

FESTIVAL OF SPEED

Barber launches its Vintage Festival
and Gary Nixon dominates
AHRMA's Formula Vintage series



Within earshot of the track, the Vintage Japanese Motorcycle Club put on a fine showing of classic Japanese bikes.



Two-time AMA Grand National Champion Gary Nixon showed he hadn't lost his form at AHRMA's 2005 season finale at Barber, winning the Formula Vintage series. It's all about attitude: sticker on Nixon's upper triple clamp (below).

Story and photos by Richard Backus

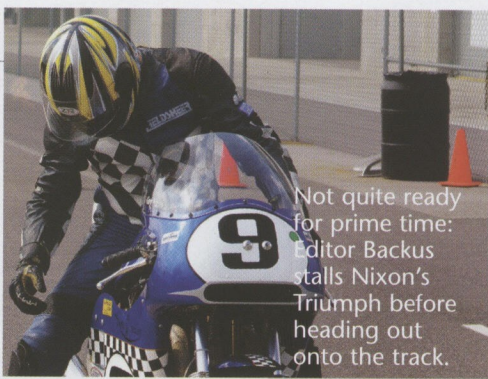
OLD AGE & TREACHERY
ALWAYS OVERCOME
YOUTH & SKILL

It's early in the game, but the Barber museum's inaugural Vintage Festival, combined with the season finale of AHRMA's Historic Cup Roadrace Series, looks set to become the next big happening in the classic bike scene.

In three short years Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum has quickly established itself as the *ne plus ultra* of vintage motorcycles, a Mecca for lovers of old bikes everywhere. Founded by businessman George Barber in 1994, and in its current digs since 2003, the museum houses the most amazing collection of classic bikes anywhere, bar none. And the adjoining track, alternately described as heaven on two wheels and as one of the most demanding circuits in the country, has bowled over AHRMA (American Historic Racing Motorcycle Association) race fans with its roller coaster runs and spectacular scenery.

The Oct. 21-23, 2005, event signaled the third time for AHRMA at Barber, but it was the first for Barber's Vintage Festival. The Barber folks crafted the event in short order and publicized it sparingly, yet it still drew rave reviews. "We were absolutely overwhelmed. We got so much positive feedback," says Barber's Brian Slark. Slark says he and museum executive director Jeff Ray would have been happy to get 40 vendors on board for the first event. As it was, 150 vendors filled 200 spots on the Barber grounds next to the track.

In addition to the vendors, the Confederate Chapter of the



Not quite ready for prime time: Editor Backus stalls Nixon's Triumph before heading out onto the track.

Four Laps on Gary Nixon's Series-winning Triumph

"You wreck that bike, and I'll f***ing kill you." So spoke the great Gary Nixon to yours truly as I climbed on his Triumph triple at Barber before the final races of the 2005 season. Gee, thanks Gary, now I really feel comfortable. Not only am I riding your bike, but I'm dead meat if I put a wheel wrong. There wasn't much chance of that, and not because of my superb skills: I've never ridden competitively in my life, and I sure wasn't gonna start on this bike — the same bike that would carry Nixon to his first major series victory since 1997.

The bike belongs to Jerry Liggett, who joined forces with Chris O'Neil's Steel Breeze Racing in 1996. (The name comes from the Pink Floyd song *Shine on You Crazy Diamond ...* "and we'll bask in the shadow of yesterday's triumph, and sail on the steel breeze.")

Liggett bought the Rob North replica triple in 2000 from an employee of the Icelandic consulate, turning it from a basket case to a race-ready machine in time for the 2002 season. Liggett got Keith Johnson of Johnson Cams to breathe on the engine until he had 82+hp on tap — a not insignificant increase from the engine's stock 51hp.

Crew members Charlie Barnes, Craig Knapp and David Wells make sure the bike shows up on time and help keep it running; the team is a slick operation that thrives on competition and values the close friendships created under the pressure of racing.

With the bike fired up, it's finally my turn in the saddle. I'm sitting on the bike thinking, "man, this feels good. I am one smokin' dude." That delusion evaporates almost instantly as I kill the engine before I've even made it 10 feet: Nixon's giving me a "Christ, whose idea was it to let this joker ride my bike" look. For the record, it was Liggett's idea.

Like most race bikes, this triple's *tres* temperamental. There's no such thing as idling, and it bogs down at anything less than 3,000rpm or so. Lurching onto the track, it's obvious the only way this thing wants to run is close to flat out. A handful of throttle and the engine clears its throat, emitting the most soul-satisfying howl from its unmuffled exhaust. On cam, an unfettered 120-degree triple sounds like a Lamborghini: delicious.

Doubtless it was painful for anybody watching me as I made my first lap around the track: my entry speeds into corners were meek at best (okay, doddering), and I never really got it wound up except on the straights.

By the end of my four laps around Barber my comfort with the bike and the track had grown, and I was on the cusp of thinking it was time to dial it up a bit. Probably a good thing I didn't get another lap: I might have forgotten what Nixon said. — *Richard Backus*

Antique Motorcycle Club of America held a classic bike show on the grounds, and the Vintage Japanese Motorcycle Club held a member bike show in the vendor area. The diverse offerings of the two groups (the AMCA leans towards vintage American and British iron, while the VJMC is strictly Japanese bikes) complemented each other well. The VJMC had an estimated 60 bikes, while the AMCA had about double that number; we expect to see even more bikes at the next event.

Slark wants to see more club activity, as well. "We want to encourage the clubs to do displays, to have a little area where they can show what they are. The VJMC display proved extremely popular."

As well as it went, the event wasn't without some teething problems. "There are a few areas we could improve on," Slark admits. "We need more toilet facilities, and more variety in food vendors."

Slark expects big things for the second Vintage Festival, scheduled for Oct. 20-22, 2006. He's predicting 400 vendors will sign on, and he's promising more events, including AHRMA off-road races, a live auction, and a classic bike run to 29 Dreams, a motorcycle resort situated 12 beautiful, winding miles away from Barber.

Slark says an estimated 10,000 enthusiasts were on hand for the AHRMA races and Vintage Festival, and he's convinced part

of the draw is geographical. "It's a unique event in the South, because for years everyone's had to go north or down to Daytona. I can see in about three or four years this is going to be a bloody good event."

Vintage Wrenching

That's what Jerry Liggett, team manager for Steel Breeze Racing, calls AHRMA's Historic Cup Roadrace Series. "A lot of guys think they'll get a vintage bike because it's cheap, easy racing. And it's the exact opposite of that. I don't call it vintage racing. I call it vintage wrenching, because you're wrenching about 100 hours for every one hour on the track."

Liggett, owner of the '72 Triumph triple that racing legend Gary Nixon rode to Formula Vintage victory at Barber, got into AHRMA racing in 1992. It was in 2004 that he scored big and got Nixon, back-to-back winner of the '67 and '68 AMA Grand National Championships, as his rider.

"I got a call from (Sandia Classic organizer) Craig Murray, and he said, 'Hey, would you mind letting Gary ride your bike?' I said 'Gary who?' and he said Gary Nixon! So we went to Sandia in 2004 with the bike and made arrangements." When Nixon swung his leg over Liggett's bike, it signaled his first competitive run on the track since the Legend series of the '90s, which Nixon won in '95 and '97.

That first ride at Sandia set the stage for the next year, with Steel Breeze Racing and Nixon establishing a string of wins in 2005 that led to Nixon's final win in the series. Their first taste of victory came at Willow Springs in April, where Nixon took first place both days. "When he rode that bike, he looked like he should have been on the cover of *GQ*. The leathers matched the paint job, and it was a total accident. It was perfect."

Make no mistake, Formula Vintage is competitive, with ex-champs like Jay Springsteen and rising stars like Robert Hurst keeping the pressure on. "You can't let the fact that it's vintage



Gary Nixon and Steel Breeze's Jerry Liggett are all smiles after Nixon's series win aboard the Steel Breeze Triumph.



Nicely modified '52 Vincent Black Shadow.

Resources

AHRMA:

<http://www.ahrma.org/>

Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum:

<http://www.barbermuseum.org/>

Gary Nixon's Web Site:

<http://www.garynixon.com/>

take anything away it. It's an AMA national race, and with the work involved and the speeds involved, the preparation is intense," says Liggett.

Why race with Steel Breeze? "He's into it, he's trying to make it good," Nixon says of Liggett. "If it wasn't for Jerry, I probably wouldn't be doing this."

Watching Nixon, it's clear he's in his element at the track, which comes as no surprise when you consider he's been racing his entire life.

His first major race was Daytona in 1960 at the tender age of 19, and he won his first AMA National three years later, in 1963.

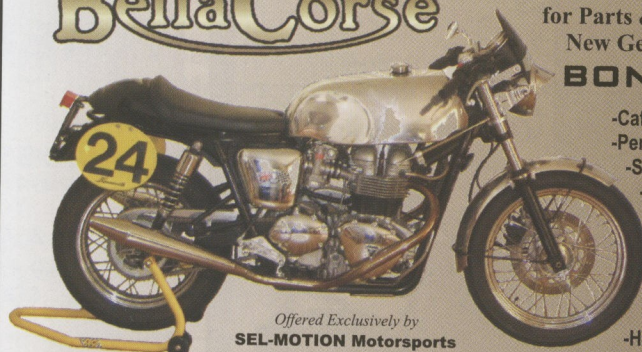
Nixon had his share of on track accidents during his heyday, and he built a reputation for toughness: He rode three seasons with a stainless steel rod holding his left leg together after stuffing a Triumph dirt tracker into a post in 1969. "For me, the ankle doesn't work and the knee doesn't work. It's not like it was in 1970. I ain't going as fast as I did back then, so I'm trying to make it a little more comfortable. But f***, it hurts. At Daytona I was kind of realizing it's just the legs. The upper body's okay."

Now 65 years old, he hasn't lost any of his affinity for the sport. "The nice thing is meeting the racer dudes, like (Thruxton Cup racer) Steve Atlas. I run into some cool guys, which is neat." Watching Nixon race, you'd never suspect he's ever taken a fall. With precise control, Nixon makes every turn and every pass on the track look easy. "He's never dropped it," Liggett says. "He's slid it around and gotten it a little sideways, but that's it."

Nixon didn't put a wheel wrong at Barber, grabbing first place on Saturday after Springsteen dropped out with ignition problems, and nabbing the series win on Sunday following a heated dual with Springsteen.

"Springer (Springsteen) was keeping me going that last lap, he wasn't gonna give it to me," Nixon says. "He shifted, got ahead of me, I shifted, got ahead of him, and it was just my time. It was good to get number one after all those years." **MC**

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