

## Touching The Past

**W**Henever I have time to slow down, I've been reading Mick Walker's book *Taglioni And His World-Beating Motorcycles*, about Ing. Fabio Taglioni, Ducati's celebrated designer. I'll take it with me to a restaurant to read while I have lunch, or stop to read a few pages between projects. It's filled with lots of black and white photos, most of which are not particularly artful or high quality, but which simply serve to document the subject matter. I don't know why exactly, but I've often found myself drawn trance-like into the pictures, feeling almost as if I were present in the moment they were taken. I'm able to conjure up the smells and physical presence of the machines, and the sense of mechanical delight they created in those who owned them.

I suppose it's partly because I respond with fondness to the simpler times in which so many brands represented one man's expression of what a motorcycle should be and were not the work of committees or corporate focus groups.

Staring, I can smell the intoxicating tetraethyl lead in the gasoline wetting the carburetors, the gum rubber drying in the tires, the oxidized metallic taste of the alloys and steel used in their engines and chassis, the density of the sheet metal in the gas tanks and the cushion in the seats. I can almost touch them.

The fact that the riders in the pictures, competing 40 years ago, were basically amateurs compared to the competitors of today also fills me with admiration. They did what they did without the benefit of modern safety equipment or enormous financial compensation on dangerous courses, often over public roads—just for the sheer sport of it—to win the applause of appreciative fellow enthusiasts and to take home a trophy, their machines' smooth shapes unadorned except for numbers inside white circles, the colors of their bodywork meant to distinguish their nation of origin.

I suppose the fact that I actually owned bikes from this time period helps my powers of visualization, but I think all of us have some point of beginning in our motorcycling careers that charms us still when we take the time to stop and think deeply about it. Many of you, I'm sure, still keep some of those same machines, either to ride occasionally or everyday because they distill the spirit of that first experience that made you know that motorcycling was something you would have to do for the rest of your life.



Modern motorcycles can be so complex that wrapping your mind around their essence can sometimes be very difficult without living with them for years and many thousands of miles. From this point of view, efforts to quantify the behavior of individual systems and to assign scores adding to a sum can occasionally fail to capture a bike's essential quality, or lack thereof. Some bikes make an impression far greater than the sum of their parts, and some in spite of them. I'm sure you can name notable examples of both types as well as I can.

Of course, there's no such thing as objective perfection. We're each different in what we want from a motorcycle, and that's what makes the world go 'round. At MCN, we try always to convey the elusive "character" that each machine possesses, and we've never had a truly superior bike, in my recollection, that generated serious disagreements about its intrinsic goodness. Great bikes somehow get their message across to one and all.

For me, the qualities that conspire to make a bike something special are about how responsive it is to your wishes. The more "transparent" its mechanical connection to your muscles, the more in control you are and the more you enjoy the riding experience. Also, it mustn't have weird quirks or unnatural behaviors that make it untrustworthy. It should be utterly predictable. "Linear" is a curious word, but it means that the system in question responds in exact proportion to the effort you supply, whether it's braking, accelerating or steering.

One of the most critical factors tends to be the tires. Exactly how tires work can be

extremely complicated, nonetheless they are our primary connection to the road surface. And, if they supply sufficient grip and feedback, nothing else can give more confidence to a rider wishing to explore the capabilities of his or her motorcycle.

After tires, suspension becomes the second most important ingredient. I learned to love fully adjustable suspension after I learned how to adjust it. The transformations it makes possible can be truly astounding. And the correctness of a bike's original set-up can make a huge difference to its first impression at the model introductions we attend.

A rigid chassis comes next. All manner of unpredictable, treacherous behavior can come from inadequately stiff frames, forks and swingarms, although exactly how they all interact with the tires, wheels and road surface can be very difficult to pinpoint. At least it's obvious when it all works or frightening when it doesn't.

The precise geometry of the chassis is also very important and factors like wheel sizes, rake, trail, wheelbase, weight distribution and center of gravity all interact. The wrong combination can make a bike feel like it can't be trusted to initiate or hold a given line all the way through a corner. Agility with stability is the goal as far as I'm concerned. "Neutral" is a good word for linear handling.

Engine power characteristics also come into play here. Again, "linear" is a good word for power that builds consistently or tapers up and down smoothly, so that you're sure of what you'll get as you roll the throttle. Turbo-charged engines, at least the production ones that we sampled in the '80s, had the exact opposite of linear delivery and also lacked any engine braking effects off-throttle—they could be very exciting to ride—in a bad way.

Early motorcycle designers struggled with these same factors. Some bikes were brilliant and others weren't, but occasionally a great rider's skill and commitment could manage to make up for a machine's deficiencies. I don't think that's changed.

Every once in a while, slow down and consider how far we've come. Take pleasure in the history of our sport. Some truly wonderful characters have brought us to this place.

Cheers!

—Dave Searle  
Editor