

Assen Ducati races

Probably the best clubrace in the world

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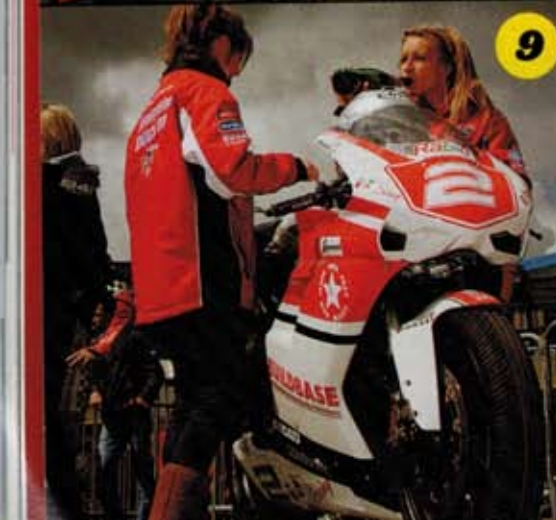
The sun's setting and a golden light accents the sculpted tanks of a hundred red bikes. A heady summer perfume of barbecues, race fuel and just a hint of herbal hangs in the air. The atmosphere's as relaxed as the racers and their rolled down leathers, cracking open those first cold cans of Amstel after a hot day on track. This is the Ducati Club race paddock at Assen and it's filled with some of Europe's coolest and most obscure racing Ducatis. It's opulent, it's rammed with incredible metal and there's not a set of gaffa-taped leathers in sight. This year it's even hosting a round of the 848 Challenge – a million miles from a piss-wet weekend at Thruxton – which is why we flogged our 848 Evo over to the flatlands to see for ourselves.

**BIG
EVENT**





1. Just 10 litres between orange lights means there are plenty of visits here. Just think of the Nectar points
2. I'm sure I parked the 848 next to the old Ducati with the Dutch plate... oh sod it
3. Last corner, last lap – Leon Morris steals it on the line by just 0.7sec
4. Cloggy ice tea does what it says on the tin, literally
5. Valter Bartolini on the brand new GPM Racing GPM1000 went on to bag a 7th in the BEARS championship, but clearly doesn't like legs
6. A-ha, so that's where I left it
7. Spuff spuff, 848 lads have a celebratory spurt
8. John Paul Bak bought the wrong colour 996;
9. Ugg boots are compulsory Ducati pit crew attire
10. No bike sat nav? Just tape your car one to your yoke
11. See the joy that racing a Ducati can bring...



Emma Franklin

2011 Ducati 848 Fenlands to flatlands...

Eurosport has a lot to answer for. From the ass-shaped crater in my sofa courtesy of five hours non-stop BSB coverage to pricking my interest in the Ducati 848 Challenge. Watching Mike Edwards, Darren Fry and Leon Morris duke it out at Brands on their race-honed 848s while the PB 848 Evo was sat dormant in the garage made me feel a little guilty. So far the finely crafted track weapon had been used as a commuting fashion accessory; a performance handbag. (I know, I know it's a disgrace...) A pilgrimage was needed, somewhere a little off the beaten track, a chance to put some miles under the 848's Supercorsas and indulge in my growing Ducati passion. Too much of my time had already been spent at Jonathan Palmer's pleasure through my own misadventures in club racing, so I couldn't quite stomach a BSB round. Hmmm, but then there's always Assen – home of the Ducati Club Netherland's legendary club races, now in their 32nd year and host of the next round of the 848 Challenge.

The 848's fluted tailpiece with its underseat exhaust really does it for me, but it makes bungeeing luggage impossible. Thankfully I'm part of the toothbrush touring movement, something every self-respecting sportsbike rider should subscribe to, and have just the bare essentials packed into a rucksack. Visor around my waist, waterproofs on and the car's satnav wrapped in a sandwich bag and gaffer taped to the billet top yoke. TT Circuit Assen is programmed in, time to hit the road.

Off the ferry and into Holland, a country not known for its enthralling roads, so no chance to test the 848's legendary handling. But as speeding excuses go it's a great one, when the roads are straight and mind-numbing the only thing to do is go flat chat. Besides, the 848 resents going slowly with every cubic centimetre of its Desmodromic being. At legal motorway cruising speeds my weight is forced down through the wide bars and onto my wrists, leaving me feeling like I'm invading the bike's own personal space and swinging around its headstock. Beneath me the 848 feels reined-in: hunkered-up and trapped like a horse ready to buck; tense and un-compliant, straining to be released by a twist of the throttle... But I doubt your average Dutch copper would understand.

Ah, who cares? Rotterdam's cleared, the road's open. I give in to the 848 and set it free. Cracking the throttle in second invites the rear to dig in and the front to lift, hovering above the tarmac as if being lifted by some cloud-anchored elastic. The 848 roars in appreciation, the twin underseat cans sound as if they increase in size the faster we go, like a lion's mouth mid-yawn. Things make more sense at this speed, everything seems so much more compliant and smooth, even the windblast makes the riding position work as it pushes back on my chest and lifts my weight away from the front. Knees now perfectly recessed against the flat sides of the tank,



clocks displaying a speed that belies the calm sensation. I just wish I could see out of the mirrors so I could check for blue lights, although it would be worth the fine.

160 miles and two tanks of fuel later and my backside's starting to feel it. The token gesture seat, perfect for the track, is the source of much shuffling on the motorway. Thank Petrolia, the patron saint of tank range, that there's only 90 miles or 10.5 litres between orange lights. Now all signs point to Assen, home of the Dutch TT circuit and a cathedral of bike racing since the 1920s. The track has been a permanent fixture on the GP calendar since world championship road racing was invented, but today it's echoing with the sound of 500 pairs of Termis. The paddock road is rammed with Ducatisti – racers, specials, fans, tourers, road bikes – they're all here, bristling with excitement as the Dutch commentator calls the next grid to the collecting area. In between the hurdies and the gurdies I make out '848 Challenge' – the bikes I'd travelled so far to see and hopefully the inspiration for a few upcoming performance mods of my own. Lost in a sea of red Ducatis I make a mental triangulation of the 848's exact location in the paddock bike park: third 848 in behind the yellow van. Got it. Yes, the fly-splattered one with the British plate and toasted Supercorsas.

The commentator's timbre is increasing, race start must be imminent, so I leg it to the pit wall. But the rain that had been chasing me all the way from the port had finally caught up, dousing the track and the riders and delaying the start. A wheel change for the racers and a croquette for me. Either that or a schmoke and a pancake.

Wets on, flag drops, the Assen round of the 848 Challenge explodes off the grid in a cacophony of thunder. Unruffled by the greasy conditions, JHP/Buildbase rider Leon Morris makes a cunning last corner dash to take the win by 0.07 seconds. Impressed, I wander off across the laid back paddock to congratulate him and to get a look at his bike. But I soon find that getting from one side of the paddock to another is going to take some time. Once I'd escaped the clutches of the croquette stand (again) my hungry Ducati-obsessed mind was distracted by all manner of special Italian metal. I grab my camera and go hunting for the best...

SEE THE 848 CHALLENGE FOR YOURSELF

For the sofa enthusiasts amongst us, obviously the domestic rounds of the 848 Challenge are being screened with Eurosport's BSB coverage, but if you fancy going along to see it for yourself, here's where you can catch them:

- * 5-7th August Brands Hatch
- * 27-29th September Cadwell Park
- * 3rd September Castle Coombe
- * 23-25th September Silverstone



FERRIES HAVE CHANGED...

We took the Stenaline crossing from Harwich to Hook of Holland and were absolutely blown away by the quality and service onboard. Ferries have changed a lot since my last overnight ferry experience and the Stena Hollandica is better than most hotels we have the misfortune of staying in. Crossings start from £75. For more details see www.stenaline.nl.

TOURING STATS

Peterborough to Harwich to Assen and back: 660 miles
66 litres of fuel (six petrol stops) at £1.35 = £89
Average economy 45mpg

1990 Ducati 750SS Team Tre Bello

"We love PB," says Ton Vissers, one third of the 1000SS-mounted team, "I made this racer after being inspired by the magazine. It's a 20 year-old frame, but we've made some changes to make it strong again." Ton talks me around the 750SS frame, with its Aprilia Mille front end. "We've done a lot of lightening to make the bike handle better. The 1000ss engine is mostly standard, except for the 749 oil cooler and home-made exhaust system." Ton made his own Kevlar race bodywork too, from cut downs of the original, with a Honda bellypan for good measure. The other two bikes in the team are almost identical spec. "It is a great form of low budget racing and also a nice way to spend time with family – we are a team of husband, wife, brother and sister so we always have healthy competition." I can't help but feel the competition might be a little healthier still if he moved his transponder from the back to the front of the bike... Ducati-loving racing fanatics are always welcome in PB's pages.



Home made Kevlar bodywork was made from cut down moulds of original 750SS bodywork. It's immaculate

Underseat panel really slims down the once-but 750SS into a like race bike



Peel off the tank and the airbox and you'll find a pair of carbs, not fuel injection

Lex's Over 848 makes 125bhp through its blueprinted engine, but better still it now weighs just 140kgs

2011 Over Racing Lex van Dijk

I've been standing a long time, people are starting to stare at me there's not really much there's never been a appeal to me as a Beautiful frame, titanium and carbon bodywork ticking all my boxes broken by a huge D who has all the size stereotypical presence villain. "It's an Over with an 848 engine van Dijk, racer and stunning machine. Racing frames and from Japan and they like this. This one is on a Yamaha T225 the length of the frame geometry to be as as possible, whilst fit the 848 engine has also ditched the injection system in of 48mm carbs. "I incredible power to 12000rpm is seen Through years of been able to acquire from a Stobart Honda some discs from a

2000 Ducati 996 ST4 Frank Banga

Drawn in by the Foggy Petronas-coloured 996 ST4, I look up to see its rider, Noordwijk's Frank Banga, grinning from inside his awning. Pants around ankles. "Hey I'm just about to race," says Frank as he steps out of his slacks and into his leathers. Turns out Frank's Open Class racer is a bit of a Heinz 57 of the 916 line. "It's basically an ST chassis – frame and swingarm, with the lightweight five spoke wheels and the Ohlins shock from a 996 SPS. I replaced the standard forks with a front end from a 1098, including four-pad Brembo radials." The announcer gives the first call for his race. "The tank is from a 916 and the engine is from a 996 – I haven't tuned it, because I want it to stay reliable. And I'm not the fastest rider, so I know there are improvements I can make with myself before I need to make the bike faster." Rolling off his homemade paddock stand, Frank shouts over the bellow of his underseat cans: "Oh and the paint, well, it's a tribute to Foggy of course. He had a lot to spare!"



1098 front end was just a triple clamp away; Frank said it was a breeze to fit

This is no 996 – look closely and you'll see the frame and swingarm are actually from the ST



Ducati Performance racing seat (£124 ducaticovertry.com) is an alternative to grippy tank pads

Pirelli Supercorsa are the only dry tyre choice when it comes to the 848. After 2500 miles on ours, we have to agree

2011 JHP/Buildbase Ducati 848 Leon Morris

I eventually make my way across the paddock to Leon's motorhome. He's smiling after racking up a second win to make it four wins out of four in the championship so far. I congratulate him and tell him I've ridden the PB 848 all the way over here to watch; he seems more impressed with that than I am of him. So Leon, what makes a winning 848? "The regs are fairly tight so there's not that much you can do with them, but they're a great bike so there's not that much you need to do. We have a slipper clutch with uprated springs, Akra cans with decat pipe and a PC – although the non-Evo bikes can run a full system. The fork stanchions have to remain the same, but the internals can change – we've got K-Tech gear in here." I ask him what mods I should be throwing at my 848 to make it even better on the road and track. "A good quality steering damper should be high on your list, as well as one of these Ducati Performance race seats. The special fabric grips your leathers and stops me from sliding forward so much."