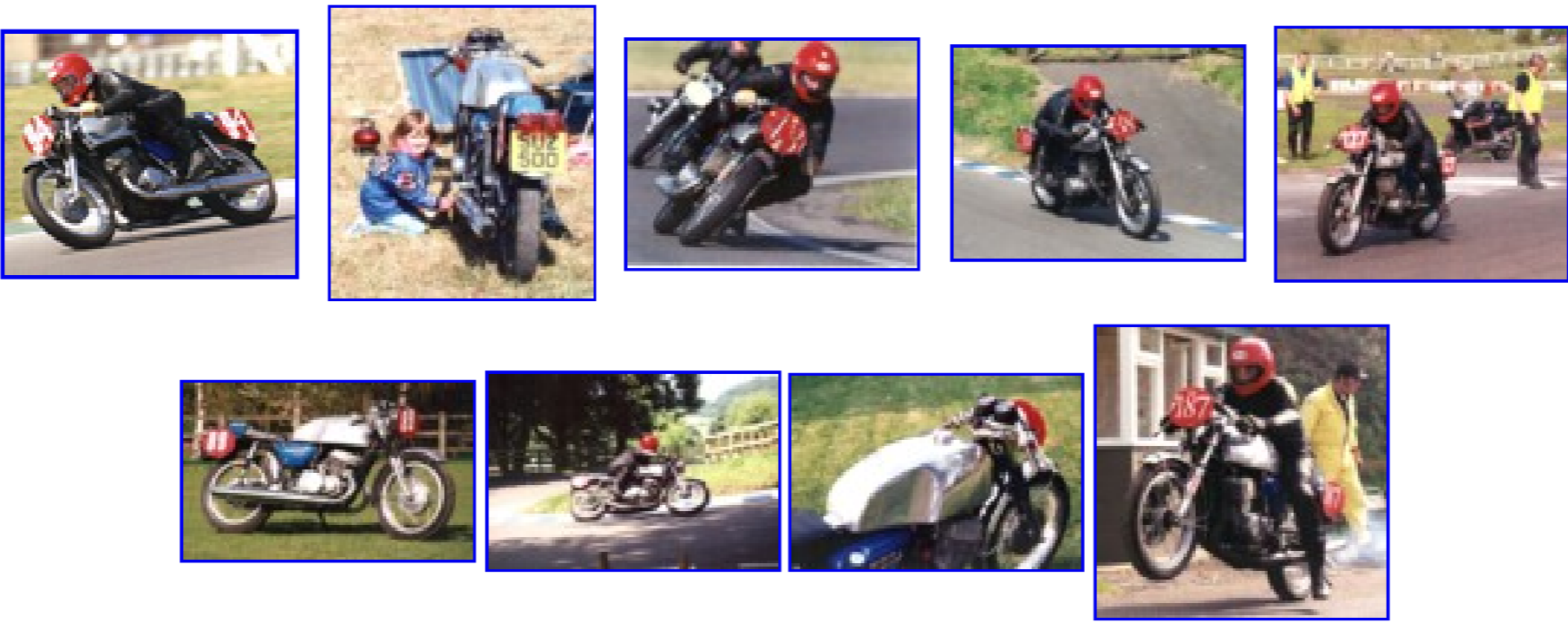


Frank Melling's Suzuki 500



Suzuki T500 Crooks-Suzuki - Better Than Viagra

You find funny things in lofts. There's the valentine card which you kept from the girl you nearly married - but didn't. The only school report that didn't describe you as uninterested in academic work and a daydreamer. And a five and a quarter gallon alloy petrol tank from a works Suzuki. In this case, it wasn't my loft I was exploring but the cavernous expanses which range above the Crooks-Suzuki emporium in Barrow-in-Furness. I was up there looking for a quick action alloy throttle drum from a 1976 RM motocrosser which, to give you the winning edge the next time you are playing "Classic Bike Trivial Pursuits", work wonderfully well with Amal carburettors, when I literally fell across the tank.

In the normal run of things, finding an alloy tank in Martin's loft would not have been any big issue because it is simply jam packed with exotica but this tank was different. This tank brought back a flood of memories. This tank, or more accurately its sister, paid for the first holiday I had with a GIRL and began a 30 year old relationship with Crooks-Suzuki.

This is the story. Let's go back to 1967 and look at two rising stars. One was the Suzuki factory. Now established as a leading manufacturer of lightweights, the Hammatsu team had dominated 50cc and 125cc World Championships for five years winning dozens of Grands Prix and a string of world championships. Having achieved everything they set out to do, the factory withdrew from racing in 1967 and concentrated on the next major step forward in the company's development - the launch of their all new 492cc T500/5 twin. The reason that the T500 was so important was that big bikes were, and are, far more profitable than tiddlers. The other celestial body in ascendancy was Eddie Crooks - one of the most enthusiastic, not to say talented, riders, ever to walk this planet. Eddie had won the Manx Grand Prix in 1959 and also rode a works MZ in the TT and, having spent part of his youth in the Island, had tremendously strong Manx connections. By 1967, he was one of the country's leading Suzuki dealers and was responsible for running Suzuki GB's race teams. Eddie visited Hammatsu in August 1967 and there is a lovely newspaper cutting of him of sat astride the new T500 - and dreaming of building the bike into a racer. Ed. was actually planning the bike on his way back to England but other demands had to take priority. The first of these was running the semi-works TR250 racers for Frank Perris who came out of retirement to have another crack at the 250 World Championships in 1968. The following year, 1968, Eddie prepared a T500 for sidecar ace Chris Vincent to ride as a solo in the TT but Chris only did one lap before coming to an end - but it got Ed. thinking about the future.

One of Eddie's mechanics at the time was Frank Whiteway and, with Ed's patient tuition and sponsorship, he was beginning to produce good results on both the T20 production racers and TR250 race bikes. For the 1970 TT, Ed. decided to have a serious go at winning the 500 class in the production TT which, by this time, was beginning to attract a lot of attention. Rule bending, or to be more accurate, overt cheating, was rife. The European factories, such as Bultaco, Montesa and Cotton, ran very thinly disguised race bikes in the production class and achieved surprising results in view of the generally mediocre standard of their production road machines. The mainstream marques, like Triumph, adopted the strategy of producing a catalogue of "optional extras" which were allegedly for sale to enhance the performance of your over-the-counter bike. Eddie had complete faith in the T500 as it came from the factory and the mods. to the bike were very limited. The motor's ports were cleaned up, 19" wheels fitted to improve ground clearance, a large 5 1/4 gallon alloy tank was needed to see the thirsty two-stroke through the three laps and the rest of the mods. were largely cosmetic - glitter seat, ace bars, rear sets and that was it. Ferodo AM4 race linings were also added in a vain attempt to get the bike to stop from racing speeds on the tiny drum brakes with which the road bike was equipped.

Enter then Frank Melling, university undergraduate and part-time journalist following the hallowed American tradition of simultaneously studying full-time at college and full-time in other paid employment - in this case writing about bikes for the US based magazines "Cycle Illustrated" and "Motor Cycle World". This was a somewhat surreal life-style in that my American employers didn't know that I had another job and also had no idea of the very finite limits of my journalistic abilities. Based in New York, rather than the fashionable West Coast of America, the two sister magazines survived by a constant stream of "world exclusives" - some of them operating on the very thinnest margins of what constituted the truth. I knew that things were serious when the editor Morris Alpern, 'phoned me, rather than wrote, with specific instructions to: "Get a story on the bike which wins the Isle of Man TT pavement races." Morris had heard on the grapevine, as one did in America at the time, about the "pavement races" in the Isle of Man and had decided that Motor Cycle World should have a world exclusive. Having made the decision, and informed his young British Editor, that it should be done, all that Morris had to do was wait for the pictures and words to arrive.

The brief posed something of a problem for me. For a start, I wasn't a road racer. Like many young men of the day, I rode every form of motorcycle sport from motocross and grasstrack, to trials and even the odd road race. But I was certainly not up to blagging a go on a works MV or the Arter Matchless. Problem number two was even more depressing. I had been working for Motor Cycle World for six months and had now become dependent on the income to keep me alive for the next couple of years at college. Morris had made it clear that a lack of TT exclusive would be a career limiting opportunity - and I would be back on starvation rations again. Still, I wasn't short of self-confidence so the obvious solution seemed to be scrounging a ride on one of the production racers where my lack of race experience wouldn't show up - or at least so much. My first choice was Triumph who seemed to be certain favourites for the blue riband 750 class but their press department gave me very short shrift. Moving down a class, the hot tip was one of the Geoff Dodkin entered Thruxton Velocettes which had already won in 1967 and finished second and fourth in 1968. Unfortunately, Geoff was singularly unimpressed by my racing c.v., or lack of it, and was not at all interested.

Then I tried Ed. and to my delight he was full of enthusiasm and said that I could have the bike on the Sunday morning, directly after Saturday's production TT. Now, the only thing remaining was for Frank Whiteway to help us all by winning the TT. Not that much of a problem! But bless his heart, Whiteway rode an immaculate race to win at 89.94mph and Ed. blithely gave me the bike on Sunday morning to go and play on for as long as I wished. Later, he confided that: "You had the gift of the gab and the bike was so bomb-proof that you couldn't do any damage to it except crash the thing so I thought I'd take a chance. The chance of some publicity, even it was a bit risky, was always going to be better than no publicity." And what a super bike the Crooks T500 proved to be. Unlike the fiddle bikes fielded by the Europeans, the T500 was as docile as a mo-ped through the streets of Douglas but once out on the TT course it really got on with the job with a lovely loping gait which was ideal for the rough, undulating track. Including stopping for traffic lights, and more or less observance of 30mph limits, I got round the course in just under 40 minutes, which showed both the potential of the bike, and it's user friendly nature; in short, I just loved the bike.

For his part, Ed. was delighted with interest that the article generated and so was Suzuki in America and even, so I found out later, Suzuki Japan. As a result, we stayed in touch and I became good friends with Eddie later riding Suzukis for him in enduros for five gloriously happy years. He was the best sponsor any rider could wish for; if I won it was because I had ridden well and if I didn't - well, the bike wasn't good enough. More importantly, my editor was delighted that we had yet another world exclusive and he paid me a \$50 bonus - enough to pay for a good part of my first holiday with a real live girl. In this case, an extremely real and very alive young lady who did her best to keep me race fit during a two week tour of Scotland. Following the TT success, Ed. built more of the production racers and some of the hottest burns in the racing world graced their saddles - Stuart Graham, Barry Sheene and Stan Woods to name but a few. They also went out to customers because Ed. was very much of the frame of mind that if you had the money you could buy anything that the Crooks team raced.

Eventually, Ed. retired and his son Martin took over the business but I still stayed in contact with the Crooks family and that brought me to Martin's loft some five years ago. And there was the same huge alloy tank that had come from one of the original production racers. And there were some "Ace" drop bars, and a glitter seat, and a frame, and a rear wheel with an original Borrani rim. Well, it looked like most of one of the original proddie racers. To cut to the chase, Martin agreed to let me have the bits if I would pay for any missing items and one of Ed.'s original mechanics, Roy Dixon would build the bike up into raceworthy condition. But, there had to be a catch. Yes, I could own an original Crooks-Suzuki production racer - but only if I would compete on it.

What was certain was that if I took it to current classic races it, and I, would get annihilated. Modern replica classic race bikes are so far advanced from their 1960s predecessors that they belong on a different planet and our idea was to race an original bike as it would have been seen at the time- not a rule bending replica. However, I had dabbled at the odd hill climb on a BSA motocrosser and so Martin and I decided we would try the re-born T500 on the hills and in twisty classic sprints. The results were immediately encouraging and wins and second places started to stack up with pleasing regularity. Not only could the T500 absolutely destroy everything in the production class - whenever there was one - but it is well capable of seeing off full blown race bikes in the 500cc open category. Running against any bike in a classic sprint, the T500 is capable of surprising results and on the right day, it will see off many 750s and unlimited bikes. Not bad for a motorcycle with a swept volume of just 492cc.

With wins at Saltburn, Ormesby Hall, Lyme Park, Scarborough and the Thundersprint, the Crooks-Suzuki is always on the pace and yet Roy, who tunes the bike, Martin and myself have been determined to keep to the spirit of the original bike. This means that we run with original barrels, the cylinder barrel ports cleaned up as Eddie and Frank Whiteway used to do to the first bikes, autolube, standard carburettors, standard air-box, original steel mudguards, electric horn, lights and a battery. If we really wanted to bend the rules, we could knock 50kgs from the weight of the bike almost without trying - and the opportunity to lose two bags of spuds when one is chasing hundredths of a second is a very tempting one. Even so, we're resisting it because we want the bike to be a 1960s Crooks-Suzuki in body and spirit.

The only two changes we've made are for safety. The original 8" tfs front brake was always marginal when used hard and it just isn't up to dragging 425lbs of bike down from 90mph to the hairpin corners that are often found on hill climbs. Two years ago, I was having a very big go at Scarborough and the front brake just gave up at the Mere hairpin giving the assembled marshals, and me, a near terminal fright. Now, we've fitted a single sided Suzuki disc to the front - again period and completely original.The other big mod. is to fit a pair of road legal expansion chambers. Modern tyres permit such acute angles of lean that the original silencers were digging in on corners and being such big, strong over-engineered items, instead of bending, they lifted the rear wheel - and that was another bowel loosening thrill. The expansion chambers don't do anything for the power but they do make the bike dramatically safer. So what is it like to race a Crooks-Suzuki? To be frank, it is a bundle of mixed blessings. The very long 57" wheelbase makes the bike extremely forgiving and stable but the shallow head angle and huge weight cause endless difficulties with line changing and initiating turns at racing speeds. This is a big, big motorcycle that takes a lot of physical effort on the part of the rider to get round corners on the limit. In every respect, it is far inferior in terms of handling than the Triumph production racers of the day.

Having said that, I've got very limited talents in terms of riding abilities and the docile character of the bike does compensate hugely for a lack of ability. Where the T500 scores is the motor that must be one of the best engines ever to leave a drawing board. Contrary to received wisdom, two-strokes can be made to pull like trains and the T500 is blisteringly quick off the line and, with a racing power-band which stretches from 3,500-7,000rpm, it is incredibly easy to ride - again a big plus when the bike lacks a top level rider. Best of all, our T500 is still very much a road bike. It will pull away from traffic lights at 1200 rpm and burble along in the most innocuous way like some ancient mo-ped out for a Sunday afternoon run. I delight in wandering about country lanes with a quiet smile on my face knowing my old ring-a-ding Jap classic will turn in a genuine 135mph and leave many a modern bike for dead on a track day. Better than any amount of Viagra.

Classic Suzuki "demonstration" at Brands Hatch."...and no-one should race or try to go too fast.." said the nice marshal



the t500 in an open class race at Lurcy Levis in France. With a 1 and quarter mile straight, we got slaughtered!





The famous Mere hairpin at the Scarborough hill climb
 . We won here and set a new class record.
 Interestingly, the time would have given us 4th. in the
 modern 600cc class - not bad for a 33 year old oil
 burner!



The main straight at Scarborough - about 90 mph on the T500

A botched start at Scarborough - the wheelie cost me a second
- but t500s do climb up on their back legs



Our Crooks-Suzuki proddie racer at
this year's Thundersprint where we
won the 500 class and also the 500
cc drag racing section of the event.

