz' adapted supremely to WSB, taking 14 wins from 28 starts, including the first race at the final round at Portimao.

Spies went to the Algarve ten points down on championship leader Haga, and the two combined to bring us one of the greatest finales of the Noughties.

with Chaz, and watching a pro cycle race. We even ate five pizzas in three days!" (Isn't that normal?) "I didn't go out on a bender or anything, but we just had a good time and the important thing was that we didn't think about the race weekend too much.

"When we got to the Algarve, I just wanted to get on the bike and ride, and not over-think things. I

was in a title chase with Mladin a few years back and I felt a lot of pressure, but this time, it was everybody else around me who was going crazy. They were pacing up and down, and I was like, 'breath, calm down, getting excited ain't going to do any good!'

"I was cool. I just couldn't believe we were even in the title chase, and it was good to be in it when you consider we were coming from 88 points down. We didn't get gifted

anything. OK, Haga and Rea got together, but me and Fabrizio came together, too. We had the most DNFs. We had a few mechanicals

and I made a lot of mistakes as well. If either one of us had won the championship, we would have both deserved it and both did a good job."

How about the races? What was going through your mind?

"I really shouldn't be in the title race anyway but I thought 'just go out, have fun and see if we can pull it off.' The only time I got worked up was in the middle of both races and I missed a gear going into the hairpin and ran wide. I got a shot of adrenaline like you wouldn't believe and I could have run 80 laps at any pace and still would have won. It was pretty crazy.

"There were a few incidents and moves that Max (Biaggi) made which I couldn't understand. Man, he was fighting hard. If anyone was showing me a wheel, I was letting



"Our smoke machine has packed up, can you help us out please, Ben."

them have it. I didn't think Nori was going to catch them. I didn't want to get involved, and besides, everyone had their own agenda. Nori was going to do whatever it took to win and Johnny wanted to win it for sure. And lets just say that I'm not too comfortable riding with Fabrizio."

Even before the final round of WSB, Spies was signed to Yamaha for 2010. But for which championship? The press releases were vague. Some said that the MotoGP deal was already done, but at the time it looked as if James Toseland and Colin Edwards would remain as the Tech3 partnership for a third consecutive year.

Then, in a strange twist, it was announced that Spies would partner his fellow Texan,

Career History



BEN SPIES

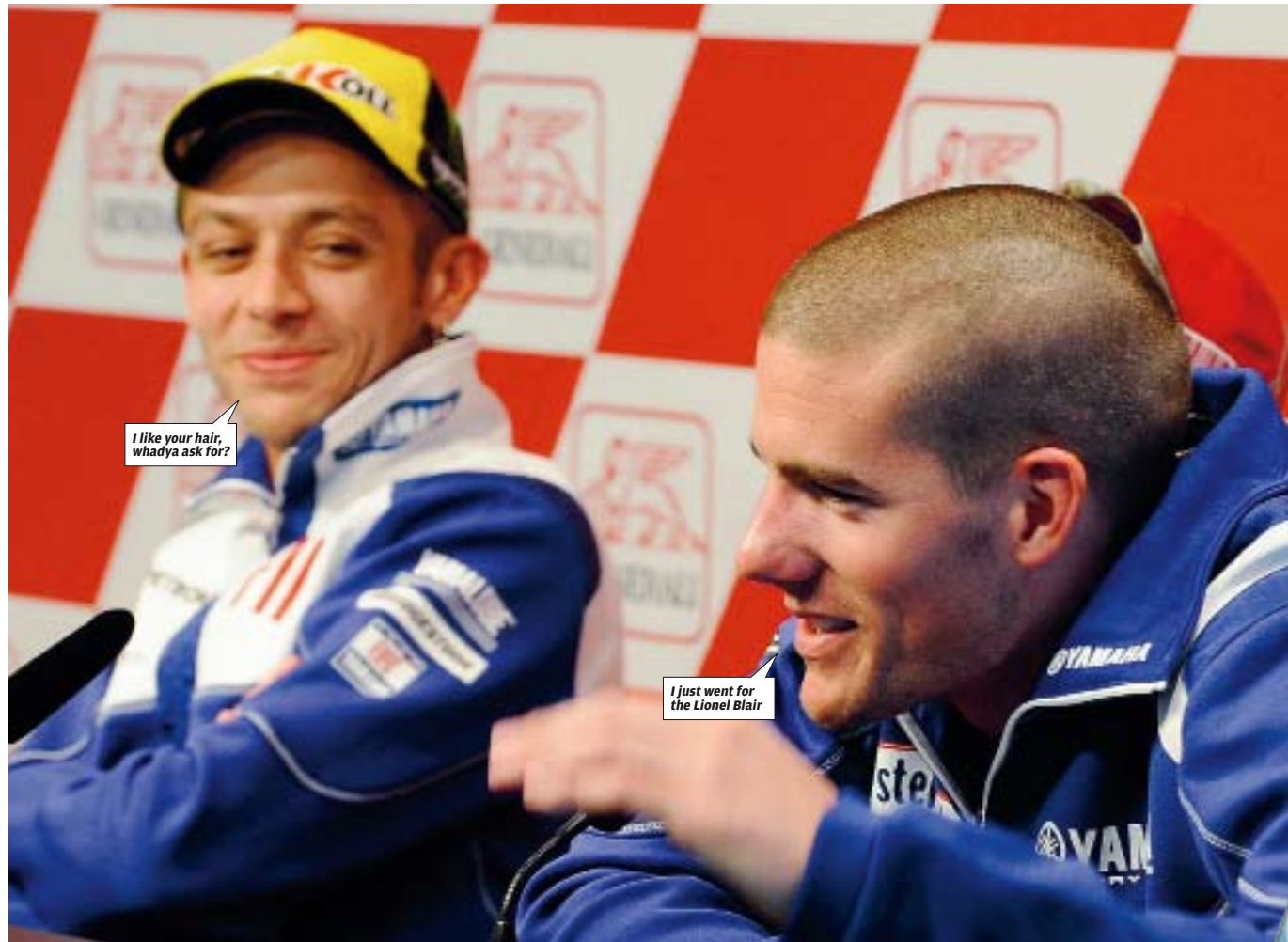
- 2002 6th AMA Formula Xtreme
9th AMA Supersport
- 2003 1st AMA Formula Xtreme
9th AMA Supersport
- 2004 4th AMA Supersport
5th AMA Superstock
2nd AMA Superbike
- 2005 4th AMA Supersport
Yoshimura Suzuki
GSX-R1000
- 2006 1st AMA Superbike
Yoshimura Suzuki
GSX-R1000
- 2007 1st AMA Superbike
Yoshimura Suzuki
GSX-R1000
- 2008 1st AMA Superstock
1st AMA Superbike
Yoshimura Suzuki
GSX-R1000
3 MotoGP wildcards
- 2009 WSB champion
Sterilgarda Yamaha
YZF-R1
7th - Valencia MotoGP



Over-talented, over-nice, and over here. Some people are just so damned perfect



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I like your hair, whadya ask for?

I just went for the Lionel Blair

ousting Toseland for the coveted M1 seat. Spies is no stranger to MotoGP. As Suzuki's up and coming golden boy, he was rewarded with a few wildcards onboard the injured Loris Capirossi's Rizla bike. He scored two top-ten finishes.

final round of MotoGP in Valencia. He took a remarkable seventh position, and Toseland in the process, although JT had problems and Ben had the advantage of a brand-new motor, while others on the grid coaxed home their final engine allocation.

YES, I GUESS I AM A VICTIM OF MY OWN SUCCESS

Yet, despite three AMA Superbike titles and an awesome GP debut, Suzuki didn't retain the Texan for 2009 and went on to give Yamaha their first ever World Superbike championship. Kevin Schwantz, amongst others, has been vocal in his disbelief. Suzuki must be spewing. They could have done with Spies to rekindle their on-track fortune, as Suzuki is suffering in every aspect of motorcycle racing.

As a little teaser from Yamaha, Elbowz was awarded the factory test machine for a cameo at 2009's

He also helped his future teammate to fifth in the MotoGP final standings, after beating Dovizioso to the line.

"Colin came over and gave me a big hug after the race. He sort of jokingly told me that I might be able to help him beforehand and I'm glad it worked out that way.

"I'm now looking forward to the tests and getting a good base under me for this season. I'll head home for a few weeks and try to relax and sort of decompress from this season. It's been a rewarding year for sure. Winning World



Ben Spies sprayed a lot of the 'poo around this summer



Superbikes and then getting the opportunity to get some time on the GP machine has been great, but it's been exhausting as well."

So, onto this year. What sort of pressure are you feeling? You're probably a victim of your own success in many ways.

"I know what everybody else is thinking, but that's the way the media is. And yes, I guess I'm a

victim of my own success. I did what I had to do in WSB, but I'm not expecting to go to GPs this year and do anything. I've raced them before and I know they're fast. Whereas I was coming to a WSB weekend and expecting to win every time, in GP, the goal is to finish inside the top ten. It's another level."

James Toseland is the latest of WSB refugees to step-up to GPs and underachieve. He joins a catalogue of other hopefuls. Apart from Nicky Hayden, who jumped straight from AMA to MotoGP, all the



WSB tag was a game that never really caught on. You're it, Ben

others have somehow failed. Spies, however, looks as though he's a rare exception, but his outlook is modest to say the least.

"There's a little bit of pressure from the media, but if you look at the other Superbike riders that have gone in there, well, they haven't really been successful.

That's not speaking bad about them, but that's just the way it is. I'm just going to take baby steps and learn weekend to weekend"

Whereas Rossi has Uccio and Stoner has his wife, Ben Spies has his mother travelling alongside him to very round, scrubbing his helmet and managing him in general. However unaccustomed being a mummy's boy is, the system obviously works flanking Ben's undeniable aptitude.

It may not be immediately apparent in 2010, but there's no doubt Spies will challenge for race wins and, possibly, a championship. There may be another alien to join the quartet of untouchables very soon.

Go Team Texas.



Has a man and his machine ever looked so right together?