



Valentino's day

As Valentino Rossi's glittering career draws to a close, a new superstar is revving up to take the top spot, writes motorsport expert James Roberts

It's fitting that in Valentino Rossi's final season racing in MotoGP, the championship is heading in the direction of his natural successor. At the beginning of 2021, Frenchman Fabio Quartararo took over the factory Monster Energy Yamaha seat from Rossi, who had spent 15 seasons with the Italian-Japanese team. Rossi swapped with Quartararo and took his place in Yamaha's Petronas satellite outfit.

After 12 rounds, Quartararo - who is nicknamed 'El Diablo' or 'the devil' - has taken five victories and has a 65-point lead in the standings ahead of reigning champion Joan Mir. Surprisingly, the Team Suzuki Ecstar man has been winless so far in 2021.

Although many of this season's races have been cancelled due

to the Covid-19 pandemic, with six races left, Quartararo looks to be favourite to wrap-up his first riders' crown. At the age of 22, competing in only his third season of MotoGP, Quartararo has the combination of speed and skill that could one day put him on a par with the retiring Rossi or the great Marc Márquez.



Above: French Yamaha rider Fabio Quartararo looks set to take over from seven-time world champion Valentino Rossi

Six-time MotoGP champion Márquez bravely returned to the winners' circle at the German Grand Prix, having sat out most of last year with a broken arm following a horrendous shunt in the opening race of 2020. The Spaniard had been hunting down Quartararo for the win, when he high-sided his Repsol Honda and broke his arm in the fall.

Márquez's victory at the Sachsenring in June brought to an end Honda's longest win drought since they returned to top-level Grand Prix racing in the early 1980s. The victory also occurred in the middle of an extraordinary mid-season run whereby six different riders (and four different manufacturers) won races to emphasize the ultra-competitive nature of MotoGP in 2021.

Perhaps the most thrilling victory befell KTM's Brad Binder in Austria, when three laps from the chequered flag, he decided to stay on slick tyres - despite an increasingly wet track - while his nearest rivals pitted for rain tyres.

The Austrian Grand Prix was the second race to be held at the Red Bull Ring in a week and did not feature Maverick Viñales on the entry list. In an extraordinary twist, the rider who had won the season-opening race in Qatar for the factory Yamaha team was immediately released from his contract and looking for new employment. Quartararo's team-mate had come into the pits after the end of the race in Styria and revved his bike excessively, seemingly in frustration at his own performance.

A statement from the team withdrawing Viñales' entry at the second Austria race was due to data showing: "unexplained irregular operation of the motorcycle." Since then, Maverick has joined the factory Aprilia team for the remainder of this fascinating season. motogp.com

VALENTINO ROSSI

Earlier this year the great Valentino Rossi announced that 2021 would be his final season in MotoGP. The self-styled 'doctor' has become a hero, not just in his native Italy, but for millions of fans around the world. They have loved his daredevil riding and incredible pace in combination with his joyous charisma and fun-loving sense of humour. All of these traits have helped Rossi transcend the sport and become a household name, taking MotoGP into the mainstream.

Who could forget his comical celebrations? They included popping into a Portaloo on a victorious slow-down lap, or the moment his friend dressed up as a chicken and rode pillion with the 'Vale' back to the pits.

After many of his 89 victories, fans would descend onto the track surrounding the podium in a sea of yellow flags and flares to worship the number 46 rider. Rossi won seven world championships in a career spanning more than two decades. The first three he triumphed with Honda and then spectacularly with Yamaha in their first season together in 2004. After a short winless streak with Ducati, Rossi returned to Yamaha in 2013, but despite finishing second between 2014-16 he hasn't been able to add to his four titles with the squad.

His remaining goal, before the 42-year-old hangs up his MotoGP helmet for good, is one more top three finish to add to the 199 podiums he has so far... valentinorossi.com

