

Bug-Eyed Streetfighters Face Off

Triumph's 1050cc Speed Triple Vs. Buell's 1203cc XB12Ss Lightning Long



by Dave Searle

IN THE RING this month are two swaggering bug-eyed machines from factories on both sides of the pond. Along with jokes about English accents the other finds funny, these two companies have had a very competitive relationship over the years. Both bikes are freshly minted, the Speed Triple introduced in 2005, the Lightning Long in 2006. Do we call them “naked streetfighters?” After an afternoon in the tattoo parlor, maybe, but we see them both as motorcycles in the essential tradition, machines whose comfortable riding positions make them perfect for everyday use, adaptable to commuting or sport riding and ripe for personalization.

An unfair contest? On paper it might be, the Speed Triple's three-cylinder, short-stroke, dual-overhead cam, 4-valve with sequential port fuel injection against the Buell's long-stroke, pushrod two-valve, with single throttle body fuel injection. Sure the Buell has a 10% displacement advantage, 1203 to 1050cc, but there's just no way the Buell's Sportster-based lump should be able to offer a viable alternative to the Speed Triple's performance potential. But it does—because “potential” isn't always the same thing as “usable power.”

Powertrain Details

Triumph—Slightly more powerful than the new Sprint ST's 1050cc version of the stroked 955cc triple (Speed Triple: 110.4 peak hp, Sprint ST: 106.9 at the rear wheel), the Speed Triple's motor can be regarded as the most up-to-date engine in the Triumph catalog. Equipped with Keihin's advanced double-butterfly fuel injection (one throttle controlled by the rider, the other by computer to maximize intake velocity for best response), the super-sporting Daytona's motor, although more highly tuned, is still 955cc and still uses the older Sagem EFI,

which is being replaced as each model in the Triumph line is updated.

Thankfully, unlike our recent experience with the Sprint ST (tested in Oct. '05) we had no issues with inconsistent engine performance aboard the Speed Triple—giving us awesome thrust from down low with excellent throttle response and minimal vibration across the range. And best of all is its aural presence, a bestial growling that tickles your brain and sounds even better without earplugs (which often mask unattractive clatter).

Buell—Identical to the XB12X Ulysses engine, the Sportster-based 45°, OHV, V-twin uses Delphi EFI drawing air from a single 49mm throttle body to make 81.0 hp on the dyno—a huge increase from the latest Sportster's 58 rear wheel hp. We're always impressed that the Buell motor works as well as it does, based on a design known more for style than performance.

Despite the big horsepower difference between the challengers, their peak torque is nearly identical—both brawny from low in the rpm range for potent acceleration right from the get-go. To be precise, the Buell registered a max of 68.2 lb./ft. @ 5750 while the Speed Triple made 69.5 @ 7500 rpm.

But, the engines' characters could hardly be more different. The Triumph can easily lift the front wheel under heavy acceleration from a start, yet the degree of levitation remains very controllable (the reason why Speed Triples are favored as Wheelie School trainers). Also, the triple's smaller, lighter internals, like pistons and valves, allow a much higher redline, 9300 rpm vs. the Buell's 6700, which serves to make much greater area under the power curve, extending its advantage.

The Triumph has a ferocious quality that sets your teeth on edge—like it's fueled by

Red Bull. While in the Buell's case, its heavy flywheels, necessary to smooth its narrow-angle firing order, creates a more relaxed and fluid acceleration—obvious in a drag race-type start. However, while riding on the street, even on tight and twisty roads, this same flywheel effect means that the motor can be given heavy throttle without fear of unintended wheelspin, making its acceleration more controllable and often an even match for the Speed Triple's in the same conditions. In fact, you don't have the impression that the Buell's motor is actually weaker than the Triumph's until you find a long straightaway. And, depending on the prevailing roads in your locale, that could range from rarely (on our favorite roads) to all the time (someplace like Florida). Consider that.

In terms of straight line acceleration there really is no contest. The Speed Triple posts a 10.82 quarter-mile @ 125.01 mph to the XB12Ss' 12.02 @ 110.69. Top speed in both cases is a matter of gearing, as their rev limiters prevent anything faster. The Triumph reached a maximum velocity of 143.3 mph to the Buell's 126.8, numbers that don't have any place on the street, but that do illustrate their respective muscle.

Transmissions are another point of departure. The Buell has five speeds to the Triumph's six, which allows the Speed Triple to make the most of its high-performance powerband (its hp peaks at redline). The Triumph's gearbox is flawlessly slick with a nice short throw and its clutch gives very good engagement feel. The XB12s' transmission, new in 2006 and by far the best a Buell has ever carried, is also very good, but not quite the Triumph's equal as shifting wasn't always as easy and we experienced a few missed shifts.

Some engine designs make you expect certain behaviors, but unlike what we