

MotoGP: Champions humbled in super-fast race

Bearing in mind that the field now includes champions not just from MotoGP but also Superbikes, the Japanese GP at Motegi didn't really feature any of them.

Nicky Hayden, having joined Ducati in a move that seems more commercially orientated than to do with winning races, started at the back because his Friday times - never intended to be an indicator of pace for qualifying, were what the grid was decided on. Before the pack had broken up, he was out, punted from behind by Takahashi. The accident was the first serious accident of the season and it was saddening to see Hayden rolling on the grass in obvious pain whilst medics tried to move him to a stretcher. After the race, he said that the accident had caused the same marks on his back and leathers as his crash in qualifying in Qatar that saw him sent to hospital.

Valentino Rossi had a bit of a battle at the start and another half-way through but mostly ran around pretty much on his own for much of the race to finish second.

Casey Stoner, Hayden's team mate, started up at the pointy end but aside from a couple of scraps also ran a fairly lonely race to finish fourth.

James Toseland and Chris Vermeulen both raced with several people but both suffered from the fact that the conditions on Sunday were so different from practice and set ups were wrong. Colin Edwards went steadily backwards through the field to finish 12.

This all sounds like the race was boring - but, due to excellent TV coverage, it was anything but. Sure it was no race for Champions, but it was a race for racers. For whilst some riders had nothing to do ride around and fail to fall off, others were at it hammer and tongs. The director decided not to follow demonstration rides but to focus on racing. And there was lots. Two Honda riders, celebrating Honda's 50 years in top flight motorcycle racing, ran each other ragged for most of the race: Dani Pedrosa raced up the field from a starting position of 11th eventually finished third, exhausted. His team mate Andrea Dovizioso slipped behind Stoner in the dying stages to finish fifth.

His win put Lorenzo one point ahead of Rossi in the championship but with only two races gone, and one of them characterised by bizarre circumstances, Rossi is showing no signs of concern.

But perhaps the star of the day finished 6th. Written off last year Marco Malandri has got a ride with a privateer Kawasaki team - just two places behind Stoner who humiliated him last year. His replacement, Hayden, didn't finish and now stands 8 points behind Malandri in the Championship standings.