

20 years of progress

IT'S THE LATE '80S and Yamaha's FZR1000 Exup is the best sportsbike in the world. Its inclined, 20-valve engine makes 110bhp at the wheel, launching the beam-framed missile over the quarter-mile from a standing start in 11.2 seconds at 126mph, before pushing on to 161mph.

Fast forward 20 years and we wonder what the fuss was about: Yamaha's own 600 makes 5bhp more and goes 11mph faster, while the FZR's great grandson, the burbling 2009 YZF-R1, makes 156bhp, covers the quarter in 10.4s at 146mph and rattles to the Japanese factories' agreed top speed of 186mph. It simply dwarfs the FZR.

Or does it? Yes, the R1 easily goes more than 20mph faster, but 50 extra horsepower is an awful lot more power to shave off just 0.8s a quarter mile time. Especially when the new bike is also about 30kg lighter.

It's this lightness that is one of the reasons why a well-riden FZR can still rule from the lights. The R1 is designed to go round corners very fast indeed, so has a 45mm shorter wheelbase, low weight and steep steering geometry. With modern tyres, there's more than enough grip to lift the front wheel during a fast launch – getting the best drive requires practice, measured throttle use and short-shifting to second to avoid accidental wheelies and instability. That we can buy such potential for the price of a budget small car is glorious, but using it is another thing. On the FZR, get the clutch out and nail the gas.

Of course, with more space between the wheels and a weight pinning down the front, the truly incredible is possible, as shown by Suzuki's Hayabusa: 180mph from a standing start in 18 seconds. That's progress.

