

State Of Serendipity

Traditionally choked by dust, the Yamaha Australian Off-Road Championship came under attack from wet weather and environmental activists this season. But that didn't prevent great racing and a serendipitous return to the sport's grassroots support.

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More than most off-road disciplines, enduro relies on a strong state race scene to underpin its existence. But, while few would argue that the emergence of a multi-round national championship in 2005 has elevated the off-road riding talent in Australia to all-new levels, the AORC also created somewhat of a disconnect between state and national race series. Pro riders who were, all of a sudden, paid a salary to race the AORC, A4DE and various desert races, found they had little time to take part in their local state enduro rounds. And it's fair to say this put a few noses out of joint. It also affected the make-up of the state teams for this year's A4DE. But that's another story altogether.

Having successfully promoted the AORC for the first five seasons, Dirt Bike Promotions' withdrawal

from the job ahead of the 2010 season left many wondering about the series' future. It also called in question the nature of the contract that seemed *not* to exist between Motorcycling Australia and DBP. In any case, everyone was caught with their pants down in the lead-up to the 2010 season, and MA was left with little alternative but to appoint a caretaker series coordinator.

The AORC survived last year, but it was more a case of plodding along than powering to new heights. So for 2011, with the support of Motorcycling Australia and its various state bodies, the decision was made to piggy-back the national series on existing state enduro rounds. It was a model that everyone accepted for practical reasons, but which the entire off-road fraternity didn't wholeheartedly embrace.

The reality, though, is that it has turned out to be a blessing in

disguise. The combined format has brought the state and national competitors back into the same pit paddock and bolstered numbers for the AORC at a time when the series is in a critical rebuilding phase. Instead of struggling with less than 100 entries per round, this year's events boasted between 200 and 300 entrants. Clubs running the state rounds had the opportunity to put their name to a national round. And, while the Clubman and Expert classes were scrapped by necessity, state riders had the opportunity to peg themselves against the country's best Pro riders. If ever there was fertile ground for feeding enduro talent into the AORC, this season was it.

But this progress didn't come without its hurdles. Wet weather saw rounds in both Queensland and NSW cancelled, and a cut-short final round, while a curious



eleventh-hour bid by a small (but evidently well-connected) group of environmental activists meant the Mount Seaview round had to be hurriedly relocated to a private motocross complex in nearby Port Macquarie.

"It wasn't an easy year, by any means," Series Coordinator Denise Hore conceded. "Like last season, many of the rounds were adversely affected by rain. But I believe there are a lot of positives to take out 2011. For starters, entry numbers were great. And that lends credibility to the Championship classes, whose numbers were getting a little thin on the ground last year. The depth of talent this

year has been excellent. We've seen clubs in all states really stepping up and aspiring to run a round of a national series, and it appears that both Queensland and South Australia will embrace the AMB transponder timing system the AORC uses. And the depth in the Junior classes has been stronger than ever. So, all in all, we took some significant steps forward."

What can we expect from the AORC next season? "We have a draft calendar in front of MA at the moment," Denise Hore explained. "We'll have either 10 or 12 rounds. The series will start in Dungog in late February and finish at the end of August in SA, which'll leave time

for the ISDE in late September and the 4-Day in late October. There will be four rounds in Victoria, four in NSW, two in South Australia and, hopefully, two in Queensland. While the series is still suffering from a lack of sponsorship and is not yet viable for a private promoter, I have to say that the support Motorcycling Australia and its state bodies have given the AORC has been fantastic. I can also confirm that Yamaha has come on board again for 2012 as naming-right sponsor. The plan is to piggy-back the national series on the state rounds again for the 2012 season, and then assess where we're at after that for 2013."



CHRIS HOLLIS

The former AORC champ must have wondered where the past two seasons got to. After looking invincible in 2008, Hollis' association with Husqvarna in both Australia and Europe bore more injury than fruit. Looking fit and focused, he returned to Oz this year, rejoined the Ballard's Yamaha outfit and took up where he left off a few seasons back. Hollis didn't claim an Outright round-win all season, but he podiumed at every round in the E2 class and was rarely off the Outright podium.

1ST OUTRIGHT; 1ST E2 CLASS

STEFAN MERRIMAN

On a 250 for the first time in years, the four-time world champ bookmarked his season with cross-country wins. In his late 30s, Merriman has finally conceded that he might not have the sheer speed of a Hollis, Price or Phillips, but his experience always seemed to pay off when the going got tough and technical. His final round win in atrociously wet conditions underlined what the guy is made of. It elevated him above Phillips to second Outright in the standings, completing a Ballard's Yamaha team 1-2-3 whitewash of the Outright podium.

2ND OUTRIGHT; 1ST E1 CLASS





MATT PHILLIPS

The 18-year-old Tasmanian was, without doubt, the season's sensation. Riding a YZ475F in the E3 class, Phillips took a while to get the beast sorted. But after his stellar ISDE result, he was brimming with confidence and returned to post four unanswered Outright wins, which put him within 13 points of Hollis as the Championship headed into its final weekend. When clutch troubles relegated him to sixth in the final cross-country, Phillips slipped behind teammate Stefan Merriman in the standings. Don't expect this kid to settle for anything but wins next season.

3RD OUTRIGHT; 2ND E3 CLASS



DAMIAN SMITH

The elder statesman of the PSC Husqvarna-backed 'Master & Apprentice' duo won the Veterans class, claiming eight of the nine round wins. Now that he's giving back to the sport, he's loving his racing like never before, and is already taking submissions for next season's lucky apprentice.

1ST VETS CLASS



JARROD BEWLEY

He was back on a two-stroke for the first time since his E3-class title win with Yamaha in 2007, but it didn't look like things came as easily for the Motorex KTM Off-Road rider aboard the 300EXC. That said, Bewley's incredible fitness, strength and consistency kept him at the top of the E3-class table and always in the hunt for Outright podiums. He now owns AORC titles in both E1 and E3 classes, and desperately wants to bag a premier-class E2 crown to complete the picture. But where is he going to get an E2 ride?

4TH OUTRIGHT; 1ST E3 CLASS





GLENN KEARNEY

After six seasons racing America's GNCC cross-country series, the former A4DE champ returned to Oz to spearhead the Husqvarna Enduro Racing team line-up, alongside Poland's Bartosz Oblucki and Luka Bussa. Riding a TE310 in the E2 class, GK looked a little undergunned at times, but he was a picture of experience, racecraft and consistency. Had he not DNF'd the opening cross-country - where he was looking good for a second place - Kearney would have been a real threat for third in the Outright standings.

5TH OUTRIGHT; 2ND E2 CLASS



TRENT LEAN

Deprived of his ding-dong battles with Geoff Ballard - who pulled out of the series mid-season with injuries - the dedicated Dungog dad was a picture of consistency to win the Masters class, and worked hard to ensure Suzuki retains a presence in the off-road scene.

1ST MASTERS CLASS



TOBY PRICE

If season 2010 was a dream for Motorex KTM Off-Road's Toby Price, this season was a nightmare. After running out of fuel at the season opener, Price came back with a vengeance and won the following five rounds Outright. But, still carrying injuries from the Six-Days, Price crashed badly in South Oz and was sidelined for the rest of the season. The reigning champ decided on surgery to get his wrist sorted once and for all, and then focus on rebuilding his fitness for a few GNCC races in America and next season in Oz.

9TH OUTRIGHT; 8TH E2 CLASS





DANIEL MILNER

The Yamaha-mounted youngster proved at last year's 4-Day that he had the talent to go all the way, but things couldn't have started worse for him this season. A big crash at the season-opening cross-country opened a massive gash in his arm. He'd lost so much blood by the time he's limped back to the pits, he was barely conscious. In the back half of the season, he posted several E2 class podiums and a standout second Outright in the deep sand of SA to finish the season in seventh Outright.

7TH OUTRIGHT; 5TH E2 CLASS



JEMMA WILSON

After being upstaged last season by teenage sensation, Jess Gardiner, in both the AORC and the 4-Day, the Queenslanders was determined to claim another title. Despite the demands of a full-time law degree, she trained harder than ever and it paid dividends ... and another title.

1ST WOMENS CLASS



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