

Road Race
Newsflash

Tom Sykes: Kawasaki Man Keeps Moving On Up

For the Kawasaki Racing Team and Tom Sykes the results of the first round at Phillip Island were an expression of how hard work in the right areas can make good results at the first time of asking.

The awesome amount of work that Kawasaki has put into its official racing programme in the past couple of years has already delivered results for the Ninja ZX-10R but the other half of the performance quotient is the rider. And in Tom Sykes Kawasaki has a competitor who has grown in stature along with his bike. Even champion Carlos Checa has spoken of him as being a force in 2012.

So what has made the 26-year-old Sykes the rider he is today? Hard work, the right work, and an unshakeable determination to get to where he wants to be, seem to be the answers.

Sykes had his first ever four-stroke race on his grandfather's pretty much road spec Kawasaki Ninja ZX-6R after Tom made the swap from two-strokes in his early British Championship career. Some impressive wildcard rides and then a difficult debut SBK season in 2009, while riding for another manufacturer, was marred by injury and a much greater general focus on his Superstar team-mate Ben Spies.

It took inner steel to get over a season like that, and since then Sykes has displayed great mental strength and focus. "It was hard to take in 2009," says Tom. "Mentally it was difficult, because I knew I could do a lot better. I know Spies was an absolute talent but I still believe in myself that the gap was not what it appeared to be. That year put me back a bit."

Picked up by KRT in 2010, and held onto for 2011 with the support of the PBM team that ran KRT's operations on the ground at that time, Sykes provided good race pace and a consistent level of feedback. That and the never-ending work on machine development he put in are truly valued assets by Kawasaki. It has been a tough road for Tom and KRT on occasions, glorious at times, but the feeling is that a corner has been turned after the efforts of last winter.

In 2011, an entirely new and more contemporary Ninja ZX-10R did provide challenges to all. "With such a different bike from 2010 onwards we did not have just one step up to make in performance, we probably had two steps, almost three steps, to make," is Tom's opinion of going from 2010 into 2011. That's when things started to move forward with a real pace, after a winter of development that Sykes had a large hand in. "Credit to everyone involved, we did a reasonable job last year," said Sykes, typically downplaying things. "We showed signs of potential and had some good results." Those results included his first win in SBK racing, at the rain-soaked Nürburgring in Germany, of course.

In 2012 Sykes is out to deliver repeatability of results. "This year I hope we can hit that consistency key all the time. I am getting more and more relaxed. I am getting older and wiser I am not new to these circuits anymore. I also know where the best coffee shops are at Phillip Island now!" jokes Sykes. A non-drinker all his life, a good coffee is a real treat for him.

Like most riders Tom does not want to pinpoint what will make 2012 a successful season for him, but one thing he wants for sure is to serve up his consistency at a high pace. "I enjoy working with the boys and if I can do a good job for Kawasaki, the team and myself then that will be enough," says Tom. "I had a bit of criticism after last year and that put a bit of fire in my belly. We really worked on race runs in testing this winter, and many other things. Phillip Island has never been my strong point, so if you had offered me a fastest lap in qualifying, and a fourth and a third before I got there, I would have accepted it. The fact that we left PI third in the championship was even better. But I will not get carried away. I really appreciate that feeling you get after a good weekend's results. Afterwards I went out for a nice Thai meal with my fiancée on the beach, took a big load of beers to the lads in the team, went back to the house we had rented and just carried on with my everyday life. For the rest of the season I aim to be consistent, and consistently in the top five."

A lot of effort goes into racing, and hard work is a central part of Sykes' overall character. Brought up in the industrial town of Huddersfield, Yorkshire, the young Sykes knew the value of work, and learned lessons about independence and self-reliance that he has never forgotten. "My parents split up when I was fairly young, maybe getting on for ten years old, so all of a sudden you have to be more independent. We were not the richest family around but the good thing for me is that my granddad was successful in engineering, so when it came to racing I was very fortunate that he would support me. For me, like saving my money as a child, racing was a good way of disciplining me. It was something I was desperate to do so I went from being this chubby teenager to having my sights set on racing. I started exercising, cutting out junk food and I took on a paper round (delivering newspapers door-to-door) - the longest one you were allowed to do. I got £4.50 per week, and now when I look back on it I say 'blimey, why did I do that?' I would spend maybe one tenth of the money, and all my prize-money from club racing also went on savings."

Tom is the first to admit that compared to some he is quiet, almost reserved, by nature, but when he speaks you get an honest opinion. He loves to race, loves winning, but Hollywood lifestyles are not Sykes' style at all. "I keep my feet grounded but I am a friendly and approachable character. I love what I do and I do like socialising," said Tom. "I generally like to do relaxing things at home. I am happy to spend time with my own team and do my own thing at races. I do not have the desire to socialise too much in the paddock. Away from the races it is great on the times when I do meet up with the likes of Leon Haslam to go trials riding." Tom's real passion outside bike racing? Karting, and in fact he has just finished working on his latest four wheeled thrill machine, with a 450cc Kawasaki engine in it.

Tom and his talented team-mate Joan Lascorz will be out for more points again soon, at Imola on April 1

High resolution images are free to download at press.kawasaki.eu.