

Ring of Fire

The Inside Story of Valentino Rossi and MotoGP

Rick Broadbent

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Extract

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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.

Ring of Fire

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 kneesliders 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

The Big Slide

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, fire-crackers exploded and people shouted, 'Fuck Rossi! Fuck Biaggi!'

Ring of Fire

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-brake 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 disintegrated. 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 night-club, 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.