

Beyond Racer Road

● A truck the color of churchmice jockeys to a halt and the RG-500 comes out the back like the Hope Diamond from a gunny sack and is borne Cleopatra-like on the shoulders of six men to the pavement in front of a small building, where it is set gently on the ground. It is exquisite, a feast for the eye from its plasma-sprayed front discs to the arrogant flip of its tail section, and every molecule in between. This is Suzuki's masterpiece, and it is at this place for me to ride. (Continued)

Plucking The Stradivarius String

By Cook Neilson

Beyond Racer Road



**"At the twist of
a handle and the
flick of a toe
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There are 59 other RG-500s loose in the world, most of them in Europe contesting the World Championship. As this is written Square Fours have won four GPs—with Barry Sheene at the controls—but more significantly, RG-500s have occupied an extraordinary number of top placings. In the Italian GP, Suzuki filled positions one through nine. In the French, one through eight.

The sixtieth RG, this one, will be on its way to England after it leaves the test track today. It would have been on its way already except for the influence of Mr. Yosh Itoh, who had inquired the day before if I would like to ride one. Receiving a nervous but affirmative reply Mr. Itoh went straightaway to the shipping department, rescued the last RG from its box, filled it with oil and water and had it brought to the track.

Anybody in my position would have been of several minds at the prospect of riding an RG-500—especially in front of people with stopwatches and background pertaining to how fast a Square Four ought to get around the Ryuyo test facility. On the one hand there is the experience of doing it—of riding a real GP racer that has proven itself capable of winning real GP races, of sampling, however superficially, a factory's Maximum Expression and locking in my vault for all time the almost erotic memory of it—a memory that could be taken out, turned, savored, fondled, exclaimed over and burnished to

a high shine whenever I wanted, a memory that I could carry in my mind's wallet and whip out at a moment's notice while waiting for a meeting to commence or a bus to come.

But on the other hand, there are the consequences of doing it badly. Suppose the little blue darter wasn't ridden with enough determination to even keep the plugs clean? The Suzuki people would of course blame the motorcycle, saying it was too rich or the plugs were already fogged up or something, but they would know, and I would know, and I would know that they knew the central reason for such an abject display: the rider. Or, suppose I cut-'n'-thrust it up a tree and turned it into a blue-and-white, plastic, fiberglass and titanium wad of cryptic art. What then? Would Suzuki telex the deserving (and paying) English recipient that some horse's ass from *Cycle Magazine* had, in the act of amusing himself, destroyed the sixtieth of sixty masterpieces, and Suzuki had nothing to send him to race with except best corporate wishes and a promised place at the head of the list for next year's production run? How would I live with that? How would *Cycle*?

The possibilities of doing it badly were very real. I have ridden but one two-stroke GP racer—a Yamaha TZ-350 that *Cycle* purchased three years ago for Jess Thomas to ride in the AMA Nationals. We had taken the Yam to Riverside Raceway,



and Gordon Jennings, who was doing the tuning, offered it to me for a few laps. It was a painful and shabby venture. The Yamaha had a personality like Punji sticks. It started making power at 9000 rpm and stopped at 10,500. I don't believe I got it above 9000 rpm more than twice, and there were fast parts of the track that saw me hustling backwards through the gearbox in futile pursuit of a ratio that the engine might find acceptable. The world of the real-racer, TZ-350-style, was a hostile and difficult world indeed. I had no reason to expect the world the RG-500 lived in would be any different.

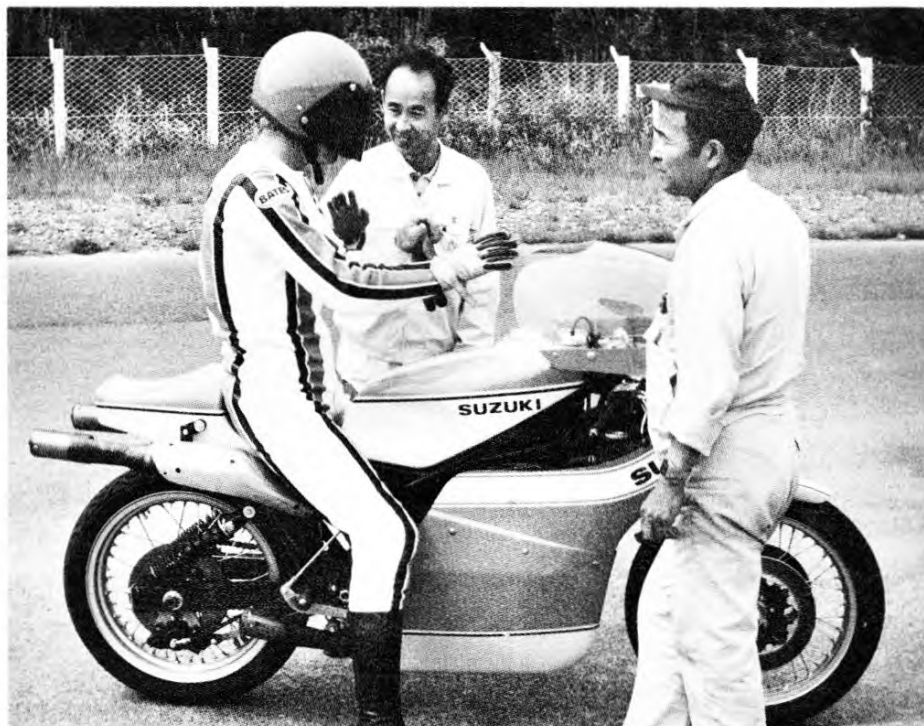
I am not going to burden you with a host of technical trivialities about the Square Four. I would, but I don't know any. I will burden you, though, with a few relevant items. The engine has four separate crankshafts, geared together in pairs and the pairs geared together somewhere in the middle. Inlet timing is controlled by disc valves. The carburetors are brown, and magnesium. The swing arm is aluminum, and most of the fasteners are titanium—except the ones that are plastic. The pipes for the front pair of cylinders are routed in the conventional manner; those for the rear pair shoot straight back and then swing outboard and around the lay-down shock absorbers. I don't know how much the RG-500 weighs; I would guess around 290 lbs. with full measures of gas, oil and water. It is alleged to make around 100 bhp at 10,500 rpm, giving it a power-to-weight ratio of less than three lbs./hp. (For reference, a good Kawasaki Z-1 weighs 545 lbs. and makes 82 hp, for a ratio of 6.7 lbs./hp.) A strong man can carry a complete RG engine under one arm, easily.

The time for rumination was past. The RG-500 sits in front of the building, warmed up and ready for me to ride—or ride at. I was familiar with the track. The bike had been ridden by Suzuki's own tester the day before, five laps worth, and no doubt was jetted on the safe side. It had been a thorough five laps. I could tell that from looking at the Dunlops which were feathered all the way to the edges. Good, I think. If I choose not to lean the bike over very far, there's no way the Suzuki people can tell from looking at the tires. I climb on and do up my gloves and helmet. The shift pattern is up-for-first, left side. I doubt whether my Electra-Glide experience will help much in remembering which way the gears go. There is no ignition switch. I note the location of the kill button, fool with the twist grip, bounce up and down on the suspension (astonishingly soft), see the tach and the water-temp gauge, pull in the clutch lever, engage first gear and they push me away, down the test track, wondering if here is where I really want to be and thinking that my snazzy blue and white leathers are the best part of my act, which the Suzuki people, I fear, are about to find out.

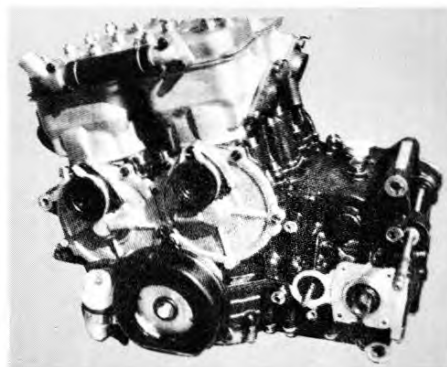
The bike fires quickly and we fuss and

sputter into the middle distance. I plan to take it softly until the water-temp comes up to 70°C, but the RG is making that difficult. I negotiate a left, a right, a left, a right, a left. We are approaching the last corner before the 1.3-mile main straightaway. I shift back to first and part-throttle it through the turn and the bike is surging.

ideas of its own. You want to streak ahead? We'll streak ahead. Turn left quick? We can do that. Stop? A piece of cake. It is a totally responsive machine. It reacts to nothing except the rider's inputs; offers no alternatives, demands no interpretations and because it is a highly-developed mechanism on whose behalf



I don't know a lot about ring-ding road-racer performance. I have heard from my friends, and read about, the reluctance of super-tuned two-strokes to run on the needles—or part-throttle—and I'm worried because they can go lean and seize. Ahead of us lies an endless straightaway. At the three-quarter mark wait all those Suzuki testers and designers with relevant pasts and stopwatches. I say to myself, the hell with it. The water temp. is almost to 70 anyway, the little bugger is probably rich, and I let it all go. There is a raucous swelling beneath me as the RG attains 8000 rpm in first and explodes to 11,000, compressing me into the tail section. Great God, I think to myself. I keep banging the gear lever down but the tach needle fights its way back to 11,000 rpm until we finally reach sixth and it settles reluctantly on 10,600 as the bike rips and tears past the little building where all the people wait, watch and doubtless click. The bike sits on the ground with tenacity, it occurs to me, even at these speeds. I of course have no idea how fast we're going, but I am aware of the wind buffeting my helmet as I sit up and begin down-shifting for the next turn, a slightly-banked sweeping long-radius right. The cornering attitude can be achieved with virtually no effort; it is unnecessary to do anything dramatic to get the bike to turn, even though it holds resolutely to whatever lean angle I select for it. And it has no



no compromises were made, it calls for none from its rider. Simply put, the RG has been designed to do what you ought to want it to do. Nothing less, nothing more, nothing different. Going beyond the muscularity with which they are expressed, the Square Four's manners are sheer, shimmering perfection; the bike asks only that its character be examined by an expert.

Which I am not, even though so far I seem to be faking my way through it. The track is faster than Riverside, which conspires to help; and the bike is easier by far to ride than the TZ-350, even though it is stronger. Riding the 350 was like walking a high wire: if it was not done just so, meaningful progress was hard to come by. The TZ was so narrow in scope as to be pure cutting edge, with neither handle

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RACER ROAD Continued from page 59

nor blade to make itself accessible to clods like me. The RG, though more potent, seems somehow roomier and more amenable, perhaps because it is a 500 that races against 500s while the Yamaha was a 350 that raced against 750s and therefore had to be what it was: pure edge, too sharp to touch.

The Square Four engine is a fascination. It has a power curve that is effective from 8000 to 11,000 rpm, which makes it rideable, in a manner of speaking, even by those of us for whom flashy leather trimming is more imitative display than a reflection of talent. It is an engine that can be worked with, an engine that has been refined to the point where there are more ways than one to get from here to there. To call it a forgiving engine is to overstate the case—but if a rider were to find himself one gear too tall, the engine can pull itself to the required 8000 rpm, a plateau from which it can start to do serious business. The power build-up from eight to eleven is strong, but not insane; the engine doesn't achieve, say, 9500 rpm and immediately try to turn the bike over backwards. By the same token you wouldn't be wanting to take a great whack at the twistgrip unless you were straight up and heading in a safe direction.

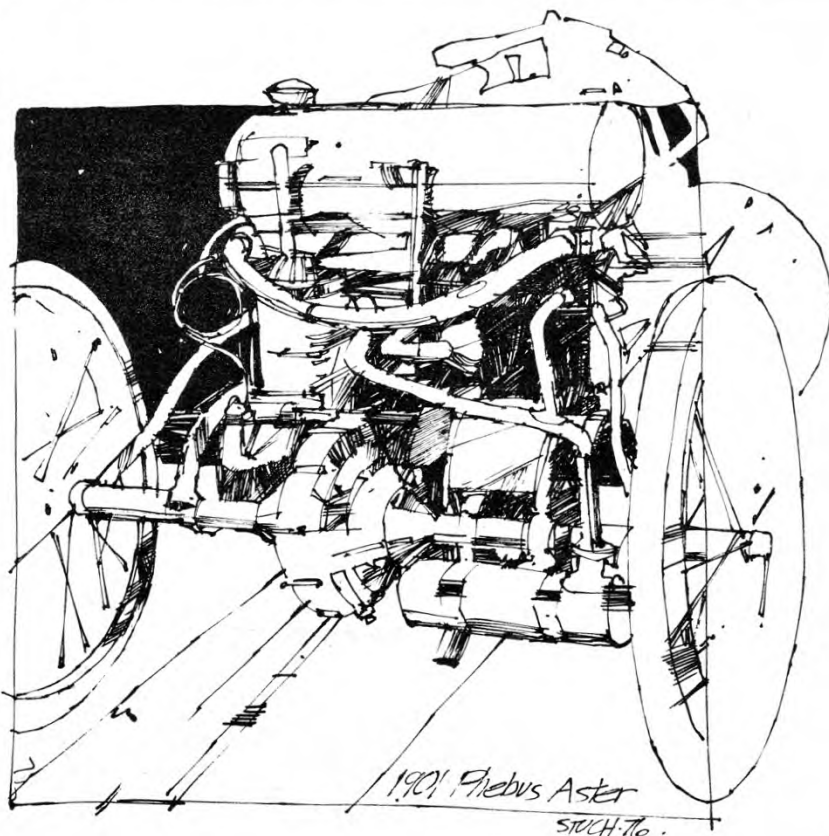
As fascinating as the Square Four engine is, the bike's handling is its real true message. It handles better than any motorcycle I have ever been on, and it's so smooth and supple that it feels like it's running on a soft track. It goes where you

want it to go and its steering is absolutely neutral and perfectly responsive. What little harshness there is seems to come from somewhere in the drive train; I don't know where, but it could be the clutch.

I have now done about five laps. The track, and the bike, are becoming dangerously familiar, and I tell myself that a couple more laps ought to do it. Besides, Suzuki has other testing to do, and while nobody seems to care a whit that the contract RG test rider zings around dodging sedans, small trucks, motorcycles and RV-90s, they have cleared the track for me. One last lap, one final strafing run past the stopwatches and I pull in. They ask if I liked it.

But yes of course, I respond: speed, acceleration, handling, blah blah blah, jaws of death, lap of the Gods, so forth and so on—nothing they didn't already know, having doubtless been told the same things by riders far better than I. But did I *like* the bike? An interesting question. Does one *like* a nuclear reactor or a throwing knife? Can emotions ordinarily reserved for fuzzy puppies and generous uncles be applied to a device like the RG-500 Square Four GP road racer which at the twist of a handle and flick of a toe can beam you Spock-like from here to there, requiring only that *there* is where you had better want to be?

Maybe Sheene "likes" his, and Read, and Lansivuori, being able to play moving tunes on Square Fours that capture their emotions. But the music's pitch is so high and keening that I cannot hear it, or make it. I can only admire the instrument, pluck a string and stand in awe.



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