



NEIL FAULKNER

CHAMPION OF BRANDS

For over 80 years the 'Champion of Brands' has been one of the most sought after trophies in motorcycle racing. The historic AMC-Matchless Cup (estimated value £35,000) has been presented to past legends such as Mike Hailwood, John Surtees, Derek Minter and Barry Sheene.

This year's winner is British Superbike and MRO Powerbike racer Neil Faulkner who clinched the title in the climax to an eventful BMCRC-MRO season. Faulkner, who in his first season in Powerbikes in 2001 (his first ever in competitive bike racing) won every race he entered, has been forced to sit out most of the 2006 season through injury after a major crash in April resulting in a broken shoulder. "Not exactly a dream start to the season," smiles Neil, who at 6ft 4" is one of the sport's most imposing figures. Typical of the grit inherent in racers, however, Neil was more concerned about the damage to his factory-prepared Yamaha R1 bike than himself. "Well, I heal for free but the bike's a different matter" he added ruefully.

The bike is something special; the four cylinder 1000cc Superbike, capable of a top speed of 175mph in its production incarnation, has been stripped of many of its standard components to improve race performance. For example, the fuel tank has been replaced by an aluminium version and the body work is carbon fibre to reduce weight. The incredible force that goes through the bike as it reaches race speeds close to 200mph, followed by sharp braking and cornering 'on the toe pegs', means fitting special front and rear suspension that can be modified individually to adapt to track conditions.

Added to his undoubted talent as a racer, the bike, sponsored by Emco Group, gives Neil a

serious edge on the track. Despite competing in just three rounds of this year's national MRO Powerbike Championship he still finished in the top 10 riders. Neil is dismissive about this performance, "The day I'm happy with anything less than being the best, is the day I should stay in the garage," he said.

It was exactly that attitude that brought him the coveted 'Champion of Brands' title. To qualify for a place to contest one of the most famous titles in the Motorcycle Calendar, riders must already be a race winner in the current season. Grid position is determined by the fastest lap over the previous weekend's racing and Neil started P3, just 0.03 seconds behind the pole sitter. It was a hard fought race, red flagged (stopped) midway – just as Neil had taken the lead – to allow a major crash to be cleared. Restarting from original grid position, he had it all to do again, before Faulkner triumphed. Grinning broadly, Neil is already looking forward to next season. "Winning is what it's all about and it was good to end the season with a gauntlet thrown down for next year!"

With the MRO Powerbike championship being revamped for 2007, Neil is considering a return to British Superbikes. His lap times and his racecraft would make him a strong contender amongst the privateers and non-manufacturers' teams. Like most modern motorsports, a lot of it comes down to the money. Neil continued, "The difference with bike racing is that the sponsors can still get really close to the team, and experience the real deal of racing. There's plenty of hard, close action with thrills and spills – as I know only too well! Peers and commentators alike rate Neil as 'MRO's best kept secret' – here's hoping he'll be one that's let out the bag in 2007.

