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CALVIN & ROB

TEAM OBSOLETE'S 30-YEAR QUEST TO POSSESS THE LAST, BEST EX-RAYBORN XR750

Team Obsolete's Rob Iannucci is not your typical flag-waving Harley-Davidson fanatic. One of the pioneers of vintage road racing in America, and still one of the sport's greatest global benefactors, he got his start racing British-built Matchless G50s. His remarkable collection—numbering nearly 80 racebikes, some the most historically significant and valuable in the world—is mostly European. There are plenty of G50s, of course, plus BSA twins and triples, AJS Porcupines and 7Rs, and enough factory Benellis and ex-Agostini MV Agustas “to grant him honorary Italian citizenship,” says his friend Stu Carter. There's even a breathtaking Honda 250 six hidden in the Brooklyn, New York, warehouse where he houses his stash. But even amongst such exclusive company,

Harley-Davidson's brutish XR750 roadracers hold a special, almost sacred, place.

“The XR750 is such a purposeful machine, built with such straightforward, pragmatic engineering,” Iannucci explains. “It's a relic from another time in America, when we were a country that turned out Liberty ships one-a-day. The guys that built and raced these bikes had a lot of heart—and a lot of smarts—and achieved some truly amazing results.”

No one embodied that against-all-odds spirit better than the late, great Calvin G. Rayborn II, regarded as perhaps the best pure road racer America has ever produced. Stories of his riding prowess are legend, and many claim that to see him ride was to see the very laws of physics upturned. “If you believe the stories—and I choose to believe them—

Rayborn had near-superhuman qualities,” Iannucci says. “He could sit on a dirt-track motorcycle, with both feet up on the pegs, and have a completely casual conversation. His innate sense of balance was that good.”

Rayborn began club racing in the early '60s, turned Pro in '65, and won his first road race in '66. Shortly afterward, Harley-Davidson race boss Dick O'Brien signed him to the factory team. Rayborn's legend was cemented in '68 when he rode the desperately outdated KR750 flathead in the Daytona 200. Not only did he win, he lapped the entire field, which included former World Champion Phil Read. He won again in '69, this time besting a field of cutting-edge Japanese two-strokes. His obsolete Harley was the only four-stroke to qualify in the top 10.



Rob Iannucci inside the Team Obsolete office/museum in Brooklyn, posing with three generations of XR750. Harley built less than 25 of these bikes—Iannucci owns a surprising number of them.

Perhaps his finest moment came in '72 when, in defiance of his employers, he and tuner Walt Faulk traveled to Britain and dominated the annual Trans-Atlantic Match Races. Riding the notoriously unreliable iron-head XR750, Rayborn won three of six races, out-riding the UK's best on tracks he had never seen before. Later that same year he won two AMA Nationals on the new-and-improved, alloy-barreled XR750. His last victory at Laguna Seca was Harley's final AMA Grand National roadrace win.

A true working man's champion, Rayborn remained fiercely loyal to O'Brien and Harley-Davidson, even as his career stats suffered. How many races and championships might he have won on more competitive machinery? It looked like that question would be answered in '74, after Rayborn made the difficult decision to leave The Motor Company. Tragically in December of '73, Rayborn was killed racing a Suzuki in New Zealand at age 33, leaving the true measure of his talent one of motorcycling's greatest unanswered questions.

Iannucci's own XR750 saga started in the late '70s, a few years after the Rayborn era. Working as Brooklyn Assistant District Attorney at the time, Iannucci was one of the country's earliest vintage racers. He'd already founded Team Obsolete, and spent his spare time building and racing Matchless G50s all along the eastern seaboard. When he heard about the AMA's new Battle of the Twins class, he decided immediately to take part, using the Harley-Davidson XR750 as the basis



This year's event at Mid-Ohio was the first time back at the track in nearly a decade for Team Obsolete. Iannucci was clearly happy to be fettling the ex-Rayborn bike.

of his team's effort.

"The XR750 was a charismatic motorcycle," Iannucci says. "It had a brief moment in the sun, and nobody else was doing it. I like swimming against the tide a little bit. The BOTT rules left lots of freedom to develop chassis and engine innovations. I thought there was an opportunity to make the XR750 competitive again."

In 1980 Iannucci visited the Harley-Davidson factory and convinced O'Brien to supply him with some ex-factory XR750 parts

to get Team Obsolete's BOTT effort off the ground. "I told 'O.B.' what my plan was," Iannucci recalls. "He looked at me through those thick, Coke-bottle glasses and said, 'Iannucci, you're either full of sh*t or crazy. Let's go upstairs and see what we've got.'"

O'Brien had so many parts that Iannucci threw his van's seats into a dumpster and loaded it up. One of the treasures he brought back to Brooklyn was an XR750 rolling chassis marked with Rayborn's name on the tail, believed to be one of the six machines

With a 54-inch wheelbase and 28-inch seat height, the XR750 is much smaller than you would expect. Look how 6-foot-tall Cal Rayborn III had to fold his legs to fit.



Cal had raced during his time with Harley-Davidson. Iannucci's research indicated this was the bike Rayborn had raced in the U.S. during '73, but because the Harley-Davidson factory never kept detailed records, that remained unconfirmed.

Iannucci appreciated the special value of an ex-Rayborn bike even if the factory didn't, but that wasn't going to stop him from racing the machine. "Ride 'em, don't hide 'em" has always been his ethos, and even today he employs a full-time staff to maintain his bikes—most of which are unrestored in as-raced condition—in running order. Iannucci spent much of the '90s and into the early 2000s shipping his valuable bikes around the world to compete in various vintage races,

as many original, ex-Rayborn parts as possible, without provenance that particular bike could never be called anything more than an extremely correct replica. At the same time, one very special XR750 that was unquestionably an ex-Rayborn bike remained safely tucked away. This was Rayborn's so-called "best bike," the final-edition XR750 he rode during his last races for the Harley-Davidson team in '73. That bike was secreted away in the factory archives after Rayborn's untimely death and not uncovered until it was pre-

"Cal III rode his father's best bike like a true Rayborn, running it deep into all five gears and blistering the fresh Avons to their edges."

often with legends like Giacomo Agostini and Jim Redman at the controls.

Some of Iannucci's most memorable vintage exhibitions featured that same ex-Rayborn XR750. Rayborn's second son, Cal Rayborn III—a very fast ex-Pro roadracer—was the rider, lending a special symmetry to these appearances. The duo raced the bike at the Dutch TT Classic (where Cal III set the fastest lap) and Brands Hatch in '99, and again at Daytona and Seattle in Y2K. Cal III set a vintage-bike lap record at the latter en route to winning three of four races.

Though assembled with great care using

sent to Dick O'Brien as a retirement gift on October 31, 1983.

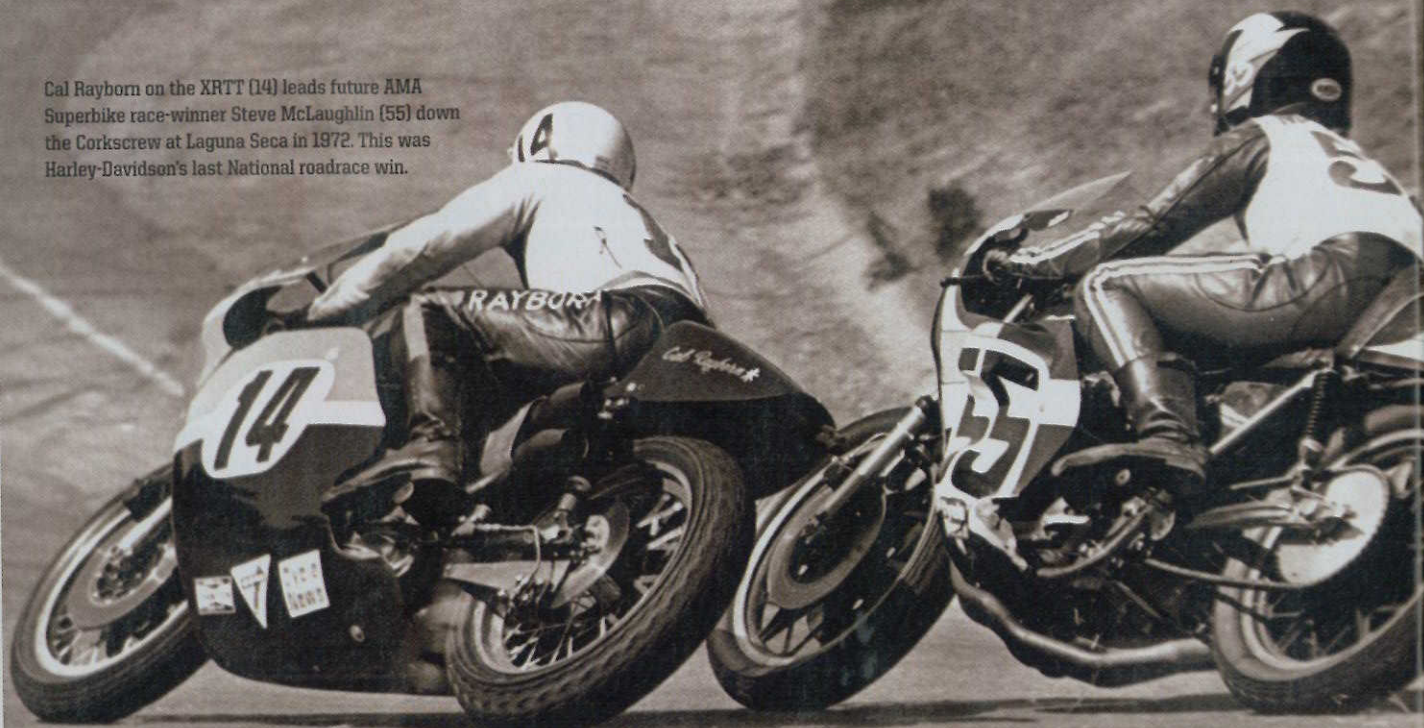
Ownership of this machine eventually transferred to O'Brien's daughter, Patty, who offered it for sale at a J. Wood & Company Auction in '06, three years after Dick's death. Iannucci was there and bidding, though he withdrew when the price reached \$150,000. A phone bidder from Australia had relentlessly raised his every bid by \$5K, and showed no sign of letting up. Iannucci almost immediately regretted that decision to stop. "I feel like I had a stronger bond with that bike than just about anyone else, outside of

maybe some factory Harley race-department guys," he says. "With all of my contact at Harley, and my experience racing XR750s, and my admiration for Calvin, I just felt that bike needed to be in my collection."

When the bike reappeared in January '09 at a MidAmerica Vintage Motorcycle Auction in Las Vegas, Iannucci didn't let it get away. That's the bike seen in these photographs—the final evolution of the XR750 platform that was built specifically for Rayborn, incorporating changes exclusive to this bike including a trick duplex cradle frame modified with adjustable swingarm-pivot height and a five-speed gearbox replacing the standard four-speed. The Morris mag wheels and Honda CB750 disc brakes are original, as is the smaller "Sprint" bodywork, still finished in the original Jet Fire Orange and Black paint with Rayborn's original #14 and decals intact.

Once it was in his hands, Iannucci immediately set to work making the bike ready to ride. He started by sending a known Rayborn motor—a correct alloy-head XR750 identified by its serial numbers as one built for Rayborn for the '73 Match Races—to XR750 tuning guru Carl Patrick to be freshened up. The chassis was refreshed too, with minor updates for safety, including new Works Performance shocks and Avon race-compounded tires. The rest of the bike remains untouched,

Cal Rayborn on the XRTT (#14) leads future AMA Superbike race-winner Steve McLaughlin (55) down the Corkscrew at Laguna Seca in 1972. This was Harley-Davidson's last National roadrace win.



“The guys that built and raced the XRTT had a lot of heart—and a lot of smarts—and achieved some truly amazing results.”—Rob Iannucci

giving it an incredibly authentic, impossible-to-reproduce patina. “As far as I’m concerned, this has the most convincing pedigree,” Iannucci says. “The chassis that was most likely ridden by Calvin in England, with what is certainly that motor, and from the collection of Dick O’Brien—the Rayborn tree and the O’Brien tree come together with this bike.”

The only thing left, of course, was to return the bike to its natural habitat: the racetrack. Iannucci set his sights on the AMA Racing Vintage Grand Championships at Mid-Ohio this past July, part of the larger AMA Vintage Motorcycle Days festivities. In typical Team Obsolete style—Iannucci doesn’t do anything partway—he created a spectacle, inviting Pieter Zylstra, the Dutch-born Harley-Davidson designer who created the alloy XR750, as well as Cal Rayborn III, who would ride the bike.

The “reveal” of the refreshed ex-Rayborn bike, not seen by the public eye in more than 35 years, couldn’t have been more spectacular. A crowd constantly surrounded Garage #20, where Iannucci displayed the machine alongside an original set of Rayborn’s leathers and other memorabilia. The Patrick-prepped motor was perfectly tuned, and whenever Team Obsolete technicians Kerry Pierno and Leon Stanley warmed up the bike with a 5-minute symphony of deep, full-throated revs, spectators literally came running.

Though the XRTT wasn’t entered in any races, it’s unfair to dismiss Cal III’s exhibition runs as mere parade laps. He rode his father’s best bike like a true Rayborn, running it deep into all five gears, blistering the fresh Avons to their edges and dragging the unprotected kneecaps of the replica leathers Bates made special for this event. The crowd hooted in appreciation, but no one was more honored—or humbled—than Cal III himself.

“Amazing. Just plain amazing,” he said following his first session. “Riding the other XRTT 10 years ago was neat, and it gave me a lot of respect for my dad, once I realized how hard it was to ride these bikes. But this one is different. It’s got so much history to it. They didn’t even touch the paint since he rode it! You can really feel the spirit, the connection, to my dad.”

After the Mid-Ohio event, the XRTT was unceremoniously loaded into Iannucci’s well-worn Dodge Maxi-van and returned to Team Obsolete’s Brooklyn warehouse warren. When will we see it next? “Maybe never,” Iannucci says. “I don’t know if, or where, I’ll have it out again.” For reasons too political to explain here, Iannucci no longer plays with the American Historic Racing Motorcycle Association (AHRMA)—a series he helped found—which limits opportunities to race his bikes stateside. Besides, he has many more less valuable XRTTs in his collection that he would be more willing to risk racing.



Dressed in a replica set of his father’s Bates leathers, Cal Rayborn III rode #14 with proper vigor, delighting the Vintage Motorcycle Days crowd. He now repairs bikes in Rupert, Idaho.

But for those who were there to see Cal Rayborn III circulating the park-like Mid-Ohio racetrack, and who heard the finest Harley-Davidson XRTT ever made bellowing through Thunder Valley, it was an unforgettable moment—the next-best thing to seeing Cal Rayborn II himself in action back in the day. Even if it never happens again, Rob Iannucci deserves thanks for bringing this essential American racebike back out into the light.