



**DUCA TI 899
PANIGALE £11,245**
Bologna's latest and
sweetest sportsbike.
It handles beauti-
fully out-the-crate but
there's always room
for improvement

EXTREME PERFORMANCE

'Huge lean, more

Carbon-fibre wheels are a huge investment, but the significant outlay



By Michael Neeves
SENIOR ROAD TESTER

Ducati's new 899 Panigale has taken over from the GSX-R750 as the cornering connoisseur's sportsbike of choice. It pulls off the neat trick of letting you think you're an amazing rider, even when actually it's the bike doing all the hard work. No other supersports or superbike offers such a delightfully delicious mix of power and handling.

It has a funky, lightweight aluminium airbox chassis; a snarling, rev-hungry, over-square race engine; fully adjustable suspension and the latest in electronic rider aids: from power modes to traction control, racing ABS and a quickshifter.

But, unlike its more exotic, expensive, bigger Panigale brothers, the Ducati is built down to a price and comes with cast aluminium wheels. OK, they're not exactly heavy, but in sportsbike wheel terms, they're at the bottom of the evolutionary scale.

Lightweight wheels are motorcycling objects of desire; they come with the unique promise of making your bike sexier *and* faster.

Expensive forged aluminium wheels from manufacturers like Marchesini and OZ, fitted to bikes like the 1199 Panigale R and BMW HP4, save around a kilo in weight over a set of cast wheels. And the forged magnesium hoops fitted to the £54,000 Ducati 1199 Superleggera save you another kilo more.

This kind of weight saving isn't exactly 'Slimmer of the Year' stuff, but wheel manufacturers will happily tell you all about the benefits in reducing rotational and gyroscopic inertia, and of course shedding unsprung weight, when you're trying to turn, brake and accelerate as efficiently as possible.

So do lightweight wheels really make a difference, or are we being spun a yarn? To find out we've taken MCN's long-term Ducati 899 Panigale test bike and fitted it with a set of ultra-light £2287 BST prepreg carbon-fibre wheels.

We'll set a lap time at Rockingham's *Continued over*

speed, less effort'

does bring significant improvements and not just to lap times

'Carbon wheels make a big difference, you can feel the tyres digging their claws deeper into the Tarmac'



National circuit layout on the Ducati's standard wheels, and then again on the carbon-fibre BSTs. They'll both be shod with the same road-compound Pirelli Diablo Super Corsa SP rubber and ridden in the same conditions, by the same rider, recorded with a datalogger.

Yes, £2287 is a lot of cash and for that money the BSTs don't even come with discs, but you do get lightweight spacers, bearings, a sprocket carrier, cush drive, valves and a rear sprocket in the size of your choice.

BST's UK distributor HPS (www.BikeHPS.com) says the new generation of carbon wheels featuring the latest composite technology and resins aren't just lighter than cast and forged aluminium, they're stronger and more durable, too. Depending on your bike and how heavy your standard wheels

are in the first place (usually around 10-15kg a pair), carbon wheels can save you over 4kg.

Now we're familiar with the theory, it's time to take to the track.

As standard, it's hard to imagine how you could improve on the 899's brilliance. Being super-critical, you could say braking power isn't great and you've got to keep the 148bhp Superquadro engine on the boil with a flurry of gearchanges during each lap. But once you've got used to all that, the Ducati is the track-addict's perfect drug.

It handles far sweeter than any 1199 Panigale and you can carry ridiculously high corner speeds and big lean angles in complete safety. The 899's power delivery is linear and easy to manage. The quickshifter is sublime and there's

BEFORE



899's cast rims weigh around 15kg a pair

AFTER



High-tech carbon-fibre BSTs save 4kg

traction control to back you up if you get carried away.

The Ducati isn't hard work like a peaky, rev-hungry 600, or ready to eject you under hard acceleration, like a 1000. Put simply, the 899 is fun, non-threatening and easy on tyres. It's a joy to lap and lap... and lap, as fast as you dare. I set a base time of 1:18.71.

Within just a couple of corners it's crystal clear the carbon wheels make a big difference. Suddenly the 899 is even easier to get around the track and you can feel the tyres digging their claws into the tarmac even deeper.

Backing-off the front and rear compression damping slightly lets the lighter wheels track the surface even more smoothly and the softened suspension gives more grip and a plusher, more comfortable ride.

From the seat of your pants, the Ducati feels lighter and more agile at speed, and looking at the data there are tangible improvements. Acceleration is stronger so the 899 is faster down the straights, and you can generate higher lean angles and corner speeds. The tyres were also less scrubbed using the carbon-fibre wheels.

The data shows a few stand-out stats with the carbon wheels. Flicking the 899 from side-to-side through the 3rd gear Grettton flip-flop is easier and results in a 3mph faster exit speed and you can carry an extra 10mph into the 4th gear downhill Deene section. The amount of lean and brake you can carry into the apex of the 2nd gear Tarzan hairpin is impressive, too.

So there's initial disappointment when our datalogger only shows a 0.63



OK, £2287 is a small fortune to spend on plastic wheels, but can you put a price on elbow-down awesomeness like this?

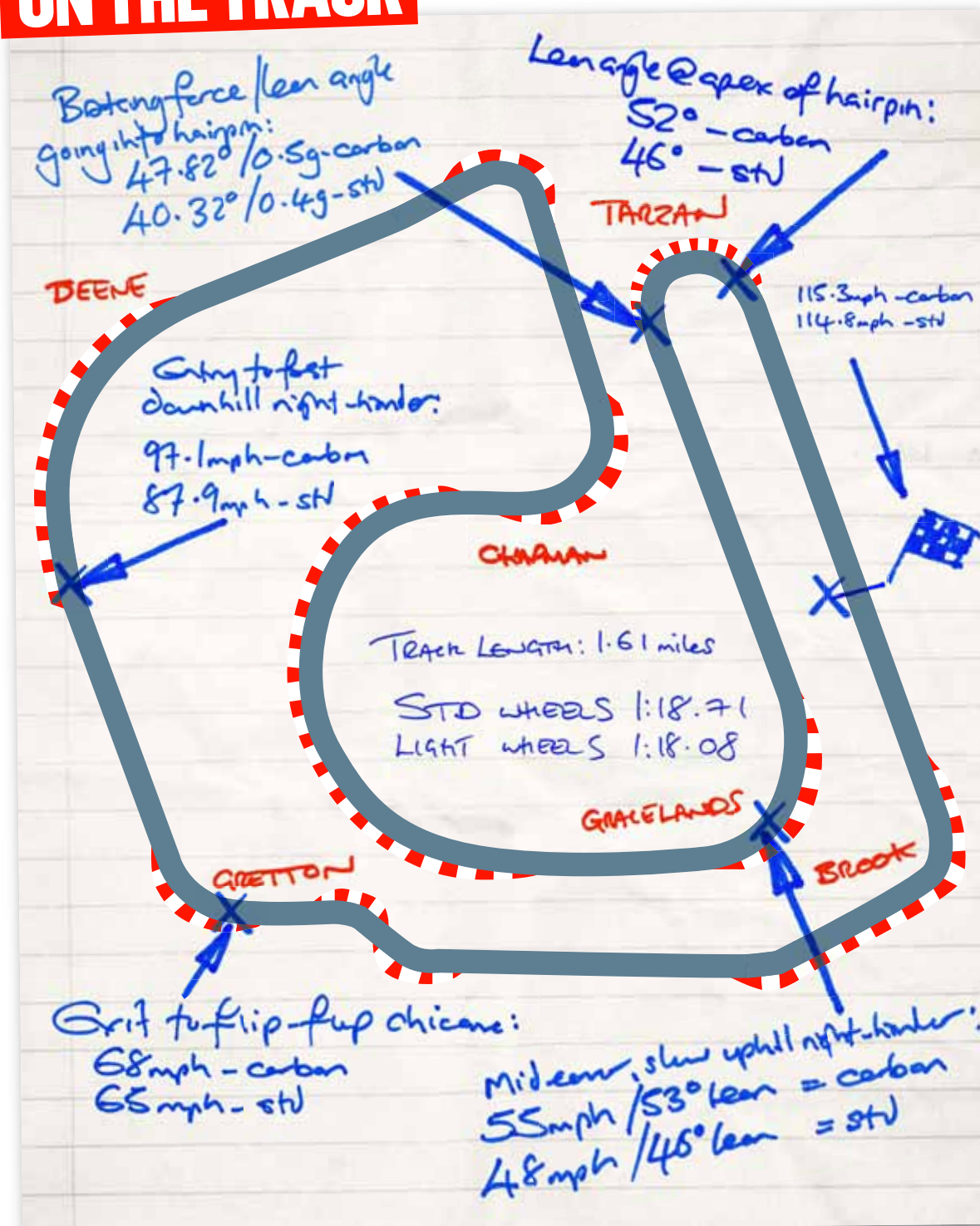
second-a-lap improvement with the carbon-fibre wheels. All of a sudden the already hefty two-grand-plus price tag seems even more over the top. But then, with my racer's head on I soon realise that small improvement would equal the length of Rockingham's start straight after a few laps. And in a head-to-head race between two 899s with standard and carbon wheels, you'd be in front by over six seconds after 10 laps – and be less knackered.

If you knew you could finish a race, or a track day session, six seconds ahead of your rival, you'd take that all day long. But lap times aside, the carbon wheels let you ride fast with less effort, which will be a blessing if, like most of us, you don't train everyday like a racer, especially at a physically-demanding track like Cadwell or Oulton Park **MCN**



Panigale casts off its cast aluminium wheels

ON THE TRACK



ON THE ROAD

'Yes, I'm a believer'

Senior Editor Richard Newland is running BST carbon wheels on the 899 Panigale as part of MCN's long-term test fleet. Here are his first impressions:

"Non-believers say carbon wheels can't possibly make any difference on the road, but I couldn't disagree more.

"These BSTs have a tangibly positive impact on every mile you ride, even on the motorway. Of course there's the improvement they make to handling, but the benefits don't stop there. Mid-range delivery rolling on in 4th, 5th and 6th is massively improved as the engine has less inertia to conquer, and you need less gearbox-dancing for overtakes.

"They're durable, the finish doesn't tarnish, and I love how subtle they are. There's nothing to dislike but the price."



Carbon does have a place on the road

MCN VERDICT

MICHAEL NEEVES, SENIOR ROAD TESTER

'An indulgence you can justify'

There's no question lightweight wheels are an expensive indulgence. Even with wheels as light as these carbon-fibre BSTs, there's not a huge difference in lap time around Rockingham.

But the difference in ride quality on the road and track is marked. At speed the light wheels make the bike feel lighter and easier to turn. They give you an improved feeling for what the tyres are doing, which in turn gives you the confidence to lean further and carry more corner speed.

If you're a racer and you're allowed to use them in your championship (so that's basically club racing in the UK), they're a no-brainer, but for a trackday rider they'll make your bike less tiring to ride during the course of the day.

And, as Richard found out, road riders will benefit from their lightweight charms, too.

Plus, at the end of the day, they're simply undeniably cool.