

★ **Rated** Experience

# 'I can do this. I can actually race bikes'

**Bike art editor Simon Russell could only dream of being a racer until the MZ Experience came into his life**



I've always wanted to race but circumstances, mostly financial, have prevented it. The ideal solution to my problem would be a club that offers competitive and affordable racing. A

friendly bunch who help each other get to the grid and who have a ready-to-roll race bike that's available to borrow and which comes with all the help, guidance and spares you need for a race weekend. That'll be the British MZ Racing Club...

The club celebrates its 25th birthday next year and throughout that time it has stuck to its task of putting on a race series that's both competitive and affordable. To introduce budding racers to the series the club has a loan bike that's available for an all-in fee of £500 for a weekend's racing, which means that rather than buying a bike, and all the associated gubbins, I can have a crack on the loaner and see if racing's for me. In turn the club hopes I love it so much I then buy my own bike and join the fun on a permanent basis. The grandly-titled MZ Experience lasts three days, including Friday practice, and there are two races per day over a weekend. Sign me up...

It's a Friday morning at Cadwell Park and I'm about to ride the MZ Experience bike for the first time. I'm glad it's practice day, because practice is what I need. The little MZ is so different to anything I've ridden. It's a 250cc single-cylinder two-stroke that's come a long way from its roots as an East German commuter. But it's alien to me. The last two-stroke I rode was my Kawasaki AR50 when I was 16, and the race pattern shift (one up, four down) is new to me. Then there's the small matter of never having raced on a track before. But I watch MotoGP on the telly so surely I've a rough idea what to expect. Fortunately I know my way around Cadwell Park so I can focus on learning the MZ.





You could cut the heavy pre-race atmosphere with a knife. Not that we would want to suggest Simon was nervous



**1** The start of Race 2 and Simon's nerves are a thing of the past. A racer is born

**2** Rossi-esque leg dangling drew the attention of the marshals

**3** Mixing two-stroke. Getting stuck in is part and parcel of the MZ Experience

**4** The first breakdown. A wire to the coil snapped. Thanks to the help of his fellow racers Simon was back on track in an hour

After mastering the shift pattern (tip from fellow racers: head down, click down; head up, click up), my wandering legs attract attention from the marshals. They're especially concerned by my off-the-peg Rossi leg dangle into left-handers and check my bike for broken footpegs. I convince them it's just how I ride.

My approach to the MZ Experience is to take baby steps. I'm not here to win, I'm here to see if track racing is for me. I take my time, ride the laps and get used to the bike.

The MZ is slim and light, with hardly anything to hang on to. And the speed it carries through corners is like nothing else I've ridden. On the exit of every corner I kick myself for not holding more speed. As my confidence grows I find I can attack the uphill left-hander of Coppice full throttle in fifth.

## THE BIKES

The MZ TS and ETZ 250 were very basic East German commuter bikes. The MZ club has been racing them for nearly 25 years (it's their Silver Jubilee in 2012). Frames, tanks, engine cases, carbs, fork externals and swingarm must all be original. Fairings aren't allowed. Engine tuning is permitted and there were tuners at Cadwell pitching in and helping people with their bikes. There's no restriction on tuning, so riders can spend as

much as they want or can afford, but there are rules on exhaust size and shape, which effectively caps power. Entry fees aside, you can get out there quite cheaply if you want. Tyres (you can run slicks and wets, or just use a set of intermediates) last for seasons, rather than a race or two. Instead of going through the hassle of building your own race bike you could easily buy one already prepped for £1500 to £2000.

It's only in the last session of the day that I have a problem with the bike, when a connector to the coil snaps and the bike coasts to a halt at the end of Hall Bends. Half an hour after being bundled into a van and taken back to the pits the bike is up and running again.

My pit area for the weekend is an awning easily big enough for four bikes. My bike shares space with Des, current MZ champion Andy Saunders and Dennis. A month ago Dennis was just like me. Then he did the MZ Experience at Brands Hatch, got hooked and bought his own bike, which he's racing this weekend. The MZedders all pitch up in the same part of Cadwell's glamorous pit complex (a grassy field) and there's a genuine sense of community.

I've been allocated a helper, Dave. He normally races and even though he couldn't take part this weekend he still drove up to Lincolnshire to help me and anyone else who needed a hand. I've also brought my Dad along to cover all bases. The MZ Experience team are happy to let him get stuck in and help tinker with the bike as it's part of the experience to get hands-on and understand what's involved in racing. I'm certainly not mollycoddled, nor left to my own devices. I'm shown where to sign on, how to mix two-stroke fuel, when to get my leathers on, how to start the bike, where to get a practice pass, all the things I would have had problems finding out if I'd turned up on my own to race for the first time. As the weekend passes the guidance reduces as my knowledge increases.

Saturday starts with a ten-minute practice and, before lunch, my first road race. Ever. My pre-race preparation involves



constantly going for a pee. Then, before I know it, I'm in the collecting area with 23 other MZs, blipping the throttle to keep it running (it doesn't idle) and choking on the two-stroke fumes. The race lasts 15 minutes and is fairly quiet. Starting from the back of the grid I find myself on my own for most of the eight laps, recording a quickest lap of 2.08.5 and finishing 17th out of 19 finishers. Back in the pits I'm disappointed. I expected more of myself, though I'm not exactly sure what, or why.

For the second race I'm a lot calmer and I seem to have

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regained control over my bladder. I get an okay start from 17th on the grid (my finishing position in race one) and along the back straight I see a yellow bike ahead, number 66 Mark Vincent. I reckon I can catch him and within a lap I've done just that. A gap appears entering the chicane on lap three and without thinking I'm up the inside on the brakes. Just as I'm about to turn in there's a high pitch whining sound from the bike and a sudden loss of power. Just as I find myself actually racing someone I'm coasting to the side of the track.

Far from disheartened, I'm actually happier than after the first race. It's also dawned on me that I can do this. I can actually race bikes, and I'm really, really enjoying it. Back in the pits the cause of the breakdown is quickly diagnosed: the torque arm has

snapped where it attaches to the brake drum and the loose arm has knocked into the exhaust bracket, pushing the end can away from the expansion chamber. It's an unusual breakage, but the failure illustrates how close knit the MZ club is. My dad and Dave quickly have the back wheel out. Then Sarah Vincent, whose husband Mark was the rider I was trying to overtake 20 minutes earlier, appears with a replacement part from a fellow racer. Another MZedder donates a new brake cable and my old man and Dave get the bike back up and running within an hour. It doesn't matter who you are or where you are on the grid, there's always someone around to help if you're stuck.

After another cold spring night inside three sleeping bags and a tent, Sunday brings a third day of bright sunshine and another ten-minute practice session. I now feel comfortable and confident. There are no nerves for my third race, I'm just up for it.

Apart from struggling to get from second to third gear my start is a corker, so corking that I unwittingly jump it. Up the hill and I'm focusing on the group ahead, hoping to catch them, then halfway through lap one Mark comes past. We dice for the next seven laps and each improve on our Saturday times by more than four seconds a lap. They may be a friendly bunch in the pits, but on track these guys are like any other racers and though I can get past he keeps finding his way through and finally we end 15th and 16th (including my ten-second penalty for jumping the start). As soon as we're all safely back in the paddock the stories and the banter start to flow.

By my final race of the weekend my riding is a world away from first thing Friday. On lap one I can see a group of four riders

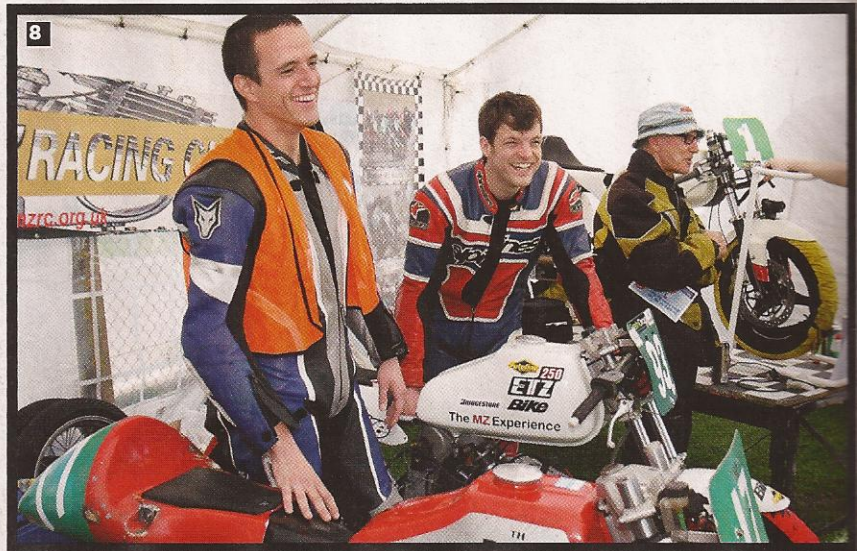
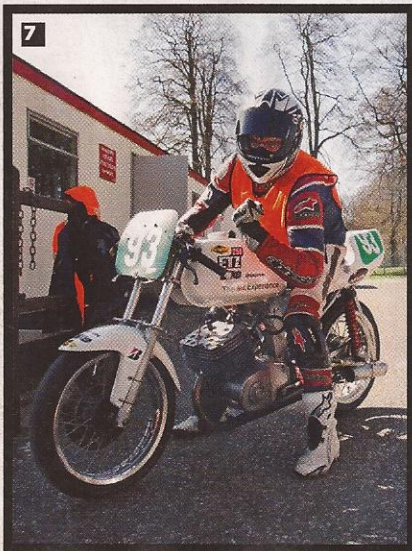


**5** Simon nips up the inside of Barry Green. It's hard to be sure who was the most surprised

**6** Father Russell hard at work. All helpers are welcome on the MZ Experience

**7** The Fist of Power. Simon practises throwing his racing shapes. Trademark anyone?

**8** The guy on the left is Dennis. He'd signed up for the Experience at Brands two weeks earlier. He loved it so much he went straight out and bought his own bike



ahead, but instead of wondering whether I can catch them it's now a case of 'I'm having them'. I'm hooked. A lap later and I have clawed my way onto the back of their group. Their bikes have a little more speed than mine but I manage to outbrake one, Barry Green, into the hairpin, though he's back past on the next straight. I'm racing alright. Mark's in this group and again it's us two racing each other. I try everything to find a way past and occasionally nip through, only for Mark to just get back past. He's covering every corner and all I can do is show him a front wheel every now and again, only for him to close the door. I get great drive going onto the start-finish straight and finally inch my way past thanks to a tiny gap on the outside. By the time I get through I'm so far off the racing line I'm nearly on the grass and Mark has the line for the uphill Coppice. So for the second time that Sunday I finish behind him.

At the end of the day all the MZedders gather for their own trophy presentation and Man of the Meeting is given to Cameron Jenner. It's a nice way to round off the weekend and now, as I'm throwing my sleeping bags into the back of my Nissan Micra, I totally understand MZ racing.

If you are even slightly tempted to have a go at racing then I'd slap money down and say the MZ Experience will leave you wanting your own bike. It's that addictive. It opens a door to a new world, which is easy to step through, and once you're there you won't want to leave. No matter what your pace, there will be someone at a similar level to race against. Everyone in the paddock is friendly and helpful, and it doesn't cost the world to do. At the beginning of the weekend I thought £500 was a lot

and you'd be better off spending it on a bike if you wanted to have a go. But that money just covers the MZ Experience costs, as it's about attracting new riders, not making money, and it's worth every penny. If it's the only race you ever do, you can at least say you had a crack. But if you go on and get yourself a bike and join the fun on a more permanent basis that weekend's experience will be worth far more than the 500 quid. **Bike**

### WHAT THE MZ EXPERIENCE INCLUDES

Use of a race-prepped bike for the weekend (not the quickest thing out there, but well prepared), fees for a Friday test day, a weekend's race entry, club membership to BMCRC (who run the race meeting), oil, tyres and any other spares you need. The only thing you pay for is petrol, so factor in about

£30. The course doesn't cover getting your ACU licence (which you will need and costs £43, plus a theory course costing £50). The MZ Club has two loan bikes and there's the chance to race at Britain's leading tracks, such as Silverstone, Snetterton and Brands Hatch.



### The MZ Experience

**Cost** £500 (plus £93 getting your ACU licence if you haven't already got it)

**Contact** [www.bmzrc.org.uk](http://www.bmzrc.org.uk)

**Bike tip** Take your Dad, he'll love it

★★★★☆

### Thanks

To Sarah Vincent and Chris Palmer at the British MZ Racing Club, Mike Dommatt at BMCRC and Bridgestone, Putoline and B&C Express for tyres, oil and chains to equip the club's machine for *Bike's* race weekend.