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Multistrada 1200S: Putting the Pieces Together

- A Racer's View of Laguna Seca*
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Shop Stop: Feel Like a Pro

By Dave Murphy

Positioned in the last row waiting for the start of my first race, I gazed at a sea of motorcycles, engines pulsing, poised for action. Sweat beaded on my forehead—in part from the 100-plus temperatures, but also from the anticipation. Up in the starting tower a race official changed the number-three sign for the number-two, signaling two minutes to the start. The pulsing engines turned to a vibrant whine, and I snapped my visor shut, leaving me enveloped in an eerie sense of isolation. There were no more questions to be asked, no more advice to be listened to. The second the green flag appeared it was all up to me, both a disturbing and exhilarating notion.

My mind focused with what felt like laser precision on the two arms of the starting official. One hand contained the still visible number-one sign that he was slowly lowering towards a horizontal position, and the other contained a green flag hidden behind the tower parapet. The green flag. My green flag. Then it appeared. The sea of motorcycles turned into a river rushing inexorably towards Turn 1.

That was my first start, but that is not how the experience started. It started several months before when I met Brian Bartlow of Feel Like a Pro at a track day.

There are many ways to enjoy motorcycling here in the Bay Area. Like many people I purchased a street bike with the anticipation that I would ride it around in the local coastal hills. I had not ridden for several decades and figured this time I would actually learn the proper way to safely ride a motorcycle rather than the shall we say, "free spirited" method I had employed as a teenager. So I went to a class held at Infineon, where I had an amazing time and realized that the track was the place for me. Not as a racer but as an enthusiast wanting a controlled environment to improve my riding skills.

I soon realized that my little red Italian beauty of a street bike was not the best choice for the track. But there were so many choices. What was the best tool for the job? At my class at Infineon I remember seeing a large trailer covered with sponsor logos, a very professional set up with canopies, a riders' lounge, a mechanic's work station and about six Kawasaki racebikes all race-prepped and lined up like soldiers ready for battle. It looked much like the pit you would find put together by the factory team at any professional-level motorsports event. Someone told me that these bikes were for rent.

Several days passed as I pondered my best-tool-for-the-job question. Figuring that renting a bike while I researched the answer to my question might be a smart way to go, I called the school back and asked about the guy with the Kawasakis. They referred me to Brian Bartlow, who informed me that his bikes were for rent for track days, race days or whole race seasons. The bikes were Kawasaki 250 Ninjas,



modified and race-prepped to production-class racing specifications.

I agreed to meet Brian at a Luguna Seca track day. Up to that point, I had never been much of a racing fan, but even I knew that Laguna Seca was something of hallowed ground for people into motor sports. Brian was very welcoming and immediately took me and the other clients under his wing to make sure we turned up at all the right times and all the right places to get the most out of our track day. His pit was set up just as I had seen it at Infineon and my bike was waiting for me in like-new condition. Race-ready tires are taken care of, as are tire warmers, gas, setup and maintenance. I didn't even have to roll my bike through tech inspection; just like a paid racer, it was all taken care of for me. By the end of the day I was in another zone: exhilarated, exhausted and thrilled to have experienced an amazing day at a world-class track.

The first thing you notice about Brian is his kinetic energy. I'm no physicist, so I don't know if that's even a way to describe energy, but in this case it describes a guy that's switched on all of the time, as if he's

tapped into a vast reservoir of positive electrons that the rest of us cannot access. The best part is that energy is directed at making sure you're having a good time, a kind of generosity that's not just reserved for Feel Like a Pro clients. As a result, he tends to get a lot of visitors to his pit whether on a race day or a track day.

Brian has been around motorcycles of all types for decades, and from my perspective as a novice, seems to know just about everyone. In the brief time I have been renting bikes from Brian I have been introduced to current hot racers, not-so-current hot racers, mechanics, engine builders, suspension experts and tire guys. All seem to have known Brian for a long time and enjoy the vibe in his pit. His racing credentials are impeccable as well—which no doubt adds to his credibility with the aforementioned moto-VIPs. Just last year he won no less than seven WERA season championships in various classes, and that does not do justice to a couple of decades worth of race results in road racing, motocross and supermoto.

It is impossible to guarantee that a day on a track on a motorcycle is going to be perfect; the rider's attitude is the real key ingredient; after all is said and done, when your visor snaps shut it is all up to you. But with all of his bikes and all of his resources and all of his decade's worth of experience, Brian can get you right there.

So how did the first race go? I managed to achieve all of my goals and more. I did not crash (goal #1), I enjoyed the experience (goal #2) and I passed some people and ran some good lap times for me. As I rode back to the pit and opened my visor once again, there was Brian waiting with a smile on his face bigger than mine inside my helmet. Feel Like a Pro? I am sure I felt even better. ☺

Dave Murphy is AFM #990 and a Bay Area resident. Racebike rentals from Feel Like a Pro start at \$250, but many other trackside and support services are available. You'll find FLAP at AFM and WERA as well as at Zoom-Zoom Racing track days (zoomzoomtrackdays.com or 888/929-ZOOM). You can get more information at feellikeapro.com or call 559/273-4429.

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