

Rob Iannucci

Restoring relic race bikes into collector's items isn't the name of his game. Trying to make them work and win in an age of newborn sophistication is.

Iannucci pondered over the Matchless G50 that brought him into the world of vintage bikes. Behind is Dick Mann's BSA triple and street equipped Matchless.

By Tom Mueller

Photos by John Patrick Clarke and Mueller

It was time to head for New York City. There I would find Rob Iannucci, Assistant District Attorney of New York and collector of road race bikes. It didn't take long to realize my preconceived notions were quite a bit off.

Instead of the three piece suit legal-looking type, I came face to face with a man in jeans and a casual shirt who led me to a '67 Corvette. His son, Dino, climbed in back and we were on our fast-paced way to Brooklyn.

We put the car in an underground parking facility and began the three block walk to Iannucci's three room apartment. Inside his wife, father-in-law and sister-in-law were taking it easy hiding from the heat. After introductions we had time for a glass of tea and a talk. Iannucci was no longer an Assistant DA. "I found it too restricting," said Iannucci. "Always a suit and tie. Now this is my outfit--dungarees."

A tight schedule didn't fit into Iannucci's plans, as he attends many races as the head of Team Obsolete, an effort that utilizes an ex-Scott Brelford factory Harley-Davidson and rider Dave Roper. After three and a half years in the DA's office, Iannucci started his present consultation service which gives him the long weekends he wanted. Finances were also involved in the decision. "It's no fun to live within your means. If you spend more you find a way to make more. I did."

For Iannucci, making more involved some real estate deals along with his now just blooming business of motorcycle law. Iannucci is sick of people being treated like second rate citizens because they exercise their right to ride motorcycles, and decided to do something about it. In one case he mentioned, a cyclist was offered \$5,000 from his insurance company

Though quite late, once Iannucci got back to the apartment he followed up a lead concerning a Harley road race fairing. Then he phoned Dave Roper and asked how he was doing. Roper crashed the Team Obsolete Harley at a club race and fractured his ankle.

"I'm a one line person," Iannucci explained when asked about the late night calls. "I'm very tenacious. Right now, there's probably only a few people in the world who know more about Harley road racers than me."

Those who know Iannucci would have a hard time disputing that statement. In his living room stands a file cabinet full of road race nostalgia, all neatly sorted so that info is easily accessible.

Iannucci started his collection of road race bikes and information in 1970 shortly after returning from Jamaica. He found himself looking through a friend's collection of *Cycle World* magazine in bound volumes, a collection he now owns. In the April 1962 issue he spotted a Matchless G50 CSR Golden Eagle with an overhead cam 500cc four-stroke racing engine.

"It was the most beautiful model ever built; it was a 121 mile-per hour bike."

The Matchless intrigued Iannucci, but when he started to ask around about the bike no one had heard of it. It took a couple of years, but he finally found someone who had seen one of the Matchless models. Law school then put Iannucci's search for the bike to rest--at least for a bit.

Then in 1974 a Matchless was located in Beowawe, Nevada, on a 50,000 acre horse ranch. The bike had been a gift to a millionaire's son, but after riding it once and crashing he packed it away. Iannucci tried to work out a deal and have it shipped, but the millionaire's wife, a brazen woman, would have no part of it. Iannucci set out to Nevada to get the bike.

"She didn't want to give it to me. It was a scene out of *The Big Valley* (television show). I had to wait two hours to see her. Then I was led into a room with a throne and a woman

in a sequined jump suit sitting in it.

"We stared at each other for a long time. Then she blinked and I smiled. Then she told me I had one hour to get off her land with the bike. I'm sure to this day if I would have blinked she would have thrown me off the ranch without the bike. I've been in love with racing motorcycles ever since."

Heads were nodding. It was time to sleep tonight, talk more tomorrow.

Dino awoke me and we headed for a local grocery store for some lox and bagels for breakfast. Iannucci's family congregated around the table for the meal. Before eating Iannucci and Dino engaged in some of their usual horseplay. The favorite line between the two is when Iannucci asks, "What time is it Dino?" Dino replies, "It's child abuse time!" at which point Iannucci and Dino romp around in a cat-chase-mouse type of game.

During breakfast Iannucci got back on the subject of bikes. After starting to pursue the collection of racers, he realized that to enjoy the machines he had to go to the track. He had come back from Jamaica with a European riding style, and found he could beat most of his friends when play-racing. It was then he became involved with some club racing, and also started with meticulous maintenance schedules for his race bikes.

"You have to do it today like they did it--or should have done it--20 years ago. Roper needs to be a bit more analytical but he's learning quickly. I have him taking notes now."

Iannucci's ties with Jamaica have not been completely broken. He took time to make a phone call and tried to set up a shipment of engine parts to Jamaica for a fishing boat his wife's brother operates there. After the call noon was approaching and Iannucci wished to take a ride and check out some of the places and people that aid him with his projects.

The first stop was at Albert "Frenchy" Arnaud's house. Frenchy has been Iannucci's fabricator, at least until now. He has decided to put all of his efforts into a stunt plane he has been working on for over 15 years,

6000 work hours. "If I only fly once before I croak, I'll be OK," said Frenchy. "I got inspired by a guy who was 73 and started one of these things, and I figured I can finish mine in two years."

The plane alone was worth the trip, every piece on it hand-crafted and fitted. Frenchy has patience, there's no doubt of that. His talents don't end with airplanes, and Frenchy has the evidence to prove it. Under a cloth in the back room we found a 1966 BSA 650cc Lightning. Frenchy put four years work into the bike and dropped it from the original 406 pounds stock to 302 pounds. "I wanted to get the bike under 300, but it would have taken me another two years to take another four pounds off."

"One show I took this bike to no one even looked at it until a guy noticed the bars (Frenchy had machined the clutch and brake levers onto the bars and then re-chromed them--no joints were noticeable). I always got first prize in engineering."

Before leaving Iannucci made a last attempt to talk Frenchy into continuing to work with him. Frenchy declined, again stating all his work would be devoted to the stunt plane.

"Just think what would happen if Frenchy shaved 15 pounds off the Harley," Iannucci said as we left.

We were off to the next stop, which was a hot dog stand. "These are some of the best hot dogs you can get!" Iannucci said as he pulled the Corvette off the road. We each gulped down a couple of the juicy beauties and moved on to Golden Cycle in New Jersey, one of the main backers of Team Obsolete.

Al Golden, owner of Golden Cycle, and Iannucci have been friends for a number of years. "Golden and I have a close personal and business relationship. When I got out of law school I didn't have any money and Golden arranged some financial deals for me." Golden used to be an avid road racer a decade ago, and now along with Brooklyn Harley-Davidson and Harley-Davidson of Nassau County supports Iannucci's Harley racing project.

The first thing one notices when walking into Golden Cycle is the ex-Mike Kidd 1971 Triumph Trident road racer, the last bike Triumph built for their road race program. The bike was one of about 20 Iannucci now owns and has dispersed around the New York area.

While looking over the Trident, Iannucci seemed to be pulled into the past. He seemed bitter about the demise of Triumph's road racing program, and the racing programs of other companies that fell behind the technology of modern times.

"They (Yamaha) said we're offering this bike to the public and you're going to have to accept it," said Iannucci concerning the introduction of TZ racers.

"Formula 750 became Formula Yamaha," Iannucci continued.

We went to the back of the building and found Iannucci's small but workable shop. In it sat the crashed Harley from Roper's mishap. "I race restored bikes, I don't cherry them out," Iannucci said as we looked over the scraped up XR750. "Sometimes it helps not to think of the bike as a classic--just to make them work right."

Making classics "work right" seems to have attracted the help of other notables. Two-time Grand National Champion Dick Mann and Iannucci have been attending races together. Iannucci is now planning to finance a cost-no-object run of 500cc special road racers put together by Mann. The select few to be built should be available not too far in the future. Iannucci claims the bikes will weigh 250 pounds and do 130 mph using a Yamaha 500 motor.

Mann and Iannucci got to know each other through mutual interest in the G50 Matchless. "I like being with Dick because I really learn a lot. He's a brilliant man. In my opinion he'd still be riding now if the (BSA) factory hadn't retired from racing."

Mert Lawwill has also lent a helping hand by sending Iannucci some Moto-X Fox Shox for Team Obsolete. Bill Werner, tuner for Jay Springsteen has also given Iannucci "constant encouragement and technical advice." Harley dyno man Ron Alexander has also been a key in keeping Team Obsolete functioning. Jim Halbert, John Wiman and John Clark are also affiliated with the effort.

We went next door for an iced tea for Iannucci and a beer for me. During the next hour Iannucci got philosophical in nature. "Road racing can only go up--it isn't up there now. The dirt trackers have given up on it, though."

What will it take to get road racing up to par? Iannucci thinks a Formula 2 class might help. It would include water-cooled 2-stroke 250cc bikes, air-cooled 2-stroke 400cc's, 4-stroke multi-cylinder bikes with a maximum of 500cc's, 4-stroke push rod 750cc twins and triples and 650cc overhead cam bikes.

"Maybe the AMA should open it up even more and have another class (after Formula 2). There ought to be more outlets than just being able to choose a 250 or 750. WERA (Western Eastern Roadracers Association) has done more for road racing in this area than any other organization in recent years."

Iannucci is the head organizer of the Vintage class in AAMRR (American Association of Motorcycle Road Racers) events, but though he is trying to offer an option to others who might share his interests, the response has been less than encouraging. "Lots of these guys won't even bring them (vintage bikes) out and ride them around slow. They're stocked away in a garage forever. Those bikes are a part of our racing history."

Iannucci wants to cling to the bikes of the past and what they offered. He wishes more people would share his enthusiasm. "I feel like I'm being left behind. There's not many others lamenting the disappearance of the 400 pound motorcycle."

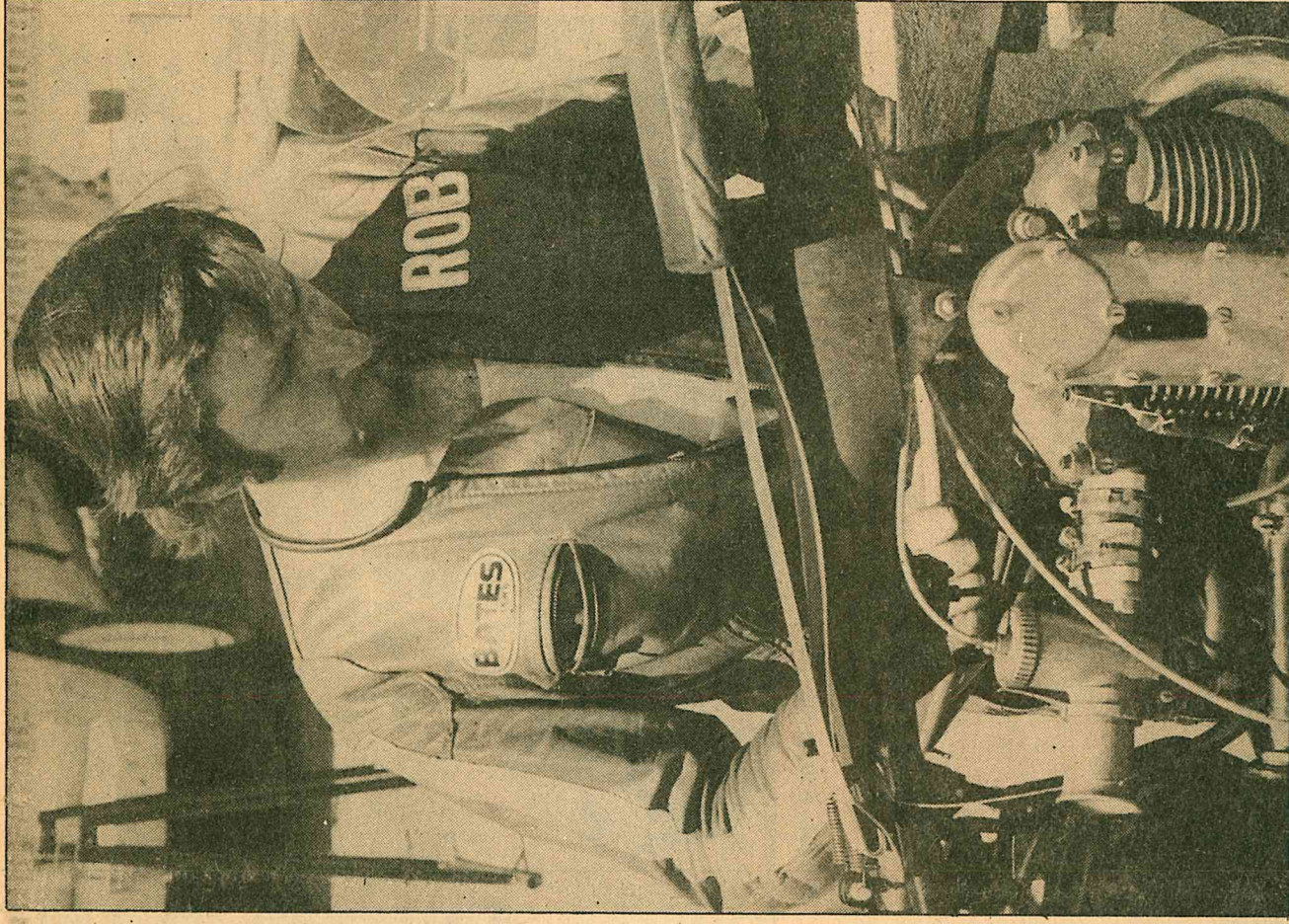
Iannucci assimilates road bikes of today with muscle cars of a few years ago. "Bigger is better. Now motorcycles are obscene. They're big, heavy, and the only thing they do is go fast in a straight line. If a bike weighs over 400 pounds it's not interesting."

"The people buying motorcycles are in many cases profilers--today a bike, tomorrow a hang-glider, and then on to a skateboard. That's not the market a manufacturer should want. But performance oriented people--they'll come back for more."

Iannucci told of a Harley XR road bike prototype, a bike that never made it to full production. In his opinion, a bike such as that is the direction Harley should have taken. "If a guy is into performance, Harley has nothing to offer him."

Iannucci's plans for next season are sketchy. He spoke of building a 1,025cc engine for his Harley that would give the bike 115 horsepower, yet the weight would be held to 305 pounds. An alternative plan is to engage the Triumph triple as his main bike.

Whatever happens, Rob Iannucci will be at the races fighting today's machinery with what was once state-of-the-art equipment. Listen for the rumble amidst the high-pitched screams of the TZs the next time you're at the races--it'll probably be one of Iannucci's riders coming around.



(Top) Iannucci has had his days at the track and devised meticulous maintenance schedules for his vintage cycles. (Middle) Iannucci and son Dino checked on Frenchy Arnaud's hand-crafted stunt plane. Arnaud has done fabrication work for Iannucci's Team Obsolete. (Bottom) Dave Roper in action on the Team Obsolete Harley.

