

2013 tyre test

Best sporty road tyres

PART TWO
THE TRACK

This month we test eight sporty road tyres at Rockingham to discover which is the best overall rubber for road and track

Words Emma Franklin Photography Jason Critchell

It's the dream for any PBER – getting up early on a warm summer's morning, rolling your bike out of the garage, then scratching down deserted roads en route to your favourite track. That's why the job of a sporty road tyre is so important. They've got to handle fast road riding on our pot-holed highways and also

take the abuse dished out by the highest powered performance bikes on the occasional trackday. They have to combine sporty handling with stability, amazing grip with fast warm-up times. They have to do it all – they're the hardest working tyres on the market.

In the second and final part of our tyre test, we packed all eight sets of

tyres into a van along with a Fireblade, two test riders and an expert fitter and took them to Rockingham to see whether the tyres that shone on the road, could still cut it out on track. Let the games begin...



Balmain Motorcycle Tyres (02) 9555 1000
www.balmainmotorcycles.com.au

HOW WE DID IT

CONDITIONS

Dry and sunny
Air temperature 24°C
Track temperature 42°C



THE RIDERS

Bruce Dunn
46, 10st 12lb,
5ft 6in



Bruce has 30 years' road-riding experience, 25 years of national and international level racing and 20 years as a professional bike tester.

Bruce is here today to push each set of tyres to the limit, appraise them at the edge of the performance envelope and set our fast lap times. He's not here to have fun; he's here to give each set of tyres the hardest time he can, like some ruthless tyre-testing Terminator.

Matt Wildee
33, 13st 10lb,
6ft 2in



Matt has been riding for 20 years, man and boy. PB editor Matt's been riding bikes for as long as he can remember and has dabbled with club racing, with reasonable success. He loves a good trackday, but a series of racing crashes have affected his mojo. He's looking for a tyre that's going to help bring back some of that confidence and put him back at the front of the trackday fast group.

THE FITTERS

James Powell and Al Chalmers of InFront Motorcycles (ifm-moto.com) are highly experienced when it comes to tyres. Not only can



they be found offering support for riders on most No Limits trackdays, they've also been hands on with Ian Mackman's efforts on the Norton at this year's TT. Impartial, highly knowledgeable and extremely professional, what they don't know about every bike tyre on the market, isn't worth knowing...

THE CIRCUIT

Rockingham National is a 1.7-mile amphitheatre of doom for our round, rubber test subjects. It's fast, flowing and technical, but is also now quite bumpy so will expose differences in construction. High speed acceleration areas will also test how each set of tyres copes with the transition from being



on their side under load to upright and off throttle, which is essential for stability and fast lap times.

THE TEST

Each set of tyres will be set at the cold pressures recommended by each manufacturer. Both riders will then ride on the OE Bridgestone S20 tyres to set a baseline lap time and get a reference point for each subsequent test. After some warm up laps, each rider will then ride six datalogged laps on each set of tyres, before returning to the pits and recording their opinions.

Maxxis SuperMaxx Sport

Ratings: Stability ●●●○○ Grip ●●○○○ Agility ●●●○○ Feel ●●○○○ **Overall: 10/20**



Matt says:

'At first I thought these tyres were taking ages to warm up, but once they were warm I found that they just didn't have much grip. They feel the same cold as they do warm. At one point I lost the front and had a massive slide – the front just folded and slid for ages. Then I had a mini highside coming out of the hairpin – a proper feet-off-the-pegs moment – a real confidence shaker. If this had been a regular trackday and not a serious test I would've just come in and parked up. And that experience would've ruined my day. The tyres are nimble enough, but they lack the feel and grip you get from the others here. They work well enough on the road, but they're not for the track. Most tyres provide a bit of an in-built safety zone to get you out of trouble if you mess up. However, these tyres don't have that, it'd be easy to overcome them and end up scaring yourself, or worse.'



Bruce says:

'These tyres tested me, rather than the other way round. There's just no grip. At no point did they give me the confidence to barrel into a corner, or dare loading up the front. Likewise the rear can't seem to handle the power being put through it under acceleration – it squirms up and down and you have to wait for all that to settle before you can continue. Granted, the job of a true sports road tyre is a tough one and they have to be able to do many things well.'

At the very least, however, they should be able to achieve a good rate of turn, be stable and give the rider confidence to push on but these tyres do none of those things. I managed to get a laptime out of them simply by expecting the unexpected and being ready to react quickly, but no one (not even me) enjoys doing that, because it's seriously hard work. A less experienced rider could easily overload them just by being a bit rough with the throttle or brakes. There's no 'get out of jail free' card with these tyres. They steer well and have a decent rate of turn, but they're so lacking in grip that it becomes a bit irrelevant. I wouldn't recommend them at all for track use.'

PROFILE

Gave both of our testers a sporty rate of turn and a bit of agility

GRIP

Single compound was slow to warm and didn't give much grip

FEEL

Stiff carcass meant our testers didn't have much feel from front or rear



SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE AS TESTED

£105 (190/50 rear)
£70 (120/70 front)

AVERAGE WORKING TEMP

Front 58°C
Rear 60.5°C

WEIGHT

Front 4.5kg
Rear 6.5kg

THE TECHNOLOGY

Carcass: Particularly rigid, Kevlar monospiral construction, which Maxxis say is designed to provide stability at high speed and give good feedback to the rider.

Compound: The SuperMaxx Sport features just one compound across the entire width of the tyre. Maxxis tell us they've been enriched with silica to improve wet weather grip and warm-up times.



BEST LAPTIME
1:20.10

BEST LAPTIME
1:21.50



Metzeler Sportec M5

Ratings: Stability ●●●○○ Grip ●●○○○ Agility ●●●○○ Feel ●●○○○ **Overall: 12/20**



Matt says:

'I wouldn't say these are the sportiest tyres on test but they're pleasant enough. They're happy carrying lean, trail braking into corners and they cope well with riding over the surface changes (some tyres can break free here), hinting that they've got quite nice road-holding capabilities. They track a line quite well and feel quite neutral. I think if you're a smooth, flowing kind of rider who enjoys the occasional track day then these tyres would suit you but they don't strike me as being suitable for someone who wants to run in the fast group. The front tyre particularly impressed me, it felt as though it was biting into the tarmac well, which in turn gave me confidence. They just feel good and solid and dependable with a nice, linear turn-in.'



Bruce says:

'Definitely not as good as the last couple of sets I've tested [which unbeknown to Bruce at the time were the Pirellis and Dunlops – Ed], as there was a fair bit of movement from them with markedly less grip. I think the Fireblade just overwhelmed them when we were trying to get a fast lap out of them. Because of this movement I found I wasn't able to get on the gas as early as I would've liked. The rear was pretty numb and didn't fill me with confidence. These tyres have less grip than others we've tested so far, but at least they're predictable

and easy to manage – you can control any slide when it happens. Other than that they do steer nicely and make the bike feel nimble through the turns. The front tyre feels quite planted when you're braking and doesn't stand up when trail braking. But they just lack that little bit extra you need when you're riding on track. If you were taking this Fireblade on a trackday, I wouldn't recommend them. If you did most of your riding on the road and went to the occasional trackday as an intermediate rider, these tyres would do the job. But they simply don't respond very well to ultra aggressive riding on track.'

FRONT

Both testers rated the front Metzeler under braking

COMFORT

Handled Rockingham's bumps and surface changes well

REINFORCEMENT

Reinforcing agents for quick warm-up and wet-weather performance



SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE AS TESTED
£76.74 (120/70 front)
£116.14 (190/50 rear)

AVERAGE WORKING TEMP

Front 53°C
Rear 58°C

WEIGHT

Front 4.5kg
Rear 6.5kg

THE TECHNOLOGY

Carcass: Uses their patented Metzeler Advanced Winding system, which varies the spacing between the steel cords at particular points on the tyre.

Compound: High silica content promises to warm-up quickly and work well in the wet. It's the same compound across the width of the tyre, but the carcass construction alters how it works at various points.



Michelin Pilot Power 3

Ratings: Stability ●●●○○ Grip ●●●○○ Agility ●●●●○ Feel ●●●●○ Overall: 14/20



Matt says:

'These tyres warmed up reasonably quickly and feel quite soft and yielding under the bike. But they do feel more unstable than the other tyres we've tested today. When the front wheel lands after bursts of hard acceleration these tyres give more of a shake than others have done. It's like a mini tankslapper. It was violent, but not scary. It was just a little unnerving, but something that wouldn't make you hesitate on the gas for a fraction of a second. On the brakes and in the turns the front end feels like there's more than enough grip, but the rear feels as though it's lacking slightly. It moves around a fair bit, squirming under power, and never feels as keyed-in as the front does. They feel like they have a particularly soft, less rigid construction and it would be easy for the Fireblade to overwhelm them.'



Bruce says:

'After my six-lap session at Rockingham I felt these tyres weren't really suited to track work. Trying to get a fast lap time was a pretty hairy experience simply because the rear was so loose and lacking in grip. They made the Fireblade feel really lively, so getting a fast lap out of them meant I had to boss the bike around much more. They were unpredictable, but predictably unpredictable, if that makes sense? You knew they were going to slide, but you just didn't know by how much or when. The lack of

stability in the rear meant I had to wait until it settled before I could get back on the gas and, as I result, I lost loads of time going through turn one, where you should be able to accelerate from 50mph up to the limiter in third (almost 130mph). I just couldn't do that on these tyres. I lost a lot of time waiting for the rear to stop squirming and yawing. The rear doesn't handle hard track abuse from a litre bike very well. They're okay up to a point, and a certain pace. Up till then the rate of turn and agility is good and the front tyre is particularly impressive – but as soon as you start pushing a bit harder and go quicker on them things quickly deteriorate.'

LIGHTER

Lightweight front gives feel and agility but can be a bit flighty

2CT+ COMPOUND

This is designed to boost stability and increase the tyre's lifespan

REAR

The rear tyre squirms and yaws under hard acceleration



SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE AS TESTED
£94 (120/70 front)
£137 (190/50 rear)

AVERAGE WORKING TEMP
Front 51°C
Rear 60°C

WEIGHT
Front 4.5kg
Rear 6.75kg

THE TECHNOLOGY
Carcass: Michelin have abandoned steel belts and instead use just three plies of Aramid to form their front and rear tyres. This makes them much lighter.

Compound: The front tyre is dual compound, harder in the middle, softer at the shoulder, whereas the rear uses Michelin's 2CT+ technology. This features a hard base layer covered by a softer outer layer.

Bridgestone S20

Ratings: Stability ●●●●○ Grip ●●●○○ Agility ●●●○○ Feel ●●●○○ Overall: 13/20



Matt says:

'In terms of handling and feel these are pretty similar to the OE tyres, however they've got more grip than the stock rubber. These tyres feel as though they're biting into the tarmac, rather than just skating along on the surface. They're compliant, stable and do everything well, but they don't feel that sporty and never gave me any incentive to really push on and ride harder. It feels as though the front tyre's profile is quite flat and makes the Fireblade feel quite inert. As a result it makes turning and dropping in to corners more of an effort. I found it took quite a while for them to warm up too, as I had a rear end slide on one of my early laps. I also had another slide from the rear towards the end of my session, indicating that they might well become easily overwhelmed if you fit them to a litre bike. That said, when the rear did break loose it did so in a progressive way, so was easy to catch.'



Bruce says:

'This is a really neutral tyre and as a result it suits the Fireblade well. It feels like a good all-rounder because it doesn't really have one stand-out characteristic – it just does everything quite well. It's very stable, has a decent amount of grip and good levels of feel. They cope well with trail braking into corners without causing the bike to sit up. But it's just not very sporty. It makes the Fireblade feel like it's

flat-footed. They're not as nimble as the other tyres on test and takes a bit more effort turn the bike. But these would probably appeal if you like stable tyres. I could provoke a slide from the rear, particularly towards the end of six-lap session, but the rear offered decent grip and handled the Fireblade's power adequately. Overall these are a good, dependable and very stable pair of tyres, but I doubt they'll be the sportiest pair we'll test today. But if you like your bikes to feel really planted, then you'll probably like these. You can provoke a slide from the rear, but overall grip levels are quite good, they gave me enough confidence to get back on the throttle early and drive out of corners.'



MULTI-COMPOUND

Both the front and rear S20 have a triple-layered compound

CONSTRUCTION

Gives good feel and decent road-holding

PROFILE

The profile is a little on the flat side – good for stability, not for agility

SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE AS TESTED
£106 (120/70 front)
£183.30 (190/50 rear)

AVERAGE WORKING TEMP
Front 54°C
Rear 67°C

WEIGHT
Front 4.5kg
Rear 6.75kg

THE TECHNOLOGY
Carcass: It's a single piece of steel cord bound in a rubber coating and wrapped around the circumference of the tyre. It's much lighter than conventional multi-cross belt constructions

Compound: The front and rear have triple-layer compounds (harder in the middle, softer at the edges). That's unusual as typically only rear tyres feature multi-compound design.



Continental SportAttack 2

Ratings: Stability ●●●●○ Grip ●●●●○ Agility ●●●●○ Feel ●●●●○ Overall: 15/20



Matt says:

'Whatever these are, they're a vast improvement on the OE Bridgestones S20s that the Fireblade is supplied with as standard. Lighter steering without being unstable and they have loads of feel when they're on their side. The front tyre definitely feels sporty. Going into corners they just feels more positive and you get the sense from that you could really start to push on them and enjoy yourself. They've probably got quite a soft compound, because I was laying big black drive lines going through the uphill right hander and I kind of like that! These tyres are definitely suited to being used on a track and you could easily run at the front of the fast group on them, though I'd say that a litre bike would start to overcome them towards the latter stages of a trackday. That said, I think a 600cc bike would be happy on track on them all day.'



Bruce says:

'Definitely a massive improvement on the OE tyres – superior in all areas – though they're about the same in terms of stability. These tyres feel properly racy and have a really direct feel through the bars. They manage this without sacrificing any stability on the straights, which is impressive. They feel brilliant when they're on their side too – there's plenty of grip and feel from the side and this does wonders for your confidence... and

your lap times. They also cope very well with going through the first corner at Rockingham (the right at the end of the start/finish straight on the National circuit). You can power through from 50mph to 126mph, before shutting off and braking for the next section. All these sudden changes in load can overwhelm a rear tyre and some struggle to react in time, which can cause instability issues, but these tyres coped extremely well. Quite impressive really. There's great feedback and feel through the bars too, particularly under braking. These are a decent pair of tyres and you could definitely have a good time on a trackday with them, whatever your level.

PROFILE

Both of our testers liked how the Contis made the bike steer. Very sporty

GRIP

Tonnes of grip, although perhaps a little soft for litre bikes

CONSTRUCTION

Top notch. Reacts quickly to load changes and gives good feel



SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE AS TESTED

£80 (120/70 front)
£118 (190/50 rear)

AVERAGE WORKING TEMP

Front 54°C
Rear 60°C

WEIGHT

Front 4.75kg
Rear 6.5kg

THE TECHNOLOGY

Carcass: DRT is Conti's patented steel belt construction made from their own brand of steel cord. The design is said to improve the contact patch, boost stability and provide superior bump absorption.

Compound: It's called Black Chili and is made up of ultra fine carbon black for fast warm up; grip resins for improved stopping distances; and silica compounds for the wet.

BEST LAP TIME
1:18.90



Avon 3D Ultra Supersport

Ratings: Stability ●●●●○ Grip ●●●●● Agility ●●●●○ Feel ●●●●● Overall: 17/20



Matt says:

'Wow, I really enjoyed these tyres. They gave me a great feeling of security and grip. They have neutral steering, loads of feel and enough grip from the rear to get on the power early. Really good fun on track and great for confidence. This tyre hung on to the grip more with throttle abuse than most, and it was seriously difficult to get the Blade to break traction. These felt more track-oriented than some of the others we've tested, and that translates into quite sharp, accurate steering. It's the easiest thing in the world to hit apexes on these. They weren't scary when they were cold and were quite quick to warm up too, hinting that they would be quite good on the road too. Loads of feel, brilliant grip and highly accurate steering. These tyres are very impressive.'



Bruce says:

'These worked really well. They felt good everywhere straightaway, particularly when accelerating away from the first corner – they remained stable all the way through second gear and into the limiter in third. This full throttle section, with a slight change of direction, was made easier because of the glorious grip and stability these tyres offer. They're also really strong when braking hard into corners because there's tons of feel. These tyres allowed me to be super accurate simply because the feel and steering characteristics gave me maximum

precision. The long-left hander at Rockingham's infield circuit is almost a full circle and these Avon's tracked through here with ease. Considering that left corner section makes up a significant proportion of the lap, a strong performance here has helped them set a good lap time. With these tyres fitted I had complete confidence in changing speed and lean angle through this section. They also did a good job of handling all the Fireblade's power as I couldn't get them to break traction at all. I reckon if we'd had time to experiment with pressures a bit then there would've been even more to come from these tyres. Can't fault them, they're really good tyres.'

PROFILE

Racy and direct, these tyres makes hitting apexes a doddle

STABILITY

The construction and compound work well together for max grip

3D SIPES

Behave well when cold and warm up quickly too



SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE AS TESTED

£92 (120/70 front)
£133 (190/50 rear)

AVERAGE WORKING TEMP

Front 56°C
Rear 60°C

WEIGHT

Front 4.75kg
Rear 6.5kg

THE TECHNOLOGY

Carcass: Rears use Variable Belt Density jointless Aramid belts to provide good stability and good side grip.

Compound: Developed by Avon's motorsport division as an optimised version of their standard compound. 3D 'sipes' – 3D interlocking points – toward the edge of the tread pattern. This is designed to improve warm-up time and limit tread flex



**BEST
LAP TIME**
1:18.92

Pirelli Rosso Corsa

Ratings: Stability ●●●●● Grip ●●●●● Agility ●●●●● Feel ●●●●● **Overall: 20/20**



Matt says:

'If I were looking for tyres to regain my track confidence on, out of all of the sets we've tested so far today, these would be it. They made the track feel like it was really wide, simply because they allowed me to put the bike slap-bang where I wanted it. They were happy running a tighter line around corners simply because they had so much grip and so much feel from the sidewall. I felt as though I could use all of the track in precisely the way I wanted to. They just made me feel like I could do lap after lap and go faster and faster. They inspire you to ride in a sporty way. Steering is nigh-on perfect – really neutral – allowing for a high degree of accuracy. Just spot on really. And grip, well, you never give it so much as second thought. These tyres are my definition of what a sporty road tyre should be.'



Bruce says:

'These tyres are up another notch from the last set we tested [Dunlops]. They've got that sporty edge and they behave like a race tyre in the way that they steer and grip. But they're utterly stable too – they're stable enough to cope with going from full braking to full lean without so much as a shimmy. They've also got that race tyre feel in terms of how they communicate through the handlebars, meaning you're always fully aware of what the front is doing so you can try pushing it that little bit harder.'

The rear's great too – absolutely loads of grip – and it allowed me to really exploit getting on the gas earlier. These tyres also allowed me to use all of the track – I had the confidence to go up to and over the white line and kerbs. These tyres really shone in the huge, 650m long left-hander in the middle of the track. That series of left hand corners makes up a significant proportion of the lap and because these tyres were giving me so much feel and grip through this section, I could attack it much harder and carry much, much more speed than I've been able to with any of the other tyres I've ridden on today. In a word – excellent. As a sports road tyre I really can't fault them.'

FRONT TYRE

Single-compound front is the perfect balance of sport and stability

REAR COMPOUND

Soft compound at the shoulders means grip isn't an issue

SIDEWALL

It's stiff, thanks to the H-shaped bead and is impressive at max lean



SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE AS TESTED
£102 (120/70 front)
£131 (190/50 rear)

AVERAGE WORKING TEMP
Front 52°C
Rear 63°C

WEIGHT
Front 4.3kg
Rear 6kg

THE TECHNOLOGY

Carcass: Single cord steel belt helps maintain optimal contact patch through acceleration, while an H-shaped bead creates a stiffer sidewall to improve response at full lean.

Compound: The front is made from a single compound. The rear features two compounds: hard in the centre and a WSB-inspired 100% carbon black compound for the outer shoulders.

Dunlop Sportsmart

Ratings: Stability ●●●●● Grip ●●●●● Agility ●●●○○● Feel ●●●●● **Overall: 18/20**



Matt says:

'These didn't feel as sharp as the previous set I tested [Continental], but they were really friendly, easier to use I suppose. I don't think they were any slower than the last set of tyres. In fact, they were probably an example of those times when you feel like you're slower but you actually end up being faster, just because they're so undramatic they just get on with the job. The steering didn't feel as direct and eager to drop into corners, but it was steady and easy to control. I prefer tyres to feel a bit more edgy in terms of steering, but I can't fault them in terms of stability and grip. The rear was especially good. It had far more grip than the previous set we tested. Side grip was good too, allowing me to get on the power earlier and harder without upsetting the bike while it was leaned over. A really good pair of tyres – the only thing I didn't like was that they felt slower to steer and less accurate than some of the other tyres.'



Bruce says:

'A really beautiful set of tyres. They have exceptional all-round feel and there is not a single area where they're lacking. This is the only set of tyres we've tested today that gave me an overwhelming sense of stability when powering through Rockingham's first corner – a speed range from about 50mph to 130mph. These tyres really handled all of the Fireblade's power through the rear

sidewall beautifully – the construction gives them a sensation of extreme grip and control. There's none of the associated wagging or bucking we've experienced with other tyres. The front's really good too and it's one of the only tyres here today that felt as though it was communicating properly through the handlebars – in that sense they feel a bit like a racing tyre. Very confidence inspiring when piling into corners and leaning on the brakes. These tyres just feel really well made and thought about. Exceptional feel, stability and grip. They seemed to iron out Rockingham's lumps and bumps well too so I'm sure they'd provide a nice ride on the road. Quality.'

N-TEC

Allows you to experiment with pressures to tailor grip levels to suit

FRONT

Divided opinion – too neutral for Matt, but just right for Bruce

CONSTRUCTION

Felt extremely high quality and provided very good stability



SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE AS TESTED
£112 (120/70 front)
£146 (190/50 rear)

AVERAGE WORKING TEMP
Front 54°C
Rear 62°C

WEIGHT
Front 5kg
Rear 7.7kg

THE TECHNOLOGY

Carcass: NTEC boosts grip by allowing the tyre to be used at very low pressures for a bigger contact patch without affecting stability. Dunlop also use a jointless Aramid belt for stability and for the precise placement of different compounds.

Compound: MultiTread with more durable rubber in the centre; softer, more grippy on the shoulders for more grip while leaned over.



Verdict: on the track

After proving its prowess on the road, the **Pirelli Rosso** has romped to the top spot on track too and so takes first place overall. Despite being one of the oldest models on test the **Pirelli** combines incredible outright grip, with race-like agility and tops it off with supreme stability. It's everything you could ever want from a sporty road tyre. The same is true of the **Dunlop Sportsmart**, which combines excellent road manners with brilliant track performance.

Despite blowing our tester away on the road part of this test, the **Metzeler M5** didn't perform as well on track. The **Avon 3D Ultra Supersport** surprised our testers with their track performance. Despite being marked down on the road test for their lack of ride quality, they excelled on track with supreme levels of grip, stability and feel. **Avon** has really upped their game with this tyre – it's well worth a try.

A sporty road tyre is always going to be a compromise and none of the tyres here would last as well on track as a dedicated sports tyre. The **Fireblade** started to overwhelm some of the tyres on test towards the end of the session, resulting in movement from the rear. But if you're looking for a fast road tyre that you can do an occasional trackday on, we can wholeheartedly recommend the **Pirellis** and **Dunlops**. If you aren't interested in trackdays but want the best sports road tyre for the road that you can buy, then give the **Metzeler M5s** a whirl. And we recommend giving a pair of **Avons** a try too.



THE FINAL RESULTS

	ROAD SCORE	TRACK SCORE	OVERALL
1st Pirelli Rosso Corsa	9.5/10	20/20	29.5/30
2nd Dunlop Sportsmart	8.5/10	18/20	26.5/30
3rd Avon 3D Ultra Supersport	7/10	18/20	25/30
4th Continental SportAttack 2	7.5/10	15/20	22.5/30
5th Michelin Pilot Power 3	8/10	14/20	22/30
6th Bridgestone S20	8.5/10	13/20	21.5/30
7th Metzeler Sportec M5	9.5/10	12/20	21.5/30
7th Maxxis SuperMaxx Sport	6/10	10/20	16/30



'The Pirelli combines incredible outright grip, with race-like agility and supreme stability'