

sive yet. In this case, both have steering heads set at 23.5°, the Triumph using a fork offset that delivers 3.3" of trail, while the Buell angles the fork tubes even more steeply than the head angle, at just 22°, and makes 4.8" of trail—a seemingly small variation in geometry that makes a big difference.

With its three-cylinder engine rigidly mounted so that it enhances chassis stiffness, the Speed Triple gives no evidence of flex when making quick directional changes, providing a solid foundation for its aggressive geometry. The result is very neutral handling, meaning that, during cornering, it feels natural and balanced with a predictable response to lean angles. This inspires rider confidence in enthusiastic cornering while providing plenty of straight line stability—everything we could reasonably ask.

The Buell carries its throbbing V-twin engine on clever "Uniplanar" engine mounts so that it's free to thrash around in the frame without transmitting much vibration to the rider, but as a result, doesn't feel like a single piece in motion the way the Triumph does. Instead the XB12Ss' engine feels alive inside its rigid chassis, and over rough roads also gives the sense that it moves slightly in response to bumps. This curious sensation doesn't prevent spirited riding, but continually feels different. Whether you find it too distracting is personal. Some of us did, making the Triumph greatly preferable, others didn't mind at all.

Although the XB12Ss' chassis and steering geometry are identical to the Ulysses (which we really liked) and only its shorter suspension travel and lower CofG should alter its handling feel, for some reason it handled very differently. Unlike the Ulysses, the XB12Ss wanted to stand up under braking and had to be consciously countersteered mid-turn to keep it from trying to fall-in. Ridden back to back, the Ulysses felt completely neutral by comparison. Why? We originally suspected that a front tire perhaps flattened subtly by too much straight-up time might have caused the sensation, but a surprise rear puncture sent the XB12Ss back to H-D's fleet center, where it received two fresh tires. Yet the sensation remained. Whatever the reason, the XB12Ss' handling feel is very different from the Ulysses.

"Stark" naked, without fairings of any kind, the Triumph will pummel the rider with wind blast at higher freeway speeds,

but at least the handlebars are low enough to balance torso weight against wind resistance to ease pressure on the wrists. Call it a good reason to slow down or look to add some wind deflection. If the latter solution appeals, Triumph's stylish headlight cover for the Speed Triple runs \$260. On the other hand, unclothed, the bike is less susceptible to side winds and more stable in gusty conditions as a result. And its stability is one of its best charms, allowing you to carve precise arcs through long turns with delicious ease.

Instruments/Controls

Triumph—The Speed Triple has the trickiest instrument package, replete with



trip computer functions should your instantaneous gas mileage, average fuel consumption, distance traveled, journey distance, journey time, average speed or maximum speed be fascinating enough to push some buttons. In addition, the dash will display a digital clock, a bar graph of coolant temperature, two trip meters and the usual warning lights including low fuel. And for the ultimate gadget, a series of five shift lights at the right side of the tach illuminate in a 250-rpm sequence as you approach a programmable rpm limit. Pretty fancy stuff, but the one gauge we'd prefer after the speedo and tach, a fuel gauge, isn't part of the display, although a countdown-to-empty feature is provided. Also, the shift lights were more of a distraction than a useful rider aid, as the big tachometer itself was even easier to read, and just half-an-inch away. Plus, the tripmeters eventually refused to be reset, suggesting that such complexity may have a practical downside.

In terms of controls, the Triumph's extreme brake lever freeplay has already been mentioned, but its mirrors deserve another good tongue-lashing. Way too narrow to be of any use—simply terrible.

Buell XB12Ss—Essentially the same as

the Ulysses, the XB12Ss has a pair of easy-to-read analog clock faces for its speedo and tach. And, just like the Ulysses, the smoked plastic cover over the indicator lights makes them harder to read than necessary.

While the XB12Ss' mirrors are not as steady as we'd like, blurring images horizontally in resonance with engine vibration, they are placed well-enough outboard to give a good view aft, and they aren't too fuzzy to be useful.

Style/Value/Economy

As sculpture, the Triumph is the better piece in our estimation, with a greater variety of surface finishes and more visual complexity. But we do wish the company would pay more attention to the routing of hoses and cables. We've learned to live with the clutter, but it certainly has room for improvement.

The Buell's blocky shapes can seem almost deliberately plain, as if to make a counterpoint to the precious paint and plating of the Harleys on the other side of the ledger. But we do like the brightly painted wheels, and think the Triumph would look better if it had something similar.

In terms of value, the Triumph objectively wins the performance contest outright and, as it sells for \$500 less (\$9995 to \$10,495), easily prevails as the Best Buy.

But in terms of economy of ownership, the Buell provides significantly better fuel mileage and its maintenance costs should be a bit lower as well, although it's specified for 2500-mile check-ups to the Speed Triple's 6000-mile intervals.

Bottom Line

The Speed Triple is a fast and infectious fun ride that bristles with desirable high-tech parts: Aluminum chassis, single-sided swingarm, premium suspension, radial front calipers, sophisticated fuel injection and trip computer functions in its instrumentation. But, thanks to its zoomie mufflers, it has a few hard-to-fix drawbacks.

The Buell Lightning Long has an equally vivid and engaging personality and is a highly innovative machine in its own right: Fuel in its hollow alloy frame, oil in its swingarm, rim-mounted brake, under-slung active exhaust system, to name a few, although its power, handling and braking are not quite at the same level as the Triumph. But it's an apple pie, Old Glory American...choices, choices.