

# KING OF THE HILL

**Who better to guide you round the 37.75-mile Isle of Man TT course than 15-times winner John McGuinness**

**T**here are a few road racers that have done more laps around the fabled and feted TT course, but none have made these laps count more than 15-time winner John McGuinness. No racer would admit to completely knowing every inch of the track, but in the 14 years that McGuinness has raced at the TT he has built up an intimate knowledge of the island's intricate A-roads that make up the magnificent, yet perpetually perilous, mountain course. 15 victories, 14 further podiums, lap records galore and a whole host of unfortunate breakdowns that could have easily been converted into wins means that despite Ian Hutchison's imperial quintet of wins last year, John McGuinness remains the man to beat on the island – and our first port of call when we wanted a guide of the track. So here's John's taking you by the metaphorical throttle hand for the most exciting lap of your life.

## START TO BRAY HILL

"Bray Hill is so daunting because it's the

first thing you face. If it's any other race you get a warm up lap, get to see the track conditions, scrub the tyres in a bit. But you go into Bray Hill blind effectively, full of juice and with a new set of tyres on. It's full commitment from the word go, so that's why it's so daunting. It's a lot steeper than you think, and on a bike it's a real roller-coaster ride. As you come to the top of it, you can't see anything, just the sky, and then you pick the right point to aim for. Do that and the road opens up for you on the way down. On the way down you're focused on that spot 100 metres in front of you, at the bottom of where

you want to be on Bray Hill. It's the old story of where you look, it's where you go. Once you hit the bottom the road opens up for you, and you get yourself into position for Ago's Leap. So on lap one, lap three and lap five you're doing that with new tyres and you're full of fuel, and the superbike is a real handful down there. After saying all that, it's also easy to forget about because it's the first part of the track and you've got another 37 miles to ride.

"I kept it pinned when I first came over on a 250. Years ago that's what you rode to learn your trade. It's a hell of a buzz. When I rode for my first TT win, I remember coming down and everything was perfect. It handled right, was carbed right, it just felt so good and I remember thinking that if I don't win on this I never will. It's a good gauge of a good bike.

"On a flying lap St Ninians Crossing is a ►

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ON ANY OTHER TRACK YOU GET A WARM UP LAP. BUT HERE YOU GO DOWN BRAY HILL BLIND

"...and if you see the church, you've gone too far..."





*Rootsy gets the best seat in the house – following the legend that is John McGuinness*

►bally one. It's fully committed. It must look absolutely insane. We're doing 173mph over the start line – in fifth! Then we change up and keep accelerating. You meet the hedge, then the wall and it feels so fast. Pull on the bars and over the crown of the road and then there's the crest. I'm pressing the thumb brake there to calm the rear down a bit. There's a lot for your brain to process. You can't go down flat out on a superbike, you have to roll off a bit to weight the front because going down the hill and it drives away from you. You're there thinking 'why can't I keep it pinned?', but psychologically you have to back off a bit. But on a 600 you're on the limiter, so that's the best part of 170mph!"

## QUARTERBRIDGE TO BALLACRAINE

"I know it seems that we brake way too early for the slow stuff, but that's only the case when you're full of fuel. Quarterbridge on lap two, four and six is different, because you've only got half a tank of fuel and you're scrubbed in. You can gain time here, if you attack, and if it goes wrong you've got half a chance of saving it by running on or whatever. Years ago everyone was very cautious here at the start, but that's changed now. Now you have to look at nicking a tenth here, a tenth at Ballacrairie, Ramsey and all the slower stuff, and suddenly you've found a second – and that's what you're looking for.

"Once you get the slow stuff out of the way at Quarterbridge and Bradden Bridge, it gets very fast, very quickly. It's so, so fast on towards Ballacrairie, way above 150-160mph for massive long periods of time. You never really go below fourth, so that just shows you

the speed. It's a really important part of the track, especially if you're feeling good, and you're relaxed and get a good run out of Union Mills, up the hill. Because there's a guy in front, who's started 10 seconds ahead of you, if you get a glimpse of them here you know everything's going well and you've just taken a bit of time off them.

"Then you get to Ballagarey, where Guy crashed. I hear all sorts of stuff about people going flat out on 600s, but I come back a gear on a big bike and drive through it. It's one of

Ballagarey much faster. Guy asked for a little bit too much, he would have had a new tyre on and got mega good drive out of Union Mills and probably arrived there 5mph quicker. That's all it takes. I've had front end slides on that part of the course on Gorse Lees and Crosby where there's so many people there you've got to look fast, but never at Ballagarey.

"Greeba Castle is a fast left-right chicane with a good camber going in and a negative camber on the way out – it's dead easy to lose the back here being too greedy, and then it's

## AS GUY SHOWED, WE CAN'T GO ROUND BALLAGAREY MUCH QUICKER

those corners that every time you come to it you're there going 'Oh my God, oh my God'. A real grit your teeth one... You're in the dip and you can't see through it, you can't see your apex, there's no peel in reference. It's all done by feel and it's a split second instinct to turn in. You might have to make a few little adjustments before you get on the line. When Guy crashed there, after lap one we were 0.3 seconds apart, which is nothing, so that's how hard the envelope is being pushed and, as Guy showed, we definitely can't get round

push-push-push on the way to Ballacrairie."

## BALLACRAINE TO GLEN HELEN

"This is probably the hardest technical part of the track. When you're on any of the bikes, but especially on the superbikes, you're constantly on the edge of the tyre, often at full lean. It's not as fast as the previous section, but it's about trailing the brakes, running deep into the turns, being on good lines and keeping the speed up. You've got to be really smooth,

really precise throughout the whole section. It's all very enclosed under the trees, it flows, and you're never fully upright. There's only really one line through here, so it's really hard to pass anyone."

## GLEN HELEN TO BALLAUGH

"Glen Helen is not so important, but the corners that come right after, Sarah's Cottage and Lambfell going up the hill are key because they lead out onto a straight. As you're building the speed up, it's important to get the two rights before the last left spot on before the Cronk Y Voddy straight. Get those bang on and it determines your speed all the way down the straight. If you're following someone up through the turns you can hold back a bit and



*The GOAT hands the laurels out to a real hero of racing*

then draught them down the straight – it feels like you've got another 10 horsepower if you get it right. You hold back to gain speed later.

"Then you come out on the Cronk Y Voddy straight, to the fast bit, through to the 11th milestone. This is probably my favourite bit. There's a little left kink that hasn't got a name, and you never see anyone watching there, but when I'm retired I'm going to bring a radio, a crate of beer and some butties and sit there in the sun all day. When you get it right, it's really satisfying and there's a lot of time to be made up there.

"After the Cronk Y Voddy you've got the big depression at the bottom of Barregarrow, which is hard. I've been through there hundreds of times and it's weird because it's nice to ride through, but I'm there thinking that I'm going to break something on the bike. It's not worth the risk of going balls out, so you just get it out the way. Then going through Kirk Michael village that feels like you're doing 300mph. The sense of speed is just amazing. There's only one line through here, and you've got to be bang on line. Then it's on through

places like Bishopscourt and Alpine Cottage which look simple, 'yeah, yeah, it's flat out', but they're not easy. You've got to get everything tucked in, get a good feel for your bike and countersteer your way through them using the palms of your hands and weighting the pegs. It takes a long, long time on a big bike to commit yourself here. When you get it right, there's a lot of time to be made up here."

## BALLAUGH TO RAMSEY

"Ballaugh Bridge is in the way really, but it comes with the fixtures and fittings of this place. Then there's the big jump at Ballacrye. I had a mental block there for years. The first superbikes I rode over there, like the SP-1, were always pretty unstable there. I hit the jump a few times and got myself into some right knots, and that scarred me for life! I'm still pretty average around there, Hutchy passed me on the 600 last year just after Ballaugh, so I thought I'd follow him and he went through the left kink before Ballacrye fully pinned, whereas I rolled off. I lost ten bike lengths, just like that. Then he carried ►



*Be it a CBR600RR or a Fireblade, McGuinness just loves lapping this isle*





Ballagh Bridge is part of the Island's fixtures and fittings – a bit like McGuinness

## FROM GINGER HALL TO RAMSEY IT'S LIKE RIDING A 180MPH ENDURO BIKE

► all the speed through to Quarry Bends.

“Quarry Bends is a natural short circuit chicaney thing, but exiting the last is mega important because up next is the Sulby Straight, and to get the speed here you’ve had to have done all the work way back. Go in too quick at Quarry and you lose, lose, lose speed. So find a good line, hold back a bit, be patient and then start picking up and feeding the power in, so you build the speed through on the exit. Because it looks like it should be on a

short circuit, Quarry can really suck you in, the first left especially. If you do this then you’re fighting through all the corners. So don’t rush into it, especially on a big bike because they take some steering here.

“Then you can make your move on Sulby Straight. It pisses me off a bit when everyone says my bike’s a missile and all that, but the truth is I’ve built up the speed by attacking the corners in the right way, and that comes with experience, not horsepower.

“From Ginger Hall to Ramsey, it’s like a riding a 180mph enduro bike, and it’s here that a lot of people wear themselves out, fighting the bike. They grip too hard and hold their breath, but you need that oxygen. You’ve got to concentrate through there, which is hard because your vision goes over the bumps. It’s so fast on a big bike. I’ve had a tank slapper through there, at Glen Duff, and it was that violent that it went off the lock stops, bang, bang, bang, and it was flat in top in 2005 on an R6. That ruined me. I’m still shit through there. It broke the fairing off, it bust the clock mounts off, I had my foot underneath the back wheel, it bent the back brake lever. I thought fuck me, I was just a passenger. You hear people say ‘gas it and it’ll come out’ – does it fuck. Terrifying. The pads had gone back, everything. I absolutely shit myself.

“Then you’re into Ramsey and it’s all a bit scrappy. Parliament Square is scrappy, same with May Hill and Whitegates. Ramsey Hairpin is miserable to ride, then you’re up through the trees, where you can pull a tear-off off, then Waterworks is scrappy, Tower Bends, and the Gooseneck is scrappy. But then the climb starts. Everyone’s quick through that bit, so there’s not much time to be made up.

### THE MOUNTAIN

“It’s here where you have to start thinking and get the bike working for you. You get relaxed on the bike, and get thinking about where you’re going. Guthries is two lefts, you carry good speed up through Joey’s at the 26th, keeping the rpm up all the time. They are mega important corners, as you’re going uphill. Through the white walls to start the mountain mile – and this is crucial. If ►



### IT'S THE MCGUINNESS TALKING:

John took us from the bottom of the island to the top of the mountain section; him on a 'Blade, us on Beemers. On regular roads, McGuinness was a courteous, careful rider, but as soon as we hit the track at Ballacrine, he was off, imperceptibly accelerating away, taking big, sweeping lines and looking like he was loving every minute of it.

Aside from describing his lap, John also talked about plenty of other topics – here's some of the stuff that we're allowed to print...

#### On road riding

“I really enjoyed that ride, I don't often get the opportunity to just go out and ride, so that was mint. That was a big ten thumper coming out onto the Cronk Y Voddy. I was in fifth gear there, doing about 130mph on the back wheel! Oh, I shouldn't say that, should I!”

#### On lap records

“It's amazing how people just go on about speeds. The 2007 Senior TT was special, a really special win. No-one ever says well done for winning the race, they just go on about the 130mph lap.”

#### On lap records, again

“Whenever it's come down to the last lap the lap record has been destroyed – like in the 600s and supersport. Superbike hasn't seen a head to head, so if it comes down to the last lap and it's close we'll see 133mph. Definitely.”

#### On lap records, still...

“In 2007 I said to Becky before practice, 'right I'm

## SOUTHERNERS SAY YOU'RE MAD. UP NORTH YOU'RE A LEGEND

going to do 130'. I went out, rode my balls off, sweated like fuck, came in and was miles off!”

#### On constantly learning the track

“I might experiment with lines, or more likely gear changes, a few little bits. You're never too wise to learn. At Joey's at the 26th milestone, I was talking to Micheal Rutter. He said he did it in fourth, and I've always done it in third, but I tried it and it was better. Ian Lougher, Jim Moodie, Lee Pullan, Mick Lofthouse, I picked up loads of stuff from these guys over the years.”

#### On the money

“It's not footballers wages, so you've got to do it for the right reasons. You've got to have the passion to do it, and there will always be someone who wants to come for these reasons.”

#### On 2010's biggest achievement

“For all of Ian's five wins and the coverage for all of that, the biggest thing of the lot was Hutchy's superstock 130.7mph lap on a road bike.”

#### On disappointment

“There's always disappointment. When my



To the 15-times victor – the spoils!

#### On the bikes

“I love riding all the bikes. On a 600 you've really got to scratch your plums off. With the bigger bikes you've got to be confident on them. A superbike has to be ridden to a certain level, otherwise it won't work. At 80 per cent they feel wrong, the pressures in the tyres don't come up and it just feels so stiff and unstable. Compared to the superbike, the superstockers are idiot-proof.”

#### On 99 per cent

“I always try and carry a little bit in reserve, just in case it comes down to a scrap. So I might have a bit more in my pocket if it comes down to it. It's not in a certain place, but it's nicking little bits here and there. But if it came down to it, there's a point where I would let whoever have it. It's not worth it at the end of the day. If you can't go any faster you can't.”

#### On fitness

“People always take the piss out of me, but I'm bike fit. Ask me to run from here (Keppel Gate) to the Creg and you'd have to call the air ambulance out, but I could do 150 laps round here without breaking a sweat.”

#### On the future

“I'll stop after a big win. Well, either that or a wall! Then I'd like to be some sort of mentor. I'm not a manager-type of person. I can't even organise myself.”





McGuinness has raced in HM Plant colours, but will look fantastic running the new TT Legends colours in 2011

► you're crap here then you'll be crap all the way up, dropping time like mad. Then you're up to the real lovely Mountain Box, a stunning corner. Get that right and it's one of the most satisfying corners on the whole track. You go back two, and as soon as you make the turn you know that you're on it, and the white lines fly beneath you. But this is once every six laps. Miss it and you have to wait to get back on it, and it's so difficult, especially if the wind is up.

"Then there's corners like the left before the Verandah and then the four rights together, one of the hardest corners on the track – that's a one in six corner again. You're middle of the lefthand side of the road to the white line then middle of the righthand side of the road to the apex. It's mega if you get that right. The problem is it's just so fast, setting speed is a real fine art, it's getting off the brake at the

right time, getting everything settled.

"It's pretty smooth, but the mountain as a whole is quite hard to ride because there's so few peel-in points, you've just got to know it. When it comes down to it, this is where the race is won and lost. If you're not on it over here the three or four second lead that you had at Ramsey Hairpin can just evaporate – you can lose it all in a breath.

"By the time you get to Kate's Cottage you can have a big wheelie over the top and steer it on the rear down to the Creg. There's a wet patch here that springs up, and there's a picture of me running over this stream with my back wheel in the air. I hate seeing pictures of myself like that. You can see the sea here and sometimes you can see the boat coming in. And you always see mates dotted around the course, but up here you see David Knight a

lot. He's always messing about up here, getting his arse out or whatever.

"Running down to the Creg, you brake so hard. Last year the wind changed direction for the Senior and two of them were off here, you've got to look at the wind sock a bit earlier and take it in. The wind can change a lot up there, you have to adjust for it. Once you're at the top, heading down to the Creg, you feel like you're nearly there – but you have to concentrate to the end. Have to. Towards the end of the week, and on the last few laps of the senior it's hard work – a lot of accidents happen just due to fatigue. You may be only a mile or two away, but you get it wrong at Brandish or Hillberry and you're in deep shit. Even when I've had a 30-40 second lead you've got to concentrate. I've been there and you find yourself thinking 'what's for tea?'

"Some people are different, I remember David Jefferies smashing the lap record by pushing so hard. I just try and get the bike home. A lap record can always be broken. The win is set in stone, that's in the book." □

🏠 **GET IT RIGHT AND IT'S SO SATISFYING,**  
**BUT THIS HAPPENS ONCE EVERY SIX LAPS** 🏠



On the climb up the mountain, McGuinness gets the 'scrappy stuff' out of the way