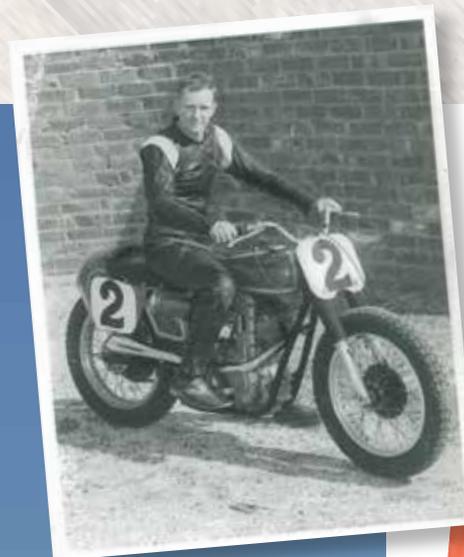


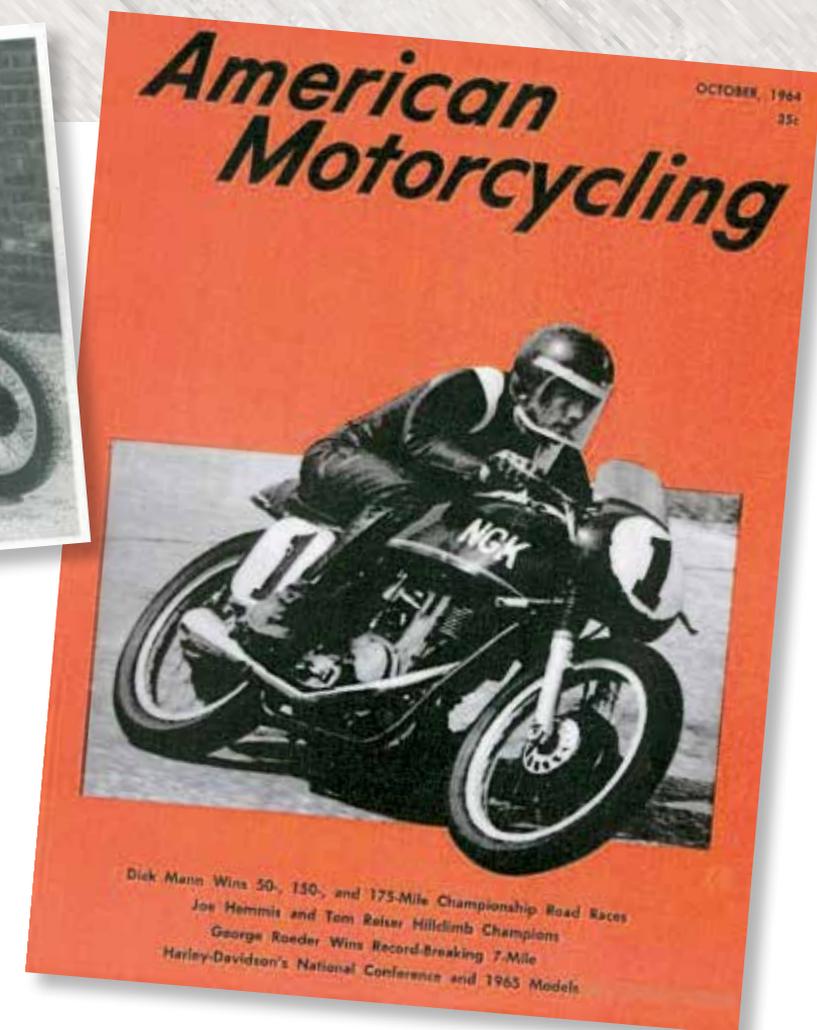
# MANN'S MACHINE

Reviving the Matchless G50 Dick Mann Rode to his first AMA championship

WORDS: Aaron Frank / PHOTOS: Ray Bradlau



Right: Dick Mann at speed aboard this very bike on the cover of the AMA magazine in October, 1964, the year after he won his first Grand National Championship. Above: Mann on the Matchless TT bike he also raced that same season.



The story of this Matchless G50 road racer—the very same bike Dick Mann rode to the 1963 AMA Grand National Championship—isn't your average “barn find” tale. Each of the 80-odd racebikes in Team Obsolete’s breathtaking collection—the ex-Cal Rayborn Harley-Davidson XRTTs, the ex-Agostini MV Agustas, the ex-Jim Redman Honda six, a near-priceless AJS Porcupine—have remarkable origin stories, and this one is no exception.

The most impressive aspect of the Team Obsolete fleet is its authenticity. This isn't another auction-assembled checkbook collection. Team Obsolete's Rob Iannucci has been racing vintage motorcycles since before they were even vintage, and he has owned a great many of his bikes, especially the Matchless singles that were his first two-wheeled love, since the early '70s when they were considered little more than worthless scrap.

That was the status of this particular bike when Iannucci found it buried underneath a pile of used exhaust pipes behind a muffler shop in Bakersfield, California. After Mann retired from racing in the early '70s, he sold much of his used equipment to famed Brit-bike tuner Al Gunter in Los Angeles. Gunter ultimately sold the Matchless G50 parts to a District 37 desert racer named Bill Keen, who owned Bakersfield Mufflers.

“By the time I got to Keen’s shop in 1976,” Iannucci remembers, “the Matchless stuff was scattered all over the place. Stacks of con-rods, heads, rings, pistons, all the parts were literally buried under a mountain of old mufflers. I probably moved a ton of rusted metal to extract a complete roadrace chassis, dirt-track wheels, gearboxes with different ratios, and two original Dick Mann G50 CSR magnesium-case motors. I think I paid \$3K for all the Mann stuff. It was quite a lot for the time, especially for a penniless Assistant DA still paying off law school bills, but even then I recognized this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

That this story starts at a dusty Bakersfield muffler shop is wholly appropriate considering that Mann—two-time AMA Grand National champion, first-ever “Grand Slam” winner (a national mile, half-mile, shorttrack, TT, and roadrace all in the same year, 1971), and widely considered the best all-around racer ever—was the archetypal workingman’s racer. Although he had countless factory rides with Honda, BSA, and others, even when he raced



“Even when he raced under a factory flag Mann maintained his fierce independence. He figured out how to do well, and he liked doing things his own way.”

in the mid-’60s—wasn’t without peril. The year Mann won his championship, 1963, was an especially low point. The Matchless distributorship was transferred that year from the Indian Sales Corporation to Berliner, leaving Mann without a strong advocate to support his racing activity. Support was so poor from Berliner, in fact, that Mann painted his Matchless fuel tank black in protest and began entering it in races as an NGK motorcycle, with sponsorship from NGK spark-plug distributor Hap Jones.

This situation was further complicated by Mann’s prickly relationship with Rod Coates, then head of the AMA’s technical competition committee. “At that time, the BSA/Triumph guys thought whatever Harley didn’t win, they were entitled to,” Iannucci says. “Coates was a Triumph guy, so there was a conflict of interest. He was always trying to get Dick out of a race.” At Coates’ urging, the AMA banned the Matchless roadrace chassis for the 1963 season by retroactively undoing the approval process from 1962. As a result (and despite threatening the AMA with a court injunction) Mann wasn’t allowed to race Daytona in 1963, making his Grand National Championship that year, by a single point over George Roeder, all the more remarkable.

It was roughly 10 years later when Iannucci began his own odyssey with the Matchless marque, and he made it his personal mission to acquire all the Matchless bikes and parts he could find. “I’d been chasing this stuff for years and not finding much,” Iannucci remembers. “This was a scarce bike. Back in those days it was difficult to find somebody who had even seen a Matchless G50.” Matchless imported just 25 CSRs [a hastily constructed streetbike combining the SOHC G50 racing motor in a G80CS scrambler chassis] to the United States in 1962 for homologation purposes.



**Vintage racing legend Dave Roper, who led the restoration of this magnificent machine, had the honor of riding the bike for the first time in nearly 50 years at New Jersey last fall.**

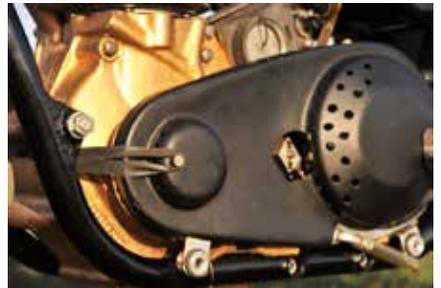
under a factory flag he maintained his fierce independence. Some have characterized Mann as mercenary, but Iannucci is kinder, calling him a “pragmatist” instead. He never thought of himself as a particularly good rider, Iannucci says. He was just a rider who figured out how to do well using strategy and logic. And he liked doing things his own way.

Mann’s DIY ethos was forged earlier in his career with this very bike, which he built and tuned himself. Mann began, like so many others, as a BSA Gold Star guy, but better handling and a more reliable engine soon swayed his allegiance to Matchless, Iannucci says. Mann liked the G50s because they were easy to work on and they finished races, which wasn’t always the case with the Beezas. This was especially true on dirt tracks where brakes weren’t allowed, so

you had to run the engine at very high rpm to make the most of available engine-braking. A better bottom end and overhead cam made the G50 more reliable, especially compared to the Triumphs and BSAs of the day.

Mann raced G50s exclusively from 1962 to ’64, winning eight individual AMA nationals and the 1963 championship on Matchless. The first time he raced a G50 he lapped the field at Laconia—a feat that landed him on the cover of *Cycle World* magazine—and he almost won the Daytona 200 until a pit-stop mistake knocked a fuel line off and cost him valuable time. Mann won races in every form of competition on G50s.

Mann’s allegiance to the Matchless brand—which, like other Associated Motor Cycles (AMC) brands, including AJS and Norton, was stumbling toward insolvency



**This bike is fit with countless one-off pieces built by Mann himself, like this custom fiberglass primary cover that was created to comply with another of the ad-hoc AMA rulings Mann was often subjected to.**

Most were broken up for the engines, Iannucci says, and the rest were cannibalized for parts after Matchless shut its racing department that year.

"I was totally in love with the G50 motor, and I had some CSR stuff at home, some streetbike stuff, but not any G50 roadrace stuff, so this was really exciting to me," Iannucci says. "When Bill Keen's treasure trove came along, it was like God smiled on me."

Iannucci bought everything G50 Keen had, including a complete bike, another rolling chassis, three motors, and dozens of special parts, including the 6-gallon "Daytona" tank with NGK logos painted on. In addition to the pile from Keen's muffler shop, Iannucci also bought a parts cache straight from Mann, including the set of roadrace wheels currently on the bike, some Mann-made upper triple clamps that allowed him to easily alter the steering geometry and other one-of-a-kind, non-standard pieces.

Iannucci later contracted Mann, who he describes as "very humble and just incredibly clever, a classic American rugged individualist who did things his own way," in the 1980s as a rider and advisor, during which time Mann rebuilt another of his old G50s, a high-pipe TT bike, for the Team Obsolete collection (using a G50 frame sourced from Canada). The TT bike came together easily; this roadracer was a different story. "The NGK bike was mostly complete but in a million pieces," Iannucci remembers, "so it sat for a very long time."

Iannucci and Team Obsolete lead mechanic Dave Roper—another G50 expert—finally launched the restoration in the early

2000s, painstakingly returning the bike to 1964 specs, the last time Mann raced it. The oil tank still has factory-stove enamel on it, Iannucci says, and the infamous NGK tank is original too. It's even got the one-off fiberglass primary cover that Mann made himself, to keep oil spray from the chain oiler off his feet. There's almost nothing on the bike that's not genuine back to Mann, Iannucci says, right down to the custom internal gearbox ratios that Mann painstakingly developed over many years of racing.

Team Obsolete put the bike back together with maximum respect for the way that Mann would have done it. "He approached a motorcycle like a Native American might a buffalo—use every piece until it was entirely used up," Iannucci says. "His equipment had a look to it. It wasn't pretty. It was workman-like. Totally pragmatic. We wanted to maintain that. We

didn't over-restore this bike. I did repaint the frame—there was almost no paint left on that—but we weren't re-chroming exhaust pipes or anything like that."

Although the restoration was finished some seven years ago, the bike wasn't actually rolled out of Team Obsolete's Brooklyn shop and started until last September, when it was bumped off and run for the first time since the mid-'60s, at a US CRA event at New Jersey Motorsports Park. Roper rode the bike, making a handful of exhibition laps, and no one was more pleased to see the bike back out on track than Iannucci was.

"Just to hear it run, after so many years of staring at it in my shop, was a very special moment," Iannucci says.

*Rob Iannucci and Dave Roper wish to extend special thanks to Dick Mann for his great contributions to the sport of historic racing.*

**Just days before this article went to press, Team Obsolete owner Rob Iannucci acquired the other ex-Dick Mann G50 roadracer (shown here), a bike he had been chasing for nearly four decades. Now Iannucci owns both of Mann's Matchless roadracers and the TT bike, too.**

