

## MotoUSA Goes Kawasaki Ninja 250 Racing



**Steve Atlas** Executive Editor | [Articles](#) | [Articles RSS](#) | [Blog](#) | [Blog RSS](#)

Professional-grade speed and an attitude to match, Executive Editor Steve Atlas is the leader of the new blood at MotoUSA. Atlas has AMA racing creds that are even more extensive than his driving record.

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I've raced a lot of motorcycles in my time. From Motocross to Supermoto, from 1000cc Superstock to 750cc Supersport, from SV650 lightweights to the Daytona 200; all very different, but all great experiences. I thought I pretty much had the road racing thing covered. Not quite. Recently I opened a new chapter in my career: **Kawasaki Ninja 250** Cup racing. And what a chapter it turned out to be!

The friendly Team Green press department dropped me a line last minute to ride their Carry Andrews-built Ninja Cup spec machine at Willow Springs. As I had planned to be there anyway for another feature, I figured I might as well do a bit of racing. Little did I know it would go down as one of the most fun, not to mention *the* closest race of my life. Who knew?

The **Ninja 250** Cup idea is simple: Limited modifications only to make the machines race-worthy – bodywork, rearsets, exhaust, jetting, gearing and tires. The rest must remain totally stock in an effort to keep the racing as close as possible. Willow Springs adopted the class for 2009 and there have been loads of tight racing, with grids continually building in size. While we went in the sweltering heat of the summer in July – 114 degrees on Sunday – and grids were down slightly, there was still a solid 14 riders to take the green flag, of which I was gridded at the very back due to having no points. That would only make things that much more fun though. But, first, let's start from the beginning of the weekend.



MotoUSA Editor Steve Atlas goes Kawasaki Ninja 250 Cup racing at Willow Springs International Raceway.



Practice proved to be limited but despite this we were on race-pace within only a couple sessions aboard the little green machine.

### **Practice**

A full-day Friday practice was available, but real-world work constraints kept me from being able to ride. Thankfully Saturday provides nearly a full day and in theory would be plenty of time. Or so I thought. Little did I know the level of the talent in the spec class, especially class leader Wes Totsubo. My work would be cut out for me.

First time out on the bike was a shellshock of sorts, as the riding position is not the typical racebike crunch. Low mounted pegs and high stock handlebars have a relaxed feel to them, one which is quite foreign on the track. The less-than-rigid-frame flexes like a Play-Doh Gummy doll while the skinny tires fall into the corner with lightning-fast haste. Imagine riding a snake that goes anywhere it likes with the rider simply along for the ride. That should give you a good idea of how the Nina 250 behaves.

Talk about taking some time to get used to. Due to the lazy riding position it was hard to get an idea of the levels of grip provided by the thin rubber, which due to the un-typical-sized rims is relegated to street-based Bridgestone BT016s and BT003s. Even so, the levels of grip are utterly outstanding. With the motorcycle's light weight and lack of stress from the low-horsepower engine, the road-type rubber sticks like glue. Wiggly and strange glue. But glue nonetheless.

This was downright odd to get my head around at first as I'm used to full-fledged, rigid-feeling racebikes. But once I loosened up and let the Ninja dictate the course, only adding small inputs where needed, things started to make sense. So much so that I was quickly dragging the bodywork on the ground due to the mind-bending lean angles achievable with the mini-racer. My pace was within a couple seconds of the top guys by the end of my first session on the bike, so I instantly knew a win was in sight. In fact, coming from an AMA Pro Racing and motojournalism background, anything less would be considered a failure in my mind. It's club-level 250 Ninja racing for Pete's sake. Hence the goal was quickly set: Win at all costs.

Two more practice sessions under the baking 110-degree sun followed and by the end of the day we were within a second of the track record, a time consistently run during most races by class-dominating Japanese 250cc GP ace Wes Totsubo. The record was actually set by local fast-guy and Honda R&D man Jeff Tigert in cooler weather, but due to an injured thumb he would not be racing that weekend.

While limited to three sessions, with a spec bike that allows little to no adjustment of suspension there wasn't much we could do to improve it. It really came down to simply getting used to the unorthodox machine. But Ninja 250 racing at Big Willow is all about one thing and one thing only: Drafting. With bikes so evenly matched it's nearly impossible to get away, so come race day we predicted the slipstream would be the name of the game. Oh how right we were...



I was able to hook up with Totsubo in one of the practice sessions to gauge his speed, but the veteran quickly knew what I was doing and pulled in right away. Smart.



Race day rolled around and right from the green flag it was quickly apparent who I would be battling for the race win.

**Race Day**

After mounting new rubber and scrubbing them in during morning practice I was ready to race. Problem was we were Race 14, which meant sitting around and waiting all day. And I hate that. Too much goes on in my head and the pressure builds. Think of it as icing the kicker in football, but for six hours in 114 degree heat. At least we had a fan!

After a day of turning my brain to mush and my stomach in knots, the Ninja Cup final was finally afoot. Go time. While I would be starting at the back, with only 14 riders on the grid it wouldn't be hard to get to the front. But with Wes on pole as the points' leader I would need to make it happen fast. A good start was mandatory! I needed to be right on his back wheel by the exit of Turn 1 or he could get away and then there would be no chance.

No problems there; I got a blistering start and was challenging him for the race lead in the short shoot from Turn 1 to Turn 2. It was on. With bikes so closely matched I knew it would be a chess match, a mind game and a drafting war. Let the games begin.

The pace was initially slightly higher than I expected as Wes slid the little red Ninja around trying to break me. I was inches from his tailpipe and figured, 'If he can do it, so can I'. We were on the same bike with the same tires with very similar mods. He did have a tad more top-end than I down the long front straight by virtue of his tuning abilities, but my Carry Andrews-built Ninja came off the corners better, so the two bikes couldn't have been any closer matched. As were the riders, the two of us not weighing more than 140-lbs soaking wet. By the second lap Totsubo realized there was no way he would get away and the pace came down slightly. I could tell he knew the drill.

I made a pass for the lead going into the wide-open Turn 8 on the third of six laps to see if leading from the front was possible. But since the little Ninjas are pinned all the way from Turn 6 though the start/finish-line, something I've never experienced, it makes for one seriously long straight – nearly half the track. My time up front didn't last long as Wes drafted back by heading down the front straight that same lap. But I also knew there was no reason to be up front. The plan now became simple: Gauge my ability to draft him from the final turn to the start/finish line. For Laps 3 and 4 I made slingshot moves as if I was going to pass but held back. As a result I knew I could get directly along side, but getting fully in front was nearly impossible. It was going to take one heck of a draft to get by that No. 260 Ninja.

By this time we had a quite large gap on third place, over eight seconds, leaving it to just the two of us going into the final lap. Mano-e-mano. One-on-one. Time to see who held the best poker hand. Only a wrench was thrown into the equation. We had started to catch lappers, adding a seriously unpredictable variable into the equation. Typically it's best to lead through lappers, but it can go either way. And that it did.

We caught a group of two coming down the hill from Turn 4 to Turn 5. Wes was able to get both late on the brakes into Turn 5 while I only got by one, the second holding me up all the way through to the exit of Turn 6. This gave him a three-to-four bike-length gap with only half a lap to go. Surely it looked over. But wait, all wasn't lost. I could see another lapper ahead, one which we would no doubt be catching through the wide-open final two turns. This was my chance for a double-draft!

Totsubo easily got by the first lapped rider entering Turn 8 as I tucked in as tight as possible and aimed for the back of the slower rider. The only shot I had was to use his draft to catch Wes and then try and slingshot Wes to the line. And the plan went perfectly. Almost...



The gap between Totsubo and I was never more than a bike length or two for the majority of the race.



It was all-or-nothing on the last lap but coming down from Turn 4 to Turn 5 a group of lapped riders threw quite a wrench into the equation.

Throttle pinned and head behind the screen I drafted the lapper between Turns 8 and 9, giving me a blistering run into the final corner, probably a good 10 mph faster than I ever had before; nearly to the point I thought of rolling off the throttle. But I knew that would cost me the win. Keeping it fire-walled was the only option. Tires sliding and the bike wiggling, I bit my lip and pointed the little green machine straight at Totsubo.

It worked perfectly and I was flying past him up the inside just as we exited the final corner. But I still had to stay in front for the rest of the long front straight, keeping him from drafting back by, so I proceeded to slowly drift wide in an effort to force him to take the long way around.

I could see the line and Wes wasn't in my peripheral at all. The win was in sight! But with about 100 feet to go I felt a heavy tap on my left arm. That was quickly followed by

Totsubo's knee pushing up against mine and then our bars touching just as we crossed the line. The clever little racer had rolled the dice and stayed wide! With literally inches of pavement he almost took out the flagger but was able to pull up beside me at the line, the two of us crossing in a dead photo finish, bouncing off each other and trading paint like Tony Stewart and Kevin Harvick in the Daytona 500. I think Wes even put a wheel or two in the gravel for a short time. I must say, that took some serious balls risking life and limb to try and win a club race. The man is dedicated.

Never in my life have I been part of such a close finish. As we sat up and looked at each other after crossing the line we both shrugged, no one knowing who won. We both gave each other a thumbs up for an awesome race and coasted back into the pits, still not unaware who the victor was. In fact, it wasn't until the results were posted that evening either of us knew. The Kawasaki guys said I had it, Wes' crew said he did. Way too close to call. Unfortunately for us, WSMC gave the win to Totsubo. But considering the closeness and fun we had, I can live with that.



Who knew racing a 25-horsepower entry-level Ninja 250 in nearly stock form would prove to be one of the most thrilling and fun races of my life? What a day! Though I must say, I do want revenge. I think a rematch is surely in the cards...

Team Green had a strong weekend at Willow Springs, all three riders placing on the podium. (Front left) Editor Atlas (581), young female racing star Elena Myers (921) and Angels and Airwaves' guitarist David Kennedy.



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