

# IN THE TURNS

say that I had more hassle-free fun with the 125 Honda than with any other motorcycle I had owned.

But I was not destined to live life as an expatriot in a tropical paradise forever. Concern for my professional future took me from trail bike heaven back to the good old asphalted U.S. of A. Time had dulled the memory of my somewhat-less-than-exciting affair with BMW's in the 60's, and I went back for more of the same, this time, an R90/6.

Now, like the society woman, the BMW was smooth, reliable, and superbly detailed. But (dare I compare myself here to the husband of our now maligned society woman?) I found after two years I had scarcely ridden "her" at all. (Either BMW's are feminine or my metaphor and I have some serious problems.) In the meantime, memories of my mini-affair with my Honda 90 led me to try to recapture the past. I picked up a used 1966 Honda S-90 and, as it turned out, ended up riding it more than the BMW - it was light, agile, and all that.

Then one spring day, a friend of mine asked me if I wouldn't help him select a motorcycle. He was considering a used Triumph. Never one to turn down an excuse to visit a cycle shop, I jumped at the chance. We checked out the Triumph but weren't too impressed with either the vibration or the oil slick on the floor of the dealer's showroom. Then, in retrospect, came the remark that eventually led to this overblown article.

"Do you have enough time to go look at a Norton?"

"Sure", I said. "Why not?"

If you have managed to read this far, you are probably asking yourself what Nortons have to do with my eventual affair with a Ducati. What links the two is the dealer, who sold both Nortons and Ducatis.

Before continuing, let me note that, much to my more literate wife's and, probably, some of my elitist colleagues in the English Department's dismay, I am an avid reader of motorcycle publications, Cycle (what else?) in particular. I had read Cycle's tests of the Ducati 750, both the road test and the superbike comparison test, and I knew what the Ducati had to offer. "The bike that everyone wanted to ride home"<sup>6</sup> was the phrase that stuck in my mind.

My friend was not too impressed with the Norton and finally decided not to get involved with cycles at all. But I couldn't get that orange Ducati off my mind. I went back on my own to look at it some more and, ultimately, to ride it. It had sat on the showroom floor for an entire winter and was in no condition to be ridden: the battery was flat, the carbs were gummed up, and it was out of tune. But when the mechanic finally got the thing running, after a fashion, I realized that what I was looking at (and having my eardrums assaulted by) was the absolute antithesis of my frigid BMW. At first, I simply could not believe the noise. This model didn't hold back at all! Instead of a temperate, well-bred chug-chug accompanied by a perfunctory side-to-side shake, I heard the exciting sound of purring gears and gasping intake - set to the wild beat of a throbbing, pulsating exhaust. I rode the bike around the block a couple of times and decided then and there that it was love, not merely infatuation, and that I could safely throw caution to the winds and give up a little security and refinement for some FUN. Good-bye BMW.

For nearly a year, the Ducati lived up to its reputation in spades. You all know what I mean - handling, responsiveness, and a certain appealing lack of civility. But that's not all. My new mistress opened up other sources of "entertainment" as well. Unlike the BMW and Honda, which are beautifully detailed cycles, the Ducati suffered from a number of superficial defects well known to the members of the DIOC and, probably, well loved by the mechanics who make their living attending to these endearing idiosyncrasies. (Well, caveat emptor, I always say.) But remedying these brought with them a feeling both of accomplishment and of satisfaction - like Pygmalion - of adding some refinements of your own - shaping up the electrics, touching up the cosmetics. Wouldn't you gladly pay for elocution lessons - or at least pay your honey to keep her mouth shut - if the rest of her were RIGHT?

Then, late in the fall and for no good reason, I drove to the Ducati dealer's shop and couldn't believe what I saw. On the showroom floor, surrounded by a small group of curious on-lookers, was a 900 Desmo Super-Sport. By this time, I had

practically committed to memory everything ever written on Ducatis, and I knew exactly what I was looking at. I prefaced my conversation with my dealer by stating that I was perfectly happy with my 750 and, furthermore, there was no way I could justify owning such a motorcycle on any rational grounds - NO WAY. But hold on a minute. Who (other than that controller of the family budget, the Little Woman) says that a man should be rational - or even practical? But I digress. I asked the dealer if he would possibly let me ride the Super Sport, just so I could say I had ridden what Neilson had called "a bike that stands at the farthest reaches of the sporting world - the definitive factory-built cafe racer".<sup>7</sup> The dealer, cunningly, agreed. I took it for a short spin. And that set me to thinking once again about the question that Joel and I had mused over a few weeks ago - namely, why do people own Ducatis, and why are they such a fanatically loyal group?

I guess we all know the answer - excitement. Here was a cycle one couldn't be indifferent about. Simply starting it and warming it up was an experience in itself. And riding it, knowing that it was created and built with only one thing in mind - with no compromises in the important areas (to crib an idea which C.N. has stated much better than I/me - circle the correct one) led to an intellectual as well as a physical involvement with motorcycling. (Here we go again - us fat "scholars" can't simply enjoy something without at least partially justifying our indulgences on intellectual grounds.)

Of course, owning a Super Sport, like any other love affair, is not something to take lightly. It can be a frustrating experience if one doesn't approach it in the proper frame of mind. When I finally bought mine I did so knowing full well that it would be a pain-in-the-ass to service and would require a lot of special tools and parts which one could hardly expect a dealer to keep in stock - considering how rare the machine was. So I decided to treat it as one does a project which requires extreme patience to complete but in which one has the utmost confidence. (Here, I will resist the temptation to lapse into another analogy which, I am ashamed to say, also involves women: free associate "women" and "break-in" and fill in the details yourself, if you must.)

Fortunately, I acquired my Super Sport late in the fall. I figured that there were only a couple of good weekends left - barely enough to put 400 miles on it prior to the First Valve Adjustment. My reading in the DIOC Newsletter, particularly the letters written by Dave Stein, prepared me for what I faced. I simply figured that to get the cycle set up properly would take the entire winter and part of the spring, and I would have to buy the necessary tools and parts to do the job. What made this period of abstinence endurable was the knowledge that I had no business messing around with cycles, considering the work I had to do for my job. And if I started playing around with the Ducati before late spring (and the convention that took me to Miami and beyond to Mecca), I would never get my work completed. As it turned out, my planning was realistic:

"Your parts were back ordered."

"That's all right."

"They shipped the wrong adjusters."

"Don't worry about it. Figured they would."<sup>8</sup>

There were delays, but this was fine with me. I had predicted it. Alles war in ordnung.

Fortunately, I had four things going for me: time; a dealer, Ron Cornaby, whose patience went far beyond the call of duty; an imaginative Ducati-freak-turned-mechanic, Dave Troetschler; and a lot of good advice from the pages of this newsletter, Cycle, and (via Ma Bell) Messieurs Gorsuch, Neilson, and Stein.

By spring, we had pulled the engine and heads, had the rockers and valve stems magnafluxed, shot peened, hard chromed, and dry lubed, replaced the valve guides (which were already showing signs of wear at 400 miles) with special 450 Desmo guides from Woods Motor Shop in Glendale, and reassembled the engine using a method of adjusting the closers developed by Dave Stein and modified by Dave Troetschler.<sup>9</sup> Everything worked fine. The unlikely affair between a Desmo 900 Super Sport and a short, fat, balding English professor was finally consummated in the canyons outside of Salt Lake City one warm Sunday morning in May - magna cum "loud-a".