



(above): next in line on the GSX-R, Jonathan faces his 'moment of truth'

(above top right): Jonathan gives the thumbs up, as marshals race to rescue his bike before it topples back down the way it came up

(above bottom right): eighth place and Jonathan celebrates with GSX-R owner Petit Louis



tuning my technique, and become preoccupied instead with wrestling the bike. The wide rear tyre has a weird effect on handling. The shape of the ground steers the machine if you let it, a camber or uneven bump causes the bike to tip one way or the other. It's a constant battle to keep it straight, like wrestling underwater while standing on a gyroscope – each time I fight it back from the left I have to bring it back from the right straight away.

After about 20 seconds I've sussed some feeling for the handling of this bear of a contraption. Trouble is, I'm now at a steeper section of the hill and need the momentum I lost about 10 seconds ago. The back wheel spins, the engine coughs as I try to clutch it out of the problem – but it's having none of it and stalls.

As soon as I stop and before I have time to think, marshals attach a rope to the bike and wait for the man with his theodolite to measure my distance. They then lift the bike round and lower me down the hill.

Back at the bottom, I look for my result like an ice skater waiting for the judges' scores: 100.23 metres isn't bad for my first attempt, they tell me, but it's a long way off Xavier Boutiton's 206.62m on his 685cc Zabel.

Pascal Barry on his twin-engined Husky makes the most comic attempt when he whips his way up like the thrashing nozzle of an out of control hose pipe, with his body movements exaggerated to cartoon speeds. Unsurprisingly, many competitors end up with the front wheel in the air and the bike veering off in the wrong direction. The crashes aren't as common as you'd expect, but become more regular as the day wears on. Being on one of these machines is frightening enough, but I watch a few *pilottes* end up being chased back down the hill by their bikes.

The midday sun moves out from behind the mountain to bathe us for our second attempt on the hill. The rideable line up the mountain has become progressively harder with each

huge spinning back wheel digging out a softer, sandy line. Faces look more concentrated than ever. A left/right kink around the 100 metre mark quickly becomes the focal point for riders and the crowd. The more riders that come to a spinning halt there, the worse it gets. Braver *pilottes* start to use a different line around this kink, which is straighter and steeper, but it takes more bike control and guts to succeed. Neither option is easy. Then the going gets tougher. The soft sand and steeper incline call for fine throttle response to feel for the power; the bumps are more like steps by now and need progressive suspension movement to absorb them – very few of these bikes have either.

I queue for my second run and decide on a plan of attack while watching other riders. A more reserved approach might work. I'll feel for the power to control the back wheel spin. Sadly, as soon as I launch at the mountain, the GSX-R has other ideas. Messed up carburation, not helped by the lack of an exhaust, makes it cough off the line. It coughs again as the hill takes effect and I bring the clutch in and let it out harshly. It works and I set off from a near standstill at the 30-metre mark. At 100 metres I'm going far too slowly and end up legging and pushing – 106.81 metres is only six more than last time. But I've had a whole 30 seconds more experience on the bike and reckon I've got the hang of it now. Sort of.

Jean-France has been watching my efforts on the GSX-R and enthusiastically offers his Harley-Davidson for my third and final attempt. He tells me that "better power and more control" will help me get further up the hill. The Harley has a 1600cc fuel-injected motor developed for drag racing. Jean-France is lying third today and finished 12th in the world championships in the US earlier in the year.

Now I've got a mechanic to start the engine for me and a top 20 world championship rider as a mentor. "Stand up and don't use the clutch," Jean-France advises.

Straight from the flag the Harley feels better than the