

The view from 2

That's flag 2 on turn 2 at COTA. I morphed from being a volunteer. It was worth

for the 2021 MotoGP race where I volunteered as a flagger to a flagged every damned second of it.



But first, a little back story. After a 21 year love affair with a 1983 Honda V45 Sabre, beautiful machine that it was and, still is IMHO, I was ready for a new bike. I found one. A 2007 Honda 919. Light and simple as if they took a block of metal and removed everything that wasn't a motorcycle. Adding a detuned motor made it the ideal old man's motorbike.

Cornering on the V45 was never really comfortable for me and, after years of wrangling a bike the length of a boardroom table, I had some challenges ahead with the shorter, lighter and better shod 919. There were a few surprises when I first climbed onto it but, they went away in pretty short order.

First off, the gearbox had more neutrals than Switzerland.

That eventually worked itself out as it broke in...after finding numerous false neutrals at traffic lights and missing shifts, always, of course, in public view. I needed some help so, I headed for the nearest bookstore to see what bike magazines they might have that had how-to articles in them. I found a good one from the UK.

T.W.O., Two Wheels Only. They had just begun a series on track day techniques when I stumbled onto it. Basically, I had to re-learn how to ride. The bike and I sorted it out pretty well, helped in huge part by well kept county roads with few blind curves or driveways.

Unlike US magazines, British ones covered a lot of road racing, including events such as WSB and MotoGP. Well, that did it for me and, here I am.

Serendipity being what it is, I made it to the 2017 MotoGP at COTA thanks to the graciousness of my friend, Vinny, whose wife didn't want to go. We had great seats and it was quite an eye opener. My only faux pas was deciding to pissant my camera with a 400 mm, 2.8 lens and a tripod about half a mile to my seat from the parking lot on really bad knees. My rig weighing more than some of the bikes, no doubt. Covid had killed the 2020 race. A post appeared on Facebook, seeking volunteer marshals for the 2021 race. Got my attention! I applied to be a flag marshal, that position seemed to

**just kidding.*



*Section chief, Jason Owen insisted on having his own photo separate from the unwashed.**





*A shot of Rossi from my 2017 visit.
I wanted to see him ride, one last time.*

require less standing, no lifting and, little walking. Perfect for an old fat guy with a limp.

Once I had gotten accepted, I began having second thoughts because of my knees. It being a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me, it came to mind that I would be a jackass if I wasn't able to do it, and screwed someone else out of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I went to the MotoGP volunteers Facebook page and asked people with previous experience if they thought I would be able to be a flagger considering my shitty knees. I messaged David Hawley as well. The majority of

responses were, go for it, with some people giving me how-to tips. David actually called me, we talked for a while and his thoughts were that I'd be fine. I was in.

Serendipity, part deux. I contacted Brenda, a very good friend who lives in the area to see if she might have room in her new house for me. Turns out, she did

and, more. She gave up her room to me and she slept in a spare room. Her sheets were so nice that I dreamt about them. How's that for hospitality. I tried to be as inauspicious as possible there, what with my day starting at 3 am and all. I took my CPAP machine along to prevent my snoring from loosening any of her shingles or waking them up. Alas, in my haste to get on the road, I forgot the nose piece.

We had to be at the track on Thursday by 5 am to get our assignments, etc. There were a number of people who had never done this before, yours truly included. We were asked to wear white so, I had gotten a painter's jump suit from a big box hardware store. It was breathable, at least according to the blurb on the label. Once the day heated up, it became apparent that their breathable claim was pure marketing horseshit. A GE J79 couldn't have sucked any air through that SOB.

It was raining when I got there and I had to finish getting dressed, half in the car, in the dark, in the rain, as best I could. The suit zipped in the front down to the crotch. Getting in feet first, I threw the legs out on the ground and began to squirm my way into them. They don't slide well when wet but, I finally got one leg on and, as I started to put the other leg in, I felt a sting, then another one. Rushing to get the sticky bastard on so I didn't miss anything, I managed to get both legs in and began to feel stings all over. It seems that in the darkness and rain, I had thrown the suit's legs out over a fire ant mound, giving them ample incentive to attack, as if they needed any. Born mad, they were already pissed off about the rain before I arrived. They also got a huge head start at getting into my suit while I was struggling to shoehorn my wet legs into it. Some-time that afternoon, I think I killed the last one.

After the meetings were over, I headed out to look around the countryside. I didn't get far until I saw a sign, Lockhart 13 miles. Hello, Lockhart is the BBQ capital of Texas. A friend I used to ride with once said, "Jim West can pass anything on the highway but a BBQ house." Mebbe. As a bonus, the city has an abundance of nice old buildings, especially churches so, I hung around a while to shoot a few photos.



*Not a novice to motorcycle racing,
I'd raced motocross, hare scrambles and
enduros when I was much younger.*



MotoGP winner Marco Marquez. No one in the same Zip code.

Friday was a lot more interesting. A couple of the guys on our crew had been racers and one still was. They filled in a lot of information gaps for me. Besides the main event, MotoGP which is pretty much F1 for motorcycles, there were two other classes, Moto2 and Moto3, with Moto3 being the smallest. How small, you ask? The Moto3 bikes only had 250cc engines. Lawn mower engines! They just didn't appear that much slower than the bigger bikes, at least not to me. But, they absolutely wailed!



There are two flaggers at each post and, flagging protocol suggests that one should look up the track with the other looking down. Whilst I was in down track mode, the above Moto2 bike went down just ahead of our position and was sliding right at me. I heard someone yell and I turned around just in time to get a couple of chunks gravel in the face before I could duck behind the barrier.

Some of the protocols for language over the radio were kind of interesting. For example, at one point, a Crimson fox got out on the track between turns 2 and 3. Ever seen a Crimson fox? Me either but, they warn against using the word red over the radio unless there's an emergency.

This being Texas, it was bound to heat up at some point and by 10 am, my painter's suit came to feel like a device from the Spanish Inquisition. I considered replacing the suit but,

not for long. With our schedule, I was too tired to even think of shopping for something else afterwards. The first chance I had, I attempted to air condition my suit with my pocketknife, cutting slits like sharks' gills in the backs of the sleeves, the backs being less conspicuous, and removing the elastic cuffs from the sleeves and legs. When I was done, I looked like a scarecrow's ghost. Unfortunately, any cooling affect was purely psychological because sweat stuck the suit to me with within minutes of the sun coming up. But, hey, I lost eight lbs. for my efforts.

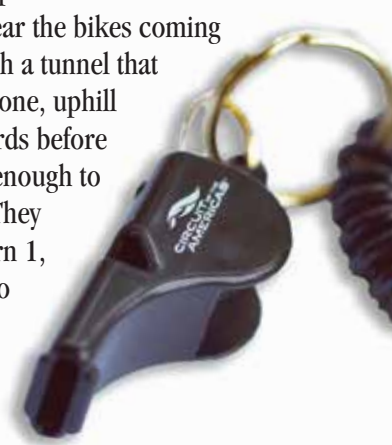
The breakfasts were pretty decent but, at that hour, I don't think that many noticed. Fortunately for me, I was spending nights at Brenda's house and so avoided hangovers. Can't imagine that. Besides, the nights came early. Usually by 7:30 pm I was showered and in bed. I am old.

The food crews did a good job of being timely and keeping us hydrated. We had box lunches, which is to be expected but, the sandwiches seemed like they'd been made for a Turkish prison. Dinner was another story. The food was very good, fresh and plentiful. Either that or I was so tired that they could have fed me peas and grease and I wouldn't have noticed.

I'd only been to COTA once before but, F(flag)2 on turn two may arguably be the best seat in the house... except that, for safety reasons, you weren't supposed to sit down if there were bikes on the track and, that's why they, and us, were there, after all. The section chief asked anyone if they wanted to change places to get another viewpoint. Few takers.

From our location, we could hear the bikes coming up the main straight, blasting through a tunnel that amplified their sound like a megaphone, uphill into the hairpin Turn 1. About 50 yards before the turn, they'd hit the brakes hard enough to lift the back wheels off the ground. They came boiling down the hill out of turn 1, straight at us before heeling over into the fast sweeping right hander at the bottom, which was, drum roll please, Turn 2. Us. Bad ass and this was just practice.

Saturday they turned their wicks up as it was all about qualifying. By Sunday, race day, my knees and legs had somewhat adjusted to the standing and getting up and down and, I felt I'd be good to go for the duration. I was.





Matt Snow handing his Nicky Hayden flag to MotoGP winner Marco Marquez. He stopped by at Turn 2 to pick it up for his victory lap.

During the lunch break on Saturday, a couple of our number had managed to slip out to the vendor area and, both came back with a number 69 Nicky Hayden memorial flag, one of which would become even more significant a bit later. I didn't make it there as I doubted that I could walk that far but after speaking with a couple of people who did, I don't think I missed much. Expensive and limited selection, aka, typical captive audience BS.

Race day was here and, two days ago, I honestly doubted that I would last this long. I got a little help from Ibuprofen.

The morning was filled with all kinds of radio chatter, instructions, corrections to those instructions and updates to those corrections. I managed to duck radio duty but it was for the best. Patience is not a gene with which I was blessed. With the ceremonies over, the time had arrived. Go time.

I cannot imagine that there's a more exciting start to any sporting event that can rival that first lap freight train of howling motorcycles coming at you, WFO.

All of the classes of bikes were sufficiently loud enough to elicit goose bumps, even after two long days of listening to them. The MotoGP bikes were another thing altogether. They weren't that much louder but they were a whole lot throatier than the other bikes. So much so that they had the Armco barrier (guardrails to the uninitiated) vibrating like a tuning fork, even when they were on the other side of the circuit, quite a long way from us.

A Rossi fan, I was busy with my flags and, the first time I saw him come around, he was dead last. Someone said he went down. In any case, he did manage to pass six other riders before the finish.

Would I do it again? Mebbe. It was more amazing than I have words for but I don't know that I'll be up for the discomfort of standing for that long. However, I'll start buying lottery tickets anyway and, if I do show up here next year, I won't be limping!



Marquez heads out with the Nicky Hayden flag accompanied by Fabio Quartararo and, Rossi in the background.