

Valentino Rossi says he will be a serious title contender once again when the new MotoGP season starts on Sunday.

The Yamaha rider won the world title from 2002-2005 but threatened to leave the team last season after mechanical problems scuppered his title chances.

"I said it was impossible to continue like last year and I wanted more effort in the winter," he told BBC Sport.

"They responded beautifully, improving all the bad places. It's just the start of the work but I'm quite confident."

Until the last two seasons, the Italian had set the standard in competitive motorbike racing, and he will hope to do so again when the 2008 season starts under floodlights in Qatar.

In 2006 Rossi saw his title chances dashed when he crashed in a dramatic finale on the last day of the season and handed the title to American Nicky Hayden.

But 2007 was a year to forget, as a string of technical glitches saw Rossi finish third in the standings, 126 points behind champion Casey Stoner, with Spain's Dani Pedrosa second.

It was the first time he had finished outside the top two in a championship since his debut season in 1996, and rounded off a year of few highlights for the Italian.

"Last year I remember Mugello, Jerez and Assen, but the rest of the year I was struggling too much," he said.

"I was very worried. I told Yamaha that my first idea is to try and finish my career with the team, because I feel very good there, but if I didn't have a good bike, I would have to change.

"From this moment on, they made a good effort. It's early to say, because we have great rivals, who are very strong, but our start is beautiful. We've done good winter work and had good tests and the change to Bridgestone tyres is very important."

Rossi admits that problems with his Michelin tyres caused him to lose confidence in his bike, and made the team "stupid," so the decision was made to use Bridgestone for the coming year.

This, combined with an overhaul of the backroom staff, has given him renewed enthusiasm for the coming year.

"We have a perfect team. It's smaller than last year but all the people who work for me, I like a lot. The sensation is like 2004, my first year with Yamaha," he said.

Casey Stoner wants to retain his MotoGP crown to finally silence the critics.

Something else that has changed in the Yamaha camp this season is the departure of long-time friend and team-mate Colin Edwards, and his replacement by 250cc world champion Jorge Lorenzo.

"Your team-mate is always your first rival, so having Lorenzo here is a great motivation - he's a fast rider."

As well as hopefully having an improved bike for 2007, Rossi has relocated to Italy from London and is finally free of the financial problems which dogged him last season, after agreeing to pay £26m in back taxes over the next two years.

"It was a difficult period on the track and outside," he admitted.

"We had some problems but I've wanted to return to Italy since the end of 2005.

"I spent a lot of time in London, which is fantastic, but year by year, as you get older, you want to spend more time with your family and friends and live a normal life.

"I tried to come back earlier, but it wasn't possible - I think the tax problems accelerated coming back.

"In the end I'm happy - if it's possible to use that word when you're paying £26m! I'm more quiet and concentrated on the race track.

"In the last two years there have been a lot of problems, with some difficult things outside the track. 2006 and 2007 have been difficult, so this year it's possible to make things work better."

Davies switches teams in the US

Herefordshire motorcycling star Chaz Davies has switched teams for next year but will continue racing in the US.

Welshman Davies, 20, had a successful season with Celtic Racing but will instead join up with Attack Kawasaki.

"From what I've seen they are a good team, they're really professional and they have got great bikes," he told BBC Hereford & Worcester.

"I raced against them last year. Their main rider won the biggest race of the year, that was at Daytona."

Stoner, 22, begins his title defence in Qatar at the weekend but says there has been too much focus on his Ducati's technology instead of his ability.

Ahead of the sport's first floodlit race, the Australian told BBC Sport: "It's frustrating people put everything down to that or the speed or the tyres.

"They're just trying to find excuses. It would be nice to think if we win it again the accusations would stop."

In only his second season competing in the top class of motorbike racing, Stoner racked up 10 wins as he surged to the 2007 title.

Much was made of the advantages he had with the speed of his bike and also its traction control, which handles the tyres' grip on the track, but Stoner hinted this was just down to jealousy from older riders and bigger teams.

"Everyone's using that as the reason why us young riders are coming up and doing well," he stated.

"We've been riding bikes our whole lives, so we know how to ride without it."

Honda rider Dani Pedrosa came second, with Valentino Rossi a distant third on his Yamaha.

Rossi and Stoner now seem to be on speaking terms again

"I know the Japanese factories have been trying to bring in new rules to squish us down a bit," added Stoner.

"With the amount of manpower they have compared to Ducati, they're running scared - trying to use politics to bring Ducati back to their level. They should try to work harder.

"At the beginning of the season Valentino was fantastic, it was great racing and he was giving me credit, but at end of the season he wasn't really talking to me. He didn't like the fact I could come in and win."

When he was a teenager, Stoner's parents famously sold their possessions in Australia and moved to live in a caravan in England to help him further his racing career.

And he revealed he has a love-hate relationship with the United Kingdom.

"Some of our closest friends are from there but we've also met some people who've tried to stamp us into the ground constantly", he revealed.

I'm not expecting to be champion again but we're hoping and doing all we can, working as hard as

we can to make sure we have the best possible chance

Casey Stoner

"It never seems to stop from there, no matter what you do you never seem to get credit and it's only our closest friends who seem to give any help."

Despite going into the season wearing the champion's number one on the front of his bike, Stoner said he did not feel under any burden of expectation from his team.

"Last year there was no number one rider in the team, it's not like that at Ducati," he said.

"They try to get every one of their riders running fast and do what that rider needs.

"Loris Capirossi struggled with the engine in some parts of last season so they changed the configuration and in the last half of the season he got better results."

A shoulder injury in the close season may have cost Stoner some physical training time but anyone thinking the world champion has fallen off the pace is in for a disappointment.

"Pre-season has been very positive," he insisted.

"We've made a few slight changes to the bike, which have been a big advantage.

"We struggled with acceleration last year, no matter what anyone thinks, and at testing in at Philip Island we made a few changes to the chassis, which seemed to give us another little edge and made it easier to put the bike into the position I wanted coming out of the turns."

Stoner says he is happy to ride wearing the number one plate

After winning the world title, Stoner was named young Australian of the year, something that came as a big surprise.

"It was very unexpected, I was standing there with people who had been putting in lots of work with their community, working with underprivileged children etc and I almost felt a bit shallow just as a motorbike racer," he admitted.

"But we proved that if you set goals and set your mind you can achieve them. It was very nice that Australia watched our progress over the season and took note."

Stoner is too cagey a character to make rash predictions and did not want to pick out specific individuals as title rivals - but he is clearly not taking his title for granted.

"I'm not expecting to be champion again but we're hoping and doing all we can, working as hard as we can, to make sure we have the best chance possible," he said.

"And it's nice to be running the number one plate for one year anyway."

Bayliss takes Aussie double win

Two-time champion Bayliss is aiming to retire on a high note

Troy Bayliss won both World Superbikes races at Phillip Island after starting from pole on his home circuit.

The 38-year-old Australian, who retires at the end of the season, now has three victories in four starts in 2008.

The Ducati rider cruised home in Sunday's first race ahead of compatriot Troy Corser (Yamaha) with Italian team-mate Michel Fabrizio third.

In race two, Bayliss finished 1.1 secs ahead of Spaniards Carlos Checa (Honda) and Fonsi Nieto (Suzuki).

Max Biaggi, who started the day second behind Bayliss in the championship standings, suffered a high-speed spill in the second race which left him with a broken left wrist.

He was lucky to escape more serious injury as his bike spun through the air and narrowly missed him as he lay in the gravel after the crash.

His unproductive weekend saw him slip to seventh in the world rankings.

Corser passed Bayliss for the lead in the second race, but was among several riders given ride-through penalties for jump-starts.

Race one had to be restarted after Fabrizio stalled on the grid and was hit from behind by Vittorio Iannuzzo and David Checa.

He lost his right boot and rear tyre in the incident, but after treatment in the pit lane finished third in the restarted race.

Iannuzzo was also injured in the incident, which was followed by Australian Russell Holland going into the back of Carlos Checa, although both riders escaped serious injury.

Bayliss, who was first and fourth in the opening two races of the season in Doha, now leads the championship standings by 27 points.

The third round takes place in Valencia on 6 April.

World Superbikes - Phillip Island results:

First race:

- 1 T Bayliss (Aus) Ducati, 34 mins 22.933 secs
- 2 T Corser (Aus) Yamaha @ 4.221 secs
- 3 M Fabrizio (It) Ducati, @ 4.738
- 4 R Xaus (Sp) Ducati, @ 5.171
- 5 F Nieto (Sp) Suzuki, @ 5.543
- 6 C Checa (Sp) Honda, @ 5.895
- 7 M Neukirchner (Ger) Suzuki, @ 5.964
- 8 N Haga (Jpn) Yamaha, @ 14.826
- 9 R Kiyonari (Jpn) Honda, @ 18.899
- 10 R Rolfo (It) Honda, @ 20.633

Second Race:

- 1 T Bayliss (Aus), 34:35.284
- 2 C Checa (Sp), @ 1.127 secs
- 3 F Nieto (Sp), @ 4.395
- 4 R Xaus (Sp), @ 6.621
- 5 M Neukirchner (Ger), @ 11.550
- 6 R Kiyonari (Jpn), @ 11.620
- 7 N Haga (Jpn), @ 12.049
- 8 G Lavilla (Sp), @ 12.134
- 9 R Holland (Aus) Honda @ 13.462
- 10 K Muggeridge (Aus) @ Honda 15.519

Overall standings after two of 15 rounds

- 1 T Bayliss 88 points
- 2 F Nieto, 61
- 3 R Xaus, 59
- 4 T Corser, 45
- 5 C Checa, 45
- 6 M Neukirchner, 39
- 7 M Biaggi, 36
- 8 M Fabrizio, 34
- 9 N Haga, 22
- 10 G Lavilla, 18

Island ready for TT 2008 launch

The official TT 2008 launch party took place at the Villa Marina on Monday, with just 96 days to go until the first practice session.

The event featured team announcements, rider interviews, news of safety improvements, sponsors, and details of the festival entertainment.

Many of road racing's top names were there, including 13-time winners John McGuinness and Dave Molyneux.

Toseland and Edwards eager to race after impressive end to winter testing

James Toseland and Colin Edwards proved they are ready for the start of the 2008 MotoGP season after the Tech 3 Yamaha team successfully concluded a long winter testing schedule in Qatar tonight. Toseland came tantalisingly close to topping the timesheets for the first time in his short MotoGP career after an inspired performance on the second night of testing under the Losail International Circuit's floodlights. Toseland led the way for three hours tonight after posting a best lap of 1.54.592, with the British rider taking full advantage of Michelin's dominant qualifying tyre. His time, which was 0.5s faster than Valentino Rossi's 2007 pole position, was only bettered with just seven minutes remaining when fellow Yamaha rookie Jorge Lorenzo went faster by the narrowest of margins. Edwards was also on fine form to post the fourth fastest time, with the American delighted at significant improvements made by new Michelin race tyres. Edwards set his best time on a Michelin qualifier, but long distance runs on race tyres produced encouraging results. The Tech 3 team now has a short break before the 2008 season gets underway with the historic first night race in Qatar on March 9.

James Toseland 2nd 1.54.592 – 52 laps

"I know this track pretty well so it didn't take too long to get into the groove of the place even on this bike. But to do the time I did and finish second is pretty amazing. I don't think I did a 58 on my superbike, so to think I'm four seconds faster than a superpole lap is incredible. And I'm half-a-second under Valentino's pole and that is really encouraging. It just shows how much my confidence has grown with the Michelin qualifying tyre because you really have to trust how to get the best out of the extra grip. I knew it was a quick lap but it was a little bit faster than I expected. It was just great to see all those great names underneath mine. It would have been nice to finish fastest but I'm still happy. I wanted to come to MotoGP and be competitive and I'm showing I can. Now I can't wait for the first race. Luckily for me the experience of the Tech 3 team, and Michelin and Yamaha working so hard, it is all coming together very quickly. It is only because of the experience of the people around me that performances like this have come so quickly. My guys have brought me to this level much quicker than I expected, and hopefully we can convert the good testing performances into the season."

Colin Edwards 4th – 1.55.464 – 50 laps

"Today we mainly tested tyres to try and find a good race tyre and give Michelin some good information. I found a race tyre I really liked. Yesterday in my long run my fastest lap was a 57.3, which isn't going to be fast enough. With the tyres I found today I did an eight-lap run and on that last lap I did a 56.4. And that was with 22 laps on the rear and 26 laps on the front. I don't know if a 56.4 on the 22nd lap is good enough to win the race but I'm sure Michelin will bring us something even better for next weekend. I know James liked a new Michelin front and I'd tried it before him and I fell in love with it. We're not talking five per cent better but it felt 25 per cent better. It works so well in the cold temperatures so Michelin has been working really hard. To come here and find a front tyre that I'm that happy with and James is also happy with shows we are definitely moving in the right direction. This place you generally always have an issue with front tyre grip because it is such a hard track on the front. But now we don't have any issues and that's credit to Michelin. I'm excited for the first race. The Tech 3 team, Yamaha and Michelin have been working really hard and as whole team we have done a great job this winter."

James Toseland dazzles at historic Qatar night test

Tech 3 Yamaha rider James Toseland produced a dazzling performance under the spectacular Losail International Circuit's floodlights to post the fifth fastest time on a historic night for the MotoGP world championship. The British rider was in sparkling form at the first official MotoGP test to be held under floodlights, with the twoday session a dress rehearsal for the season's opening race to be held in Qatar on March 9. Toseland and Texan Colin Edwards quickly adapted to the unusual conditions, with both immediately producing competitive lap times. Toseland was second fastest until the final hour and Edwards, who had been in the top five for a large part of the first night, eventually finished 10th quickest. The Tech 3 duo carried out full 22-lap race simulations, gathering vital data in preparation for the first race. Toseland and Edwards assessed the performance of new Michelin front and rear tyres that were designed specifically to handle the unusually low track temperatures. Track temperature peaked at 22 degrees when the circuit opened at 6pm, but dropped to a low of just 15 degrees by the end at 1am. Both riders were happy with progress, while Toseland also evaluated a new YZR-M1 chassis for the first time.

A Great Start to BMW Bike Week at Daytona

James Toseland 5th 1.56.251 – 90 laps

“To end up fifth fastest on my first time here on the bike is really good. It was a good night, which sounds a bit strange saying that. They have done a fantastic job with the lights. I was here in November when just three corners were lit and to do what they have done is a great effort. You have to focus a bit more than normal and the only real problem was with the humidity. It made it a bit hazy later on and I had to wear a rain mask for my race simulation because I was getting some moisture on my visor. It is better to find that out now than halfway through the race. I’m really happy with the consistency of my race run. The front tyre I found worked really well, which is a massive plus because there is no harder place on a front tyre than this track. The braking stability with the new chassis is much better and it finishes the faster corners better. Those two factors at this circuit are key so I’m really pleased with that. The most pleasing aspect of the race run though was my consistency. It is so important to learn what the bike does later in a race and that experience is coming. I’m just getting more experienced with the bike when the grip goes down, and to be in a range of 0.8s through my whole race run shows I’m making progress.”

Colin Edwards 10th 1.56.762 – 86 laps

“As far as safety goes with the lights everything is fine. There is a little problem with shadows but once you know where they are it is fine and no major distraction. You forget how much you rely on peripheral vision. In the day you know exactly what inch of track you are on and don’t even think about it. But at night you think about it a bit more. At night I’m actually looking at the kerb as a reference where normally you don’t. It’s just a different mode you have to switch into. Once race mode kicks in you forget everything so I’ve got no worries

about the lights and it didn’t hurt the lap times. Michelin have done a good job and I didn’t touch the bike. Michelin have obviously been working on getting heat into the tyres quicker and they have made an improvement. I didn’t have any tyre issues at all and my bike is running exactly the same setting as Sepang and Jerez. I’ve got a setting now that’s so good for my style that if we keep that going it will be awesome.”

American rider Nate Kern of BMW Motorcycles of Atlanta and Englishman Richard Cooper of Morton’s BMW race team have garnered five podium finishes during the opening weekend of racing at the Daytona Bike Week 2008. This is a great beginning to a full week of festivities and competition at Daytona Beach, Florida, which will culminate in the highly anticipated debut of the factory BMW Motorrad Motorsport team with the new HP2 Sport at the Daytona 200, AMA Formula Xtreme races on Saturday 8 March.

Nate Kern gives a brief overview of this very successful weekend: “Richard Cooper and I raced in ASRA Pro Thunderbike on our No. 12 and No. 347 BMW R 1200 S racing bikes, in both the national and regional events. We had a tremendous showing. The national ASRA Pro Thunderbike is a hotly contested class that includes very eager teams with big budgets. But I am very excited to say that I won both races and Cooper finished second in the national, and third in the regional.”

Kern and Cooper also had a podium finish in a dramatic Daytona 300 MOTO-ST endurance race on Sunday 2 March that Kern calls a “Cinderella story”. A Cinderella story, because Kern and Cooper finished third overall, racing on a standard BMW R 1200 S, back-up bike, which is essentially a street motorcycle. Unfortunately, a day earlier, Kern’s No. 12 race bike was destroyed in a mishap by BMW Motorrad Motorsport’s Thomas Hinterreiter during a practice session. Hinterreiter suffered a broken wrist and unfortunately won’t be racing in the Saturday’s AMA Formula Xtreme races.

Nate Kern and Richard Cooper made a late charge on the R 1200 S to take a third-place overall finish on the standard bike. “I’m still speechless,” said Nate. “From our third rider getting hurt, to our top MOTO-ST bike getting absolutely destroyed, it was an amazing outcome. I’d brought my street bike to do some instruction on, but it’s completely standard – it even has ABS and heated grips! We were 12 seconds down with eight laps to go, but Richard Cooper made up those 12 seconds in just eight laps!”

Richard Cooper grabbed third on the BMW in the closing laps when the Aprilia USA/Lloyd Brothers Motorsports Aprilia 1000R ridden by Henry Wiles ran into fuel trouble. “As soon as I had Wiles in my sights, that was it,” said Cooper. “I think I could have caught him anyway. The bike was faultless.”

Cooper can’t wait to see the Daytona 200 action kick off on 8 March and believes a good result is possible for the factory riders on the works HP2 Sport.

“We’re up against all the other factory teams’ four-cylinder bikes in the Formula Extreme class, and the twin-cylinder BMW will probably be about four seconds a lap slower. However, I believe a top 10 is still possible as the team has such a quick pit-stop routine and of course this kind of race can be won or lost in the pits. There’s also the BMW’s lower fuel consumption and tyre wear to take into consideration, which can result in less stops being required. And if you can save one pit stop over the other teams, then anything is possible...”