

● EACH BIKE GLISTENING beneath a heat lamp and surrounded by its own factory mechanics, the ItalJet road racers crouched within the otherwise dark confines of Ontario's Garage 3, Building 3. They look as purposeful as javelins, I thought to myself; willful, wicked, snappish, unpredictable, true By God Grand Prix racers, at peace for now but able to snarl to life at the drop of a clutch and lay to rack and ruin everything about them. Three shining, tiny war machines, here at the track to Do Some Business, to crush some reputations, to whack the privateers around and send them snivelling as only privateers can snivel, to explore the uncharted dimness of speed/time continuums, to demonstrate to the few emotionalists still in racing that technology and track-side pay windows go hand in hand and to show beyond a doubt that people willing to pay the Divine Cost of Winning will blast off the face of the earth the racer who antes up nothing more than the Piffling Price of Participation and who, until he shuffles off his mortal K-Mart coil, will savor naught but the bitter dregs of defeat, or worse.

I walked past the security guard, Onofrio Violente, and into the *sacrum sanctorum* of the garage. As many as a dozen spare fairings hung from the electrical conduits overhead. Piled neatly in the far left corner were unopened crates filled with experimental engines, the boxes coded with security clearance numbers and lettered with threats against

the unauthorized. A small chemical laboratory was arranged to the right; a technician and his assistant were furiously brewing up special fuel mixtures for each of the three celestial racing machines. The building hummed with quiet intent; only rarely was the work at hand interrupted by an outburst or profanity.

"I'm glad you could make it," greeted Mario Caldato, Sr. Mario is ItalJet's U.S. competition chief. He used to race in Italy and Brazil, and maintains a full-scale race shop in his home. He introduced me to the rest of the team mechanics: Winslo Homerio, George Bignotti, Arturo Toscanini, Vespa Onafitti, Ludmilla Turischeva, O.J. Simpson and Vidal Sassoon. "These men come from different backgrounds, different professions," Caldato explained. "I don't want mechanics and tuners with their own ideas. I just want men who can take orders, men whose backgrounds have trained them to a high degree of precision, men whose quest for perfection matches my own."

Perfection? I could see it in every nuance of tiny Number 31, the bike I was to ride this day. Wheel spokes as fragile as angel hair, a fuel tank narrower than the span of a hand, a fairing delicate as an insect's wing, a chassis as whimsical as a Lithuanian flute solo, a chain hand-carved from a single slender chrome-moly billet, the front brake disc drilled full of perfectly-spaced collander-sized holes. Were Leonardo to create a motorcycle it would look like my ItalJet: perfectly dimensioned

in keeping with the Golden Mean, lean yet slender, viciousness lightly veiled, smoothly striated with power, a paradigm of mechanical beauty taken to the third, and highest, level.

A knot forms in my gut as my eye sweeps spray-gun-like across the liverish lilliputian. Fifty. I keep reminding myself it's a Fifty. Three cubic inches of power unrestrained, three of the most deadly cubic inches ever seen in the United States, power to spare in a package that weighs no more than a dipswitch. Serious business, I remind myself. Was not Booth's pistol tiny? And look at the trouble it caused.

The roseate rapier is all essence: none of your power-consuming auxiliaries like tachometers and cables or anything extraneous to the bike's Reason for Being—swift flight from here to there and back again. All artifice had been swept away by the designer's monomaniacal thrust towards purity untrammelled, towards that perfect mechanical bell-like chord which when struck resonates down the corridors of history like a fresh strong breeze, turning to insignificance all that has blown through before.

"Are you ready for practice?" Caldato asked. The flame flickered brighter in the combustion chamber of my heart. The moment had come. So nervous that I tore a glove as my fevered fingers tried clumsily to draw it on, I stood by as Mario led Number 31 through the garage door and into Ontario's gloomy vastness. Engaging low gear, he pushed authoritatively and lept aboard, the bellicose buzz-bomb hesitating, then, as if in anticipation of what was to come, snapping to life in a cacaphony of birdlike roars that soon had a crowd a-building and holding its ear. Mario expertly worked the throttle, warming the ever-angrier engine until it was at full pique, rending the air with the ferocity of its strident falsetto war-whoop.

I clambered aboard. Mario, to my right, gestured, "down for first." I nudged the tiny shift lever in the requisite southerly direction and eased out the clutch, rocketing out-of-controlledly through the bore of Ontario's tunnel and onto the track.

We were using the National course today. Running in a counter-clockwise direction, there were 19 numbered corners. Luckily, I was familiar with the track; all I had to do was acquaint myself with the ItalJet's interpretation of it.

I nurse the now-sulking dawn-hued dive bomber down towards Turn One. It is unhappy because its engine speed is down, yet I hesitate to inflict upon myself the punishing, powerful surge which must come when the bike achieves its operating range. Wait! Was that it? Yes! Gosh! We were actually in The Power Band, as strong and vibrant and alive and breathtaking as Les Brown's Band, or even Lawrence Welk's! The lumbar compression made my eyeballs sink backwards in their sockets; the strain of

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN ULRICH



Off To War ON AN ITALJET 50

That right—a 50. Your Faithful Correspondent was invited to a day at the races by ItalJet USA. Dozens of laps and a half-gallon later, his verdict was in: 50cc racing may not be much for speed, but it's long on fun—especially if you have some imagination.

By Cook Neilson



Poised amidst a caterwauling throng of thundering competitors, your Faithful Correspondent (31) prepares to launch his mellifluous missile into combat (top). Said launch had been preceded by much peering and prodding; he knows the engine's in there somewhere, but where? Bring the microscope (left)! Finally embracing the tan-hot heat of competition, Your Correspondent flings his ItalJet to the absolute limits of cornering traction (above) and prays for luck. His prayers were answered.

squeak and we were away, far in arrears. Drat, I cursed to myself, I've blown the start. Nothing could be done save set the jaw a little firmer, clench the teeth with increased resolve and vow to go in deeper and come out harder. The bikes in front—and there were 30 of them, at minimum—would feel the hot breath of my dragoon before the day was done.

After two laps we have maneuvered up amongst the opposition, the red racer diving and darting, rocking and rolling, me holding on for dear life as the ItalJet overpowered bike after bike, subsisting on a will of its own, feeding on the dying carcasses of now a Honda 125 Enduro, now a Yamaha 80, now a Suzuki 50. I was looking for Nolan with blood in my eye. Despite the fact that his typical lap time was 12 seconds faster than my own I felt sure the ItalJet was, in the heat of competition, capable of performing beyond any reasonable expectation. And there Nolan was, right in front of me! So soon? Something was amiss! Nolan, doubtless feeling the pressure of my ItalJet, which was a mere 40 seconds behind, had gone all reckless and crashed! The day, if I could control my frenzied, tempestuous mount for a few laps longer, was mine. Slacking the pace from 2:44s back to 2:45s to give that extra margin of safety, the laps unwound. I saw the white flag and, in barely more time than it takes to read and memorize Cycle World, the checkers. With the crowd beside himself

with excitement I partook of a victory lap, garlands of roses soaring out of the grandstands and landing in the path of a now-satiated ItalJet. Back in the pits, bedlam held sway. Water flowed like water. The trophy girl was attacked in the time-honored Ascot manner. The band struck up the Battle Hymn of the Republic, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, flown here especially by the ItalJet Director, swung into a stirring rendition of "Russets and Flourishes."

....Time Passes....

The track is empty now, Ken Roberts, Giacomo Agostini, Barry Sheene and Steve Baker the last to proffer their congratulations as they climbed into Sheene's borrowed Rolls Royce and ticked quietly through the security gate. Probably off to raise some hell, I thought to myself. I had been invited along, of course, but my leg was acting up. Besides, my mind was still on the ItalJet. We had gotten on well together, working with a harmony that comes from both brilliant design and—I admit—hard-won experience. As I stuffed my leathers and helmet into my helmet-and-leathers bag I glanced into the now-dark bay where, only hours before, the full force of the ItalJet racing team had been housed, shreds of packing material the only evidence that they had been there at all. Racing is peculiar business, I thought silently. Then I started my truck and headed for the sunset, and home. ●

RACER ROAD. *Continued from page 39* events, so it was variously entered in Four-Stroke GP, Super Café and Superstreet. It won all of its locals except one. Pridmore brought his BMW to a Riverside race preparatory to the Loudon National, and thrashed the Ducati fair and square when we tried to milk another race out of our Daytona rear slick. My fastest lap that day was 1:37.4. Pridmore had lots of 1:35s, and one 1:34. We were desolated. We couldn't believe that the time differential was due completely to a worn-out rear tire. We suspected that the improvements Helmut Kern had made to Reg's BMW had created a performance gap we could not hope to overcome.

The improvements reflected suspicions we had had about the BMWs at Daytona. Since we had shared their garage during Speed Week we were privy to certain information not widely circulated. We knew, for example, that at least one of the team BMs was not responsive to jetting changes. Plugs which looked gray and dangerous looked the same even after main jet size had been bumped from 170 to 190. We had passed this along to Gordon Jennings, our Technical Editor.

"Are their carburetors bolted directly to the heads?" Gordon had inquired. "Yes," we said. "With aluminum manifolds."

"That'll do it," Jennings said.

We also noticed that the bikes continued to be hard to start, were throughout the week difficult to time, and

demanded tiny spark plug gaps—like .014-inch on the bottom plugs and .018-inch on the tops. Spark plug gaps less than .020-inch suggested to us that their ignition coils were weak, and when one of the team helpers was dispatched to search Daytona for K-Mart coils, it appeared that their diagnosis matched ours. The BMWs were fast at Daytona. They were also unhappy.

When Helmut showed up for the pre-Loudon Riverside event, we could see the improvements he had made. Carburetors were mounted on flexible rubber hoses. There were four automotive Bosch racing coils under the fuel tank. The bike started easily and with an old R27 advancer mechanism, idled peacefully. We also discovered that the crankshaft in Rego's bike had been rebalanced since Daytona, to reduce the kind of vibration that had been confusing the carburetors. After Reg disappeared up the track and left me for dead, Phil and I suspected that all those astonishing BMW technical specifications (compression, cam timing and lift, ignition, valve sizes, cranking pressure, etc.) had finally come out of the closet. We feared the Ducati would never again be competitive with the Butler & Smith bikes. We were wrong, as the October Riverside National would demonstrate.

Still, after getting thrashed so thoroughly by Pridmore at that May AFM race, we felt trapped. We couldn't do anything with camshafts. No cam grinder in the

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holding on to the clip-ons had the veins and tendons in my arms standing in bas relief and screaming in agony as they sought to control the otherworldly force that, in horsepower terms, must be bumping against double figures, or more.

Turn One was hurtling towards us now, and I applied the brakes and commenced downshifting. The ruby rocket slowed as if it had suddenly run into hip-deep chewing gum, and I flicked it towards the apex, tires shuddering in quest of traction, left toe burning from friction heat. With a pained yelp reverberating around the otherwise empty confines of my Bell helmet I scooted the toasty digit atop the peg and opened the throttle, the little bike leaping with a will of its own towards Turns 2 and 3. I notice that the chirping cherry mini-chariot is doing wondrous things to the track, both compressing and extending it. The number of turns is reduced; the length of the straightaways is expanded until they resemble the Oklahoma Turnpike, reaching into the far distance and seeming in their incomprehensible length to follow the curvature of the earth and disappear into pin-points somewhere near New Mexico.

The first practice session ends; in the second, whilst fanning upwards through the gearbox on the straight between Turns 8 and 9, a blur appears beside my foot and streaks ahead and out of sight. It is the Arch-Rival. It is Bob Nolan aboard his devilishly rapid Pancho-Villa 50, a bike/rider combination alleged to be able to run with some of the 100cc racers and even the 200cc production bikes! The Villa is water-cooled and seems to be 10 to 15 mph faster than my own. Nolan, a wily veteran of the SoCal GP racing wars, usually wins the coveted 50cc class laurels. Today, Mr. Nolan, I vowed silently to myself above the frightful din and vibration of the ItalJet, today the tables just might be turned; your uppance has come, or I'll know the reason why.

Back in the pits Mario Caldato, Sr. ministered to the wants and needs of my bike and the somewhat older ItalJets ridden by Mario, Jr. and Rudy Galindo. Ours was a team to be wary of; there was so much strength here that any discussions of strategy were unnecessary, and we all waited eyes a-kimbo for our race to come.

It was to be a run-and-bump start: not my favorite, my left leg not the member it used to be due to the Boer bullet still buried close—too close to operate—to the pectoral artery. I have, if you must know, a game leg, but I gamely vowed to give it my all. We waited for the starter to twitch his green flag; as soon as he did I pushed furiously and, with a clumsy effort reminiscent of Kate Smith climbing a fence, jumped aboard and let fly the clutch. The warbling warrior caught, bogged, caught again, bogged again, emitted a long, yearning, sorrowful *wwwuuuuunnnnnnnggggkkkkbbll* and finally, what seemed minutes later, brought itself up to full



Were Leonardo to design a motorcycle, it would doubtless resemble the ItalJet. It may be small—but it's pretty.

Off To WAR ON AN ITALJET 50



For \$1300 you can own an ItalJet. Telephone 213-982-2000. Ask for Keith Mullins. And gas it up!