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Ladies First Nesbitt Makes History With Honda Title

By John Hopkins

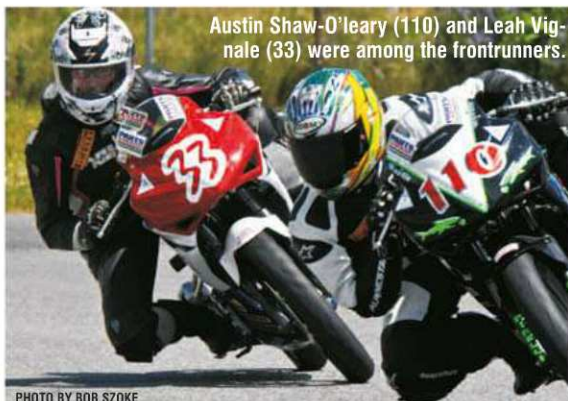
When Stacey Nesbitt won the second round of the Honda CBR125R Challenge at Circuit ICAR, few people regarded it as a sign of things to come. After all, the race had been held in tricky conditions that had turned it into a bit of a crapshoot, and the St-Lazare, QC racer hadn't looked anything like a podium contender — never mind race winner — the previous year.

But as it turned out, that ICAR victory was the sign of things to come, and the 14-year-old went on an impressive run that saw her win the final four races of the year and become the first woman in Canadian

(and perhaps world) road racing history to claim a national championship.

"Last year was a learning year, and this year the plan was to be in the front pack," Nesbitt admitted after sealing her crown with a victory at Mosport International Raceway. "But when I got the win at Mirabel [ICAR], that was a huge confidence boost. After battling for the lead at St-Eustache, I thought we actually might have a shot at this thing."

It wasn't all clear sailing for Nesbitt; she actually spent the first half of the year pulling herself back up into title contention. She led the points race following ICAR but then had a rough weekend at Shannonville



Austin Shaw-O'Leary (110) and Leah Vignale (33) were among the frontrunners.

PHOTO BY BOB SZOKE

Motorsport Park, taking 12th and sixth in the two races.

A pair of runner-up finishes at Autodrome St-Eustache boosted Nesbitt's hopes, but she still trailed Falmouth, NS's Austin Shaw-O'Leary in the points race heading into the doubleheader at Shaw-O'Leary's home track, Atlantic Motorsport Park. That weekend at AMP would see the tables turn dramatically however. After edging

Shaw-O'Leary to victory in the first race, Nesbitt would win the second after the local star was penalized for a jump start and dropped to third in the results.

That left Nesbitt with a slim points lead heading to Mosport, and she reeled off two more impressive victories to lock up the national title.

Despite the disappointment of seeing the championship slip from his fingers, Shaw-O'Leary should still be very proud of his runner-up finish in the standings. He was on the podium in seven of the 10 races, and it looked like his consistency might be enough to get him the title. Despite his disappointments, especially on home turf, Shaw-O'Leary showed poise and class. He is one of the most well spoken young men in Canadian road racing.

Other racers saw their fortunes rise and fall over the course of the season. Eric Green of Richmond, ON won the season opener and finished runner-up in three other races, but falls at ICAR (while battling Nesbitt for the lead in the second race) and Shannonville took him out of points contention.

Stoney Creek, ON's David MacKay scored a win at Shannonville and qualified on pole at St-Eustache, but also had DNFs curtail his championship run.

One of the most intriguing newcomers to the series was Ottawa racer Shay Gauthier, who displayed great pace during his limited appearances but also had a penchant for pushing things too far. He burst onto the scene at Shannonville with a win in the second race, but was docked points for unsportsmanlike conduct — there were some grumblings regarding his aggressive riding style and attitude. He returned at St-Eustache and swept to victory in both races after superb duels with Nesbitt and Shaw-O'Leary, proving that he could race hard and clean in close quarters. Unfortunately he didn't travel to the final two events at AMP or Mosport, leaving us all wondering what might have been.

Nesbitt wasn't the only female to make her mark in the Honda CBR125R Challenge in 2011. Leah Vignale claimed pole position for the AMP races and picked up a pair of podium finishes on her way to fifth in the final point standings. Indeed, women took four spots in the top 10 in the final standings, with Lauren Hill placing sixth and Karolina Pelc seventh.