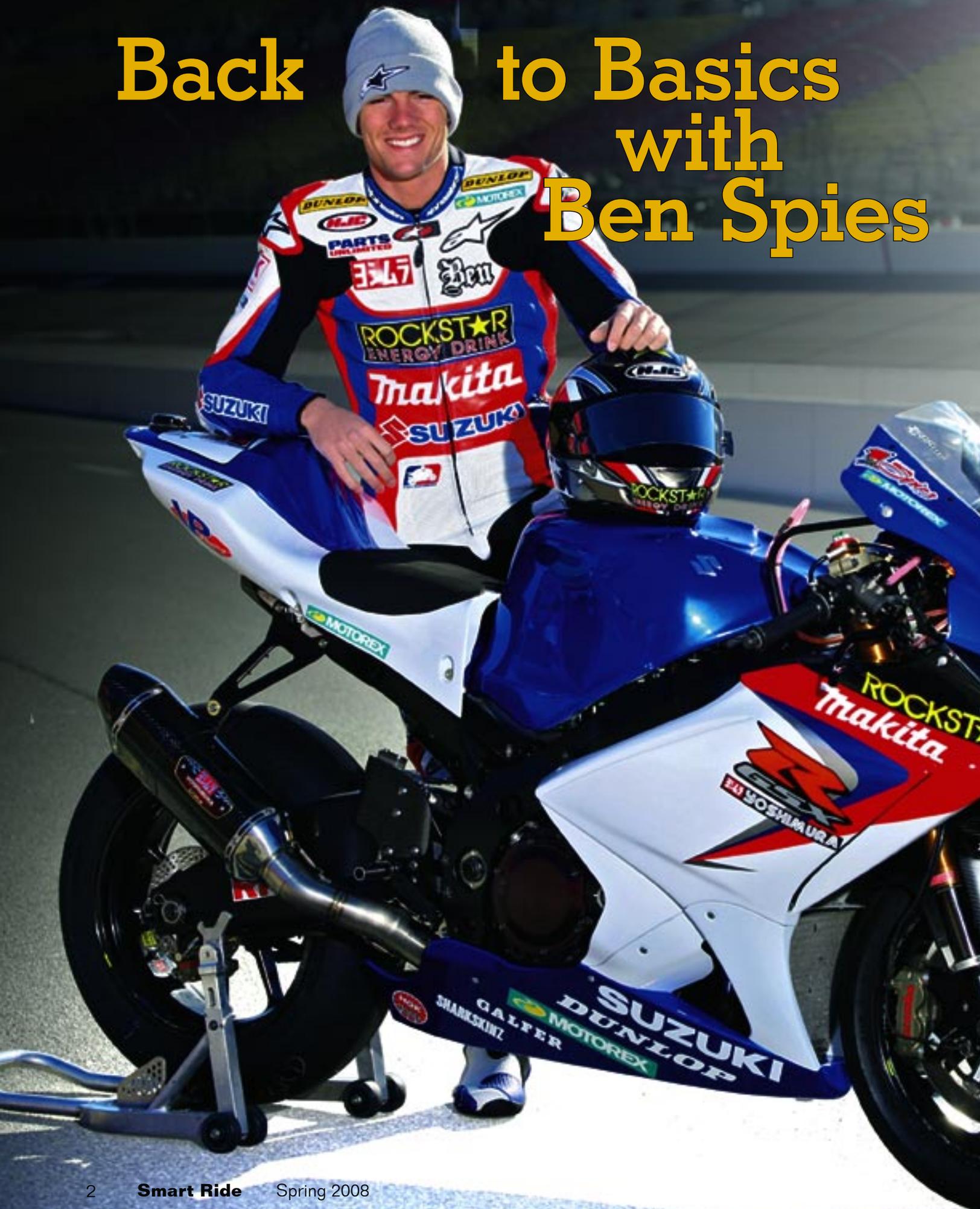


# Back to Basics with Ben Spies



By April Phillips

**T**hey don't come any faster than Ben Spies, and he's proud to say that his rise to the top of the motorcycle racing world is no fluke. He's won the AMA Superbike title two years running and he simultaneously won the AMA Superstock championship in 2007. He's 23 years old and at the top of his game as part of the Rockstar Makita Yoshimura Suzuki Factory Racing team – a team that also includes Mat Mladin, himself a six-time champion.

"We came into 2007 looking to win two championships," said Spies of last season. "I told myself that I wouldn't be satisfied with anything less than that."

This drive for perfection makes Spies train with intensity. It's understandable that fans who watch Spies race his GSX-R1000 at speeds up to 200 miles per hour think it's easy. Spies works hard to make it look that way. He began riding at the tender age of five in his hometown of Longview, Texas. He started racing when he was 8, and by the age of 10 he'd won 27 consecutive races. He turned pro at 16, when most people his age were more worried about getting driver's licenses than racing motorcycles. However, Spies is quick to point out that his success has come as the result of a lot of hard work and training.

"The most important thing is the basics," he said. "You have to have that down 100 percent before you can do anything else."

Speed may be what draws young people to the sport of motorcycle racing, but the basics of braking and cornering are what wins races, he said.

That's the point he tries to hammer home to his fans.

"I try to teach them that. I slow them down and show them how to perform the basic maneuvers," Spies said.

He also practices what he preaches. Spies has trained his body to act like an extension of his bike.

"It's what I know. It's second nature," he said.

That level of confidence could easily have been shattered back in 2003, when Spies hit the wall going 190 miles per

hour at the Daytona International Speedway. The accident wasn't his fault—his rear tire exploded during a Dunlop tire test. Even then, however, training took over. He was sliding on the pavement, headfirst toward the wall. He dug his left elbow into the ground to spin himself around and hit feetfirst. The injuries were intense. The friction of the slide causes some of his skin to literally melt. His left buttock was chewed to the bone, and there was a huge gouge in his shoulder. Still, Spies knows his gear is the only reason he's still around to race for championships.

"For sure, if I hadn't been wearing my helmet and leathers, I wouldn't be here," he said.

Spies said that in his years of racing, he's seen and been involved in plenty of wipeouts, and the gear always does its job.

"Usually, when we crash at 100, or 130, you get up and don't have a scratch on you."

It took a while for Spies to completely recover from his 2003 accident. The skills that he'd worked so hard to make second nature had been dormant for months while he endured painful bandage changes and mental anguish. He also had to adapt and change his riding position because of the injuries.

But he continued to heal, and he kept training, going back to the basics that paved his foundation in racing. Now, completely recovered and at the top of his sport, he occasionally goes back to work on the same skills he began building 18 years ago when he first hopped on the back of a bike. He is a firm believer that learning is a life-long process.

"You have to progress," Spies said. "I'm getting better every year. Even though we've won the biggest championship in America two years in a row, I still get better every time I get on the bike. I went pro at 16, but I didn't know half of what I know now."

Getting better is what it's all about for Spies. This year, he's planning on racing Superbike only, so he can concentrate on defending his title. He knows it won't be easy, especially with teammate Mladin equally driven to make it back to the top.

"Trying to win three Superbike championships in a row is really what motivates me," Spies said.

However, he knows that in order to do that, he can't afford any boneheaded mistakes. That's why he's always going back to basics.

"For sure, it's safety first for me. Always."

The 2008 season began March 5 in Daytona. Spies finished second to Mladin, but it's a long way until the season-ending race in Monterey, Calif., in September. Spies is in it for the long haul. ■