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MY BROTHER DON had come south on a business trip and got in late Friday night. We hadn't been riding together since last summer and this month's rowdy Triumph Speed Triple and Buell Lightning Long test bikes promised a great day of fun and shared memories. Both bikes had just arrived, so the testing experience would be fresh for both of us.

We were up early and departed just as the day started to warm. He rode the Buell for the first hour as we made our way down the Ortega Highway to the Lookout Roadhouse overlooking Lake Elsinore. Barbara's breakfasts are great and the ride always makes them taste even better.

Debriefing at the stop, taking notes with my pocket tape recorder, he complained about the XB12Ss' handling feel. I listened, but thought he might be a bit biased, as a former Triumph owner.

As we ate, we discussed possible routes south, and decided to take the back way to Murietta through the Cleveland National Forest. Actually, the term forest is a misnomer, as the terrain is covered with scrub brush, and the road is basically a twisting jeep path over the hills with a haphazard layer of asphalt on top; tight and rough. Don and I both spent a lot of our formative riding time on dirt bikes, so we still enjoy exploring the boonies, and this was as close to a dirt road as these bikes could handle.

We switched bikes before starting off, and as I'd ridden the same stretches on the Buell Ulysses last summer, I figured the lower XB12Ss would be even easier to handle and should feel essentially the same. But it didn't. The bike had a lazy raked-out feel, like a dirt bike from the seventies. Point and shoot worked best as a cornering technique; try not to lean too much, keep it pointing straight and gas it. As for traction, the Buell had plenty, gobbling the bouncy straights in a mad torque rush, and Don was finding it hard to keep up on the unfamiliar road. As he's often faster than I am, and we're competitive anyway (show me two brothers who aren't), I couldn't help being pleased. In fact, I was impressed that the Buell could keep the more powerful Triumph at bay.

However, as the miles wore on, the sensation that something wasn't right kept getting slowly stronger. I stopped, suspecting the front tire was leaking. But no, it felt hard. So I continued to ride around the sensation, not leaning any further than necessary and taking nibbles out of the corners rather than making aggressive arcs.

As I had managed a bit of a gap on Don, I'd stop every now and then for a few seconds so we could keep each other in sight



and then blast off whenever I'd see him coming again. In other words, I wasn't letting him get close enough to get a good look at the back of the Buell.

After a while, we got to where the roads were smoother and faster, but the Buell still felt like it was on dirt. After puzzling over the sensation for another 10 or 20 miles, I told myself that it felt as if it had about 10 pounds of air in the front and maybe 15 psi in the back. I pulled over for another check. When I looked over my shoulder, it was obvious, the rear tire was very low, but the front was fine, as firm as ever.

We were nearly 20 miles from the nearest town, Fallbrook, and in a hilly area where there would certainly be no cellular service. There were no houses and no other cars and we had no way of repairing the tire...and maybe two hours of daylight left. I didn't have to think long about the alternatives. The bike was still rideable, and the leak obviously slow enough that I could probably get a lot closer to Fallbrook, at the very least, before I'd have to park it.

Off we went. I was amazed that by controlling the queasy feeling from the rear, as I had been learning to do for the last hour, I could keep up an average speed of maybe 50 mph, taking the turns very easily and making time on the straights. The tire, a fat 180/55 radial on a 5.50" rim, had such a low profile that it simply couldn't jump off the rim, as tubed tires often will. Although the beads appeared to have moved ever so slightly inward from the flanges, the tire's rigidity kept them from coming any closer together and the flattening of the tread made it a lot wider, so that it acted like a rim protector, preventing wheel damage.

I hope you understand that I'm not recommending any particular course of action should you get a flat on a rear radial, and MCN takes no responsibility for any consequences if you ever do what I did, but I think it's useful to describe. It had been so long since I'd had a flat tire on a motorcycle that I was starting to think they never happened any longer. Clearly, the weird handling, and the amazing rear traction on the rough roads had been caused by the low tire. But as good as I've become at analyzing bikes, I would have sworn the front tire was the problem, when in fact, it was the movement side to side at the back that was reducing the steering's effectiveness.

We finally did get all the way to Fallbrook by about 4 o'clock and rode straight to a tire store about a mile into town.

"Sorry, the owner doesn't believe in tire plugs," we were told. At least we got it refilled with air and could see a metallic bit in the tread, but weren't going to remove it until we had a way of patching it. At an auto parts store on the other end of town, I bought a sticky string plug kit with big T-handles on the reamer and plug insertion tools. Returning to the tire store, I pulled a little quarter-inch triangle of metal out of the tire. It looked too small to be the culprit, but the tire was fully flat 15 seconds later.

The last tubeless tire I'd repaired had been on a neighbor's car a couple of years ago. Anticipating the same sort of effort, after reaming the hole and loading up the insertion needle with the gummy sticky string, I shoved it hard into the hole, only to push it completely inside—gone! Good thing the kit came with half a dozen plugs. The next time, pushing gently, I got it right, pulled out the tool and cut off the ends flush with the tread using my Swiss army knife. It was fixed, just that fast, and held air without leaking.

The crisis was averted. A great day of riding had been punctuated (pun intended) by an unexpected adventure and we'd both learned something about being prepared.

Before Don left on Sunday, I asked him what he wanted for Christmas. He asked me to make him one of the stripped-down 12V air pumps I'd described back in Oct. 2002. That was fun, and I won't be leaving mine at home any longer either. Reprints of the project are available from our Web site: www.mcnews.com/mcn/features/Mini%2012%20Volt%20Compressor.pdf

DAVE SEARLE

—Dave Searle
Editor