

The Hog K (Harley-Davidson 750 KR)

A fiercely competitive and egotistical streak ran through all the tuners building up the Hog K. When Leonard Andres, who was the tuner-father of Brad Andres, and Tom Sifton, who was the tuner of Joe Leonard, were crossing Nebraska, their car and trailer filled with Harley-Davidsons went out of control and turned over – presumably because they were in the middle of an argument over whose K was the fastest.

Ralph Berndt could make factual claims about K horsepower, as could Everett Brashear, Babe DeMay, Eddie Warren, and Mert Lawwill, who was the last of the great tuner-riders. But 1968, which became the next-to-last season of model K superiority, the factory tuner who was on top was one Roy Bokleman.

Part of the reason Bokleman was on top was because his pilot was Freddie Nix, at 118 pounds the most flyweight flyer in the whole Harley-Davidson factory arsenal. The very first time that Bokleman and Nix combined, at Springfield for the Mile National of 1965, Nix broke the track record and established a new one.

At first there was hostility between Bokleman and his rider. Nix was so anxious to avail himself of the K's power – he had absolutely no fear of it – that he was gassing things wide open before Bokleman's trick camshafts and cylinders were ready. Sometimes he broke them. After a few scoldings, Bokleman cured Freddie of the habit.

Their very first win together at a National came in 1966, when Nix took the important step of stopping the Gold Star BSA of Sammy Tanner from ruining Harley-

Davidson prestige on the Sacramento Mile. Their big, unbelievable, season together, however, was that of 1968.

Life at Milwaukee was in ruin following a bitter 1967 – Harley-Davidson's most humiliating campaign in 13 years. It had won only eight of 17 Nationals and lost the Grand National Championship to Triumph.

Failure fired everybody up. The K engine Bokleman built up was in response to Harley-Davidson losing the No 1 plate.

Arguably the most overpowered K ever, all of its speed goodies were laid out on a bore machine right in the basement of Bokleman's Milwaukee home and laboratory. It was an engine a tuner builds but once in his life.

And it was a pounder. When it blew off Gary Nixon's No 1 Triumph by 15 mph across the Daytona bankings, Nixon wondered whether he had been passed by an airplane. Other motorcycles merely blasted, but Freddie Nix had this one roaring in some previously unknown stratosphere. You could hear it coming over the top of even the other K's.

One quality that had made Mooch Resweber the most spellbinding of all K men was the way, no matter what, he could depart from the starting blocks and develop an advantage of 200 feet on any opening lap. It was possible to equal his speed after that, but not to erode his lead of 200 feet.

Freddie could do the same thing. But he had the added advantage in 1968 of Bokleman's engine. There was just no catching that thing once it caught and ran.

Winning a pair of dirt track Nationals and all four of the season's Miles made Nix the American Motorcyclists Association's new hero. His exploits on the Miles of Portland, Santa Rosa and Sedalia amounted to runaways.

Sacramento was somewhat strenuous. Following a few laps of practice, Freddie rolled into the infield pits wearing the pained, inquisitive look that Bokleman knew meant trouble. Deep inside the engine a bearing had melted, so a fast change to one of Bokleman's allegedly less powerful spares was mandated.

This backup engine was all right, but perhaps Nix missed the feel of the original. First he made a ridiculous and poor start, then arrived almost last in the first corner.

The story circulated later that he overwhelmed a dozen enemy riders on his harrowing first trip across the back straightaway. "That is incorrect," said Bokleman later, a stickler for accuracy. Freddie had passed 13.

His effort catapulted Freddie into third position. Then he burned a pair of exploratory laps discovering how fast Sacramento's leaders, Lawwill and Markel, were going, saw that it wasn't fast at all by his standards, and went ahead to win in another rout.

Next he used the explosive force of his good engine to surmount the dry slick and the leading Triumph to win high off the last corner at Oklahoma City.

Freddie's rule ended, big time, at Ascot Park in the 1968 finale, the National race that haunted him for the remaining eight months he had to live. He selected the wrong tire, one that chunked its tread. And then for additional punishment members of the Triumph tribe raced up to smother him and cost Freddie and poor Bokleman and Harley-Davidson the Grand National title by a fistful of points.

Roy Bokleman's big engine had been heard, however; it had been heard too damn well. For 1969, a clique of Brits came to power within the AMA and, simmering from years of resentment and defeat, they voted to avenge themselves on the flathead K by granting

overhead valve Triumphs and BSAs with identical 750cc displacement

Extraordinarily, the K briefly held off the Queen of England's avengers. First Bokleman's K beat the Redcoats on the long mile of Nazareth. Then it won in a lashing rainstorm at Loudon. But then came the fall.

For the next two seasons, 1970 and 1971, the English had their way, with Triumphs and BSAs winning so many Nationals they drowned out the memory of the K.

But paybacks, it is well known, are a bitch. Harley-Davidson by 1972 had its alloy XR fully operational at last. And the British had overspent themselves, or were in the process of doing so, into oblivion.

So for the rest of the 1970s the new XR avenged itself by winning better than 100 Nationals. It didn't sound like the old freight-train K, but at least it sounded like something. Then came the 1980s and the 1990s and castration by muffler.

The most ominous K of them all, the Bokleman K, gradually lost its pedigree, and its ability to win National Races. It ended up in regional skirmishes, but finally couldn't win there either. Fatally, its smooth cylinders received their last over-bore. This was one of the many drawbacks of the antique K: the ports are part of the cylinders. Upon reaching maximum bore, there was really nothing to do but discard them.

The engine got sold as damaged goods to a Harley-Davidson dealer in Knoxville, Tennessee, who bartered it to a friend who owned an immaculate K model he licensed for street use. On the streets is where the Bokleman K ended up and presumably died.

Freddie Nix perished in the summer of 1969. As the sovereign of the mile tracks, he played the role of cool dude by racing wearing dark sun glasses. In reality he was

a crap-kicking Okie – a farmer’s son from unworldly Lawton. He was a good guy, and deserving of a better fate than to get into a head-on wreck with another car while driving a cheesy-sounding dune buggy – Freddie, the maker of the hottest motorcycle sounds of the Sixties! – on a winding mountain road in California’s southern San Joaquin Valley.

The undertaker who came down from Bakersfield to help out with the autopsy was an interesting case himself. His name was Digger Helm, a former flat-tracker who in his years as part of the mob at Tom Sifton’s cycle shack in San Jose had been responsible for making some K noise of his own. (1993)

Frankie Scurria, my old goombah, famously panned the Hog K for being “acoustically ugly.” Then in the 1960s Frankie made the mistake of racing an acoustically pleasing Norton 500 at Daytona International Speedway during Speed Weeks. Battalions of acoustically ugly flathead Ks blew Frankie and his acoustically pleasing overhead valve Norton all the way back to Los Angeles.