

MotoGP: Rossi does the ton in Assen

Assen in the Netherlands saw a remarkable feat on Saturday: the impish Valentino Rossi started the race with 106 points, equal with two other riders. He finished it with 100 victories - equal only with Agostini.

As Rossi made his way to the podium, having spent so long coming back after the race finished that it was almost as if he had gone home, the woman who makes sure that the riders have all the necessary sponsors' carry-ons and are displaying them was not happy. In a manner reminiscent of a school mistress telling the last stragglers to get into class or they won't get their morning milk, she rushed Rossi off the scales and out to the roar of a crowd that was as delighted with his win as he was.

After the playing of the Italian national anthem - a moment where the cameras courteously cut away so as not to show Rossi's tears, he dipped his head, and brought it back up with the trademark grin. He put on his cap carefully. Sideways. On the side of it, as it does after each race, it said "1st." The woman didn't notice, it seems.

For Rossi, Lorenzo and Stoner (who went to the medical centre straight after the podium, unable even to make it to the press conference, so severe is the illness that started before the Barcelona race), the race was over after the second lap - but for the first lap and a half, there were three different leaders. Once in front, however, Rossi just rode off into the distance - going faster and faster whilst appearing to be taking less and less aggressive lines. This, for those that have watched Rossi's progress through the ranks, was the culmination of something very special. Yes, he's collected seven world titles but this race was special.

30 years ago this year, his father won the TT race at Assen. And the Grand Prix is technically still called the TT.

Rossi is the chap who moved to a small village in England when most racers are running away from the punitive tax regime. He said that it was the only place he could walk down the street and people would nod but not bother him.

That might not be the case any more - and the little chap who tries to keep out of the public eye away from the track, just like his father who did not hang around in the garage for this momentous event, knowing that a media scrum was inevitable, did what he does best: sat on a bike and made it do things it is not supposed to do. Lorenzo, riding an identical machine, made it plain that once

Rossi hit the front of the pack, there was absolutely nothing he could do to stay close to him.

And as Rossi gave a demonstration run to the end, behind Stoner there was a scrap that was more like a 125 race. Hayden held up a stream of riders for much of the race. His sympathisers say he can't get to grips with the Ducati - but last year's number two - with similar problems - was written off by the media by this point in the season. As other riders slipped by, the race stayed close with six riders on each others' back wheels.

But it was only a matter of time before Hayden either fell off or slithered wide and he did so, relegating him to the back of the group, passing Capirossi on the last lap as the pack muddled its way through a corner pushing Capirossi wide.

Stoner's heroic third was a disappointment for his fans: he had been very quick in practice. But a 25 lap race was too much for the Australian who is suffering from an as yet undisclosed - perhaps undiagnosed - virus.

Points places:

- 1 V. ROSSI ITA
- 2 J. LORENZO
- 3 C. STONER
- 4 C. EDWARDS
- 5 C. VERMEULEN
- 6 J. TOSELAND
- 7 R. DE PUNIET
- 8 N. HAYDEN
- 9 L. CAPIROSSI
- 10 A. DE ANGELIS
- 11 M. MELANDRI
- 12 T. ELIAS
- 13 S. GIBERNAU
- 14 N. CANEPA
- 15 Y. TAKAHASHI