

The Hog K  
(Harley-Davidson 750 KR)

*When I was racing motorcycles, the rule was, never trust anything with one cylinder following the other.*

On the Pomona Fairgrounds in Los Angeles this May, the night's Grand National race was ending, the parking lots were emptying, and the carnival sound was on.

Sportsters were sounding off, full-dressers were joining in, so were a few antique K models.

No such staccato Harley-Davidson rhythms had been audible from inside the racetrack during the National:

The full-race XRs of Parker, Carr, Morehead and everybody else were emasculated as ever by their gruesomely ugly and bulbous mufflers whose sole and highly successful function is to choke out the sound and make sterile what used to be the most alive and dangerous off all racing motorcycles.

A long time ago it used to be different.

Before environmental and political considerations took hold, you could judge how aggressively a Hog K was being raced just from the waves of sound it was making.

Ks were bred to make remarkable sounds. Ks were bred for Daytona Beach.

Not the Daytona of today, but the Daytona of the hard 1950s, when the season's 200-mile brawl was fought over a sand and coral battleground four miles long right along the Atlantic.

Sand swirled, blasted faces, destroyed vision. Gassing a dreadnaught Hog K up the beachfront in excess of 135 mph without seeing where you were going was part of the mystique.

And then there was wondrous Jungle Road – Daytona's back straightaway of two lane blacktop piercing dense foliage including bushes as big as houses, nothing but violent dips and sudden rises for two miles.

The jousting K models took Jungle's violent measure grappling three- and four-abreast in roaring wolfpacks.

There were two sets of handlebars, a big set of bull horns on top and a set of pegs clipped to the fork legs. The throttle was left on the big bars and set to run wide open. A rev-kill button accommodated speed-shifting through the gears.

For the length of the Jungle, if you had the balls, you hung low behind the clip-ons. No streamlining was required: a K already had more firepower than anybody wanted.

The whole nerved-up experience on Jungle really amounted to one big speed wobble lasting two miles.

Life and death existed as partners. Spectators who apparently flipped out just from the experience of watching the Ks occasionally wandered dazed across the road to get hit and run down to the great discomfort of all.

Museum pieces with their ancient flathead motors, the heavy-gauge K's were quite famous in their own right. One especially noble engine won Daytona four times as well as Laconia. And in 1964, three long years after the 200 miles had moved inside Daytona

International Speedway, the same engine raised a familiar battle cry and set the fastest qualifying time all over again.

Its earliest rider was a prodigy: Brad Andres.

Besides Daytona and Laconia, Brad won Dodge City, Langhorne and Torrey Pines. But during 1955, while he was in the process of becoming the first teenaged Grand National Champion, he got well chopped up in the slaughter of the Basney-Hawley spill at Gardena Speedway and missed much racing while convalescing.

Back Brad came, however, to win Peoria, Watkins Glen and, repeatedly, Laconia and Daytona.

The rider who used the ex-Andres engine to establish the fastest flying lap at Daytona in 1964 was named Mel Lacher.

Little Mel was some kind of daredevil medical student, a friend of the later martyr Cal Rayborn, and little-known to the riders of the Harley-Davidson factory team. His out-qualifying them was an embarrassment, so they ran him out of the road into the Daytona infield.

Mel and the old Andres engine never won a National race, but never, ever, got passed on a straightaway. Still later, Mel became a demon of flattrack on Friday nights at Ascot Park, before getting put on suspension for crashing six times in eight starts.

Bart Markel was another warrior who really knew how to race a big K; his own were among the most recklessly out-of-control of the period.

Visualize Bart 35 years ago, at the 1959 Daytona, his first 200 miles on a K. Pulling the trigger, he swerves ahead of Hog teammates Brad, Everett Brashear and Joe Leonard to arrive at the hellish end of Jungle Road near the lead.

But Bart can't turn and crashes. It isn't a debilitating crash – he's able to resume the battle – but only a few miles afterward, this time attacking hard on the beachfront and unable to see in the blowing sand, he gets into a smash with a BMW traveling 35 mph slower.

The K immediately empties its saddle of Bart and proceeds to go on a rampage of its own -- somersaulting and plunging almost the length of the beachfront -- until hurling itself at a parked car, completely wrecking the car.

Except for almost strangling on sand impacted in his throat, Bart gets away unharmed.

Through the seasons, his crash count builds in intensity.

Various Ks from the Markel stable spill Dick Dorresteyn at Ascot Park, knock Sammy Tanner through a fence at Columbus, flatten Leonard at Peoria, rough up Dick Klamfoth at Mansfield, and at Springfield one year take down Dick Hammer, Darrel Doval and Al Gunter one year, and then Gary Nixon the next.

His Ks turn on Bart, too, especially on pavement, where he seldom shows one the respect everyone else does.

Getting rough with a K at the inaugural 200 miles inside Daytona International Speedway, Bart is repaid for his disrespect by once again getting well thrown. He lands in a heap, right hand out to cushion his crashlanding.

But he isn't wearing gloves, so his palm is ground to pulp. People came to Bart's aid, but are sickened by the gore. So he visits a hot dog concessions stand and further grosses everybody out by stopping the bleeding by packing his wounds with the contents of a salt shaker.

Bart can get away with tankslappers all afternoon long winning dirttrack Nationals, but regularly comes away from road races well bitten.

A K spins him off the rainsoaked course of Greenwood. Still another flings him onto his head at Loudon. Yet the mauling a K delivers one year at Bossier City is almost too much, even for Bart.

He mounts four successive charges at the same corner. The first charge knocks him down and breaks in half the front brake lever. The second collision rips away the rear brake pedal. The third reshapes the handlebars and fork legs. The fourth almost finishes off the gas tank.

Now his ponderous, ill-tempered K really turns its rage on him, throwing him off three more times on three different corners.

Bart is ready to deposit the heavy cripple back in the pits, allowing it to complete its brutal and slow process of dying. But he changes his mind and continues. Somehow he manages a few more laps without falling, finishing fourth.

Bart, just like George Roeder, could dominate the dirt. And Brad Andres and Roger Reiman were best on pavement. The only legitimately versatile flathead K hero able to go fast on any surface was Leonard, and, following him, Carroll Resweber.

Those who continue insisting today that Carroll—“Mooch” -- was the most uncanny K luminary of them all are probably right.

Mooch was no creampuff. If he had to, he could do the macho pain number equally as well as Bart. Mooch once competed with the handicap of a fractured wrist, another time with the dull pain of a broken leg.

But Mooch would rather finesse instead of bulldog. He was the only K soldier able to understeer instead of broadside dirt corners. He also sought to civilize a K by removing much of its combat armor – he hacked the frame away from the engine, used thin-wall handlebars borrowed from bicycles, lightened drastically the gears in the transmission, and was reputed to be such a weight fanatic that he saved grams by using bicycle instead of motorcycle innertubes.

In a 1962 collision with other motorcycles and a thick wooden fence in Lincoln, Mooch's K, minus all its protection, smashed the life out of itself, and almost Mooch. That was the finish of Mooch's dream of capturing a Grand National Championship for a fifth consecutive year.

(End of Part One)

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