



shifting up a gear

As the superbikes arrive at Brands Hatch, we chat to an up-and-coming Aussie rider about the demands of life in the fast lane

WORDS TOM STURROCK

At 300km/h, there's no time to think. There's no time to judge the next corner. But the rest of the pack aren't going to leave anything out on the track. It's a split-second assessment, with only one conclusion: hit the corner hard and hope for the best.

"A lot of your decision-making starts to happen sub-consciously," says Australian superbike rider Mark Aitchison.

"You don't have time to think about it — you can be shitting yourself at that speed, but you basically have to get in a zone where you ride instinctively."

Aitchison, 24, has come a long way from riding around dirt tracks on the Central Coast as a 10-year-old petrolhead. This weekend he heads to Brands Hatch in Kent for the ninth race of the World Superbike Championship.

Aitchison now races a Triumph Daytona in the Supersport category, having moved through the ranks of motorcycle racing, each season bringing him closer to the footsteps of other great Australian riders such as Mick Doohan, Wayne Gardner and the men of the moment, Troy Bayliss and Casey Stoner.

The world of motorsport seems

awash with different categories and specifications that make little sense to anyone not raised with a monkey-wrench in hand.

According to Aitchison, his category is defined by the fact the bikes aren't much different from what is available to the average punter. In MotoGP, for example, the bikes are specially designed for racing from scratch. But in the superbikes category, spectators are watching the professionals hammer around a course on regular bikes — albeit with a few expensive modifications.

"It makes the racing close and hard-fought — keeps it very tight," Aitchison says.

"Spectators can relate to the bikes that are being ridden, because they might ride those bikes themselves."

So what does it take to race these bikes around at breakneck speeds? Apart from developing nerves of steel, the riders need to be super-fit.

"We don't do a lot of on-bike training, but I do a lot of gym work — cardio and weights, swimming and running," Aitchison explains.

"You need a lot of strength in your core and also your lower body to control the bike, but the

THE GREAT AUSSIE RIDERS

Troy Corser

The Wollongong-born veteran took out the World Superbike Championship in 1996 and 2005 and has been a mainstay on the circuit since he debuted. At 36, he is still one of the leading riders on the superbike circuit.

Casey Stoner

The defending MotoGP world

champion, currently locked in an intense battle with five-time champ Valentino Rossi and Spaniard Dani Pedrosa for the 2008 title. After early season blues, Stoner won three races in a row to vault back into the mix.

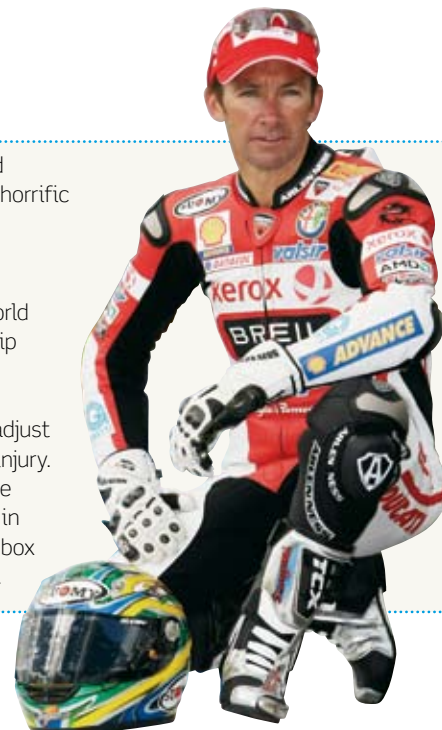
Mick Doohan

Dominated the 500cc class — which was later replaced by MotoGP as the top flight division — during the '90s, winning five consecutive world championship

titles on his Honda, and overcoming a series of horrific injuries along the way.

Troy Bayliss

After taking out the World Superbike Championship in 2001, Bayliss (right) switched to MotoGP in 2005. He struggled to adjust and was also beset by injury. He switched back to the superbikes, dominated in 2006 and is now in the box seat to win a third title.



biggest thing you need is endurance conditioning — both mental and physical.

“The races might go for 35 or 40 minutes, often in scorching heat. You need to be able to handle the demands of racing, but also be fit enough to maintain focus.”

That focus is the difference between hitting the right line on a tight corner and giving it too wide a berth, costing valuable milliseconds. That focus is the difference between winning and losing — or worse.

“A lot of it comes down to experience,” Aitchison says. “You have to rely on your natural cues, and then it’s just a matter of how hard you’re willing to push. You need to find time by stretching yourself on each section and putting it on the line.”

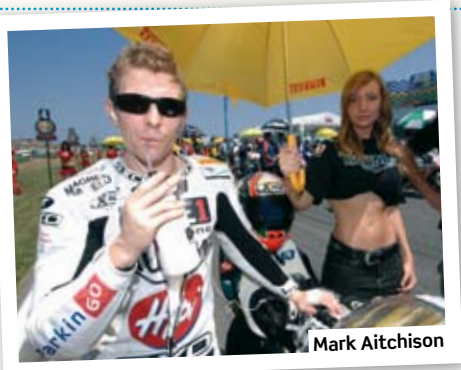
“When you go to a new circuit, you don’t know how hard to hit each corner, but you’ve basically got to go as hard as you can because you know that every other guy is going to do the same. You can’t hold back. Sometimes it comes off — other times you crash and end up in the fence.”

While racing requires split-second execution, there’s also meticulous planning involved.

“There’s a lot of strategy that goes into planning a race, whether it’s managing the bike or preserving your tyres,” Aitchison says.

“The rider will also have his own tactics on the circuit and about where he thinks other guys might struggle.”

It seems like a contradiction — the best racers ride almost without thinking, yet no detail is overlooked in preparation. Each



Mark Aitchison

competitor goes all out to wring the best possible performance out of themselves and their bike.

“We’re constantly evaluating our performance and are always finding things that we need to improve,” Aitchison says.

“We work on starts and we look at parts of the track where we think there may be passing opportunities — we work to get the absolute maximum out of the bike and the rider — it’s a constant evolution of that.”

Aitchison heads to Brands Hatch full of confidence, despite ongoing tinkering with his bike.

“Brands Hatch is a balls-out place to ride and I love it,” Aitchison says. “You’re either on your A-game or you’ve got nothing.”

“There are a couple of little circuit secrets, which hopefully I can use to my advantage. I’ll take a positive outlook, and just attack the course.”

Beijing 2008



Don't miss TNT Magazine's Olympics guide next Monday. The guide will feature interviews with leading Australian, New Zealand and South African medal hopes as well as a full schedule of events.

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Aitchison will arrive with confidence