

Event Report: 25-26 February 2012

BEARS racing, New Zealand

A year after an earthquake destroyed the centre of Christchurch, the BEARS Sound of Thunder series roared back at its local birthplace, Ruapuna Raceway



Noel Jackson, 1972 Harley-Davidson Sportster

The consensus among the Milwaukee Iron class was Noel's Sportster looks better than anything coming out of H-D's factory today. Built up from an insurance write-off, the iron-engined Sporty showcases Noel's engineering ability and attention to detail. He fitted the useable parts from the 1972 wreck to a 1979 XR frame. Noel made all the major chassis parts himself, including the tank, seat and flat-track megaphone pipes. The 883cc engine has flat-track mods, including oil pickup, lightened components and Andrews cams.



Capp Sykes, Rennie Sykes, Jim Sykes, round-case Ducati 871cc, 1985 Ducati F1 750

BEARS racing started way back in 1983 and all three Sykes brothers were involved. Capp and Rennie were on Nortons and Jim was the inaugural club president. Capp and Rennie eventually moved on to Ducatis. Capp's roundcase 750 was converted from valve-spring operation to desmo. Rennie's F1 was built up from a crashed US import. The engine is largely standard but the frame's steering geometry has been made steeper and it runs 888 superbike wheels and brakes.



Russell Bleach, Trimacchi 500

Having built several Aermacchis, Russell thought he could make a lightweight, compact version of Triumph's Daytona racer. He shoehorned a 1970 Daytona 500cc engine into his homemade, nickel-plated replica of Aermacchi's GP frame. This involved tilting the engine, moving the crankcase oil pickup forward and modifying the feed to the rocker boxes. The engine drops out for easy maintenance. Front forks are modified Yamaha with Suzuki kettle brakes. The petrol tank sits under a glassfibre cover moulded from a Ducati 250 tank. Russell was on the podium in the Best of British 0-750cc class.





Robert Stuart, Norton Commando 750 Special

Typical of many BEARS racers, Robert's Norton is a bit Burt Munro and a lot modern technology. Robert turned up the one-piece crankshaft from a locomotive shaft and got his own heavy-duty crankcases cast locally. The modern technology includes a crank-mounted Pazon ignition system with an 8000rpm rev limiter and a TT Industries gearbox that gives him six speeds to play with. His own, shorter, lower version of a Commando frame, Suzuki RG250 front forks, Honda 400 wheels and Ducati brakes complete the package. Built back in the mid-1990s, Robert has raced the Norton to many wins on both street and closed circuits.



Steve Bridge, TT Ducati 1000

TT-framed two-valve Ducatis have been the backbone of BEARS racing since the mid-1980s. Steve Bridge shows how the idea can be brought up to date without breaking the bank. Using a NZ-built version of the 1980s 750 F1 frame, Steve has fitted a standard 2006 DS1000 engine. It runs flat-slide carbs instead of fuel injection. Wheels are Marvics off a late-1980s 851 Superbike and the forks are from a late-1990s 998 model. This specification and Steve's experience as a semi-professional racer made him a winner or frontrunner in the Superstock Open, Formula One and Moto Euro classes.



Bernard Ryan, 1977 Moto Guzzi Mk I Le Mans 850

Many BEARS competitors with high-spec race bikes must grit their teeth every time Bernard blasts past on his tatty old Guzzi. He always runs near the front of the field in Superstock Open, Moto Euro and the Heritage classes. BEARS racing has always welcomed converted road bikes and Bernard loves the Guzzi he's owned for 25 years. "You could say I burst on to the scene in the Wellington street race when I exploded through the haybales in my first meeting," he says. The battle-scarred Le Mans has Megacycle cams, big carbs and a straight-cut, close-ratio gearbox.



Ashton and Neville Hughes, TT Pantah 500

Father and son fought tooth and nail all weekend in the Formula Two class. Neville was on his TT Pantah and Ashton on his KTM 300 motard. "Ashton did race my Ducati once but fell off it and that was one crash too many for me," joked Neville. He bought the Pantah in 1988. It had been built up using a local frame and raced since 1985. Like a lot of BEARS racers, the bike's scruffy appearance hides a lot of modifications. "Hours of work flowing the head gives me a lot more than the standard 10,000rpm, but the bike is still torquey," says Neville.



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The BEARS Sound of Thunder annual meeting is held at Ruapuna's Grand Prix-length circuit, on the outskirts of Christchurch. Its major classes attract grids of more than 40 riders, most on machines they have built themselves. It has always been a hotbed of innovation that spanned a world series in the mid-1990s. The ultimate BEARS racer, the Christchurch-designed and built Britten, put the South Island's largest city on the world motorcycling map in the 1990s. Last year's deadly earthquake, which killed 185 people, caused the meeting to be cancelled. Experts predict the city's reconstruction will take decades. The BEARS Motorcycle Club continues to encourage participation, even renting racebikes to competitors. Visit www.bearsracingnz.com for dates and information.

Words and photography: Hamish Cooper