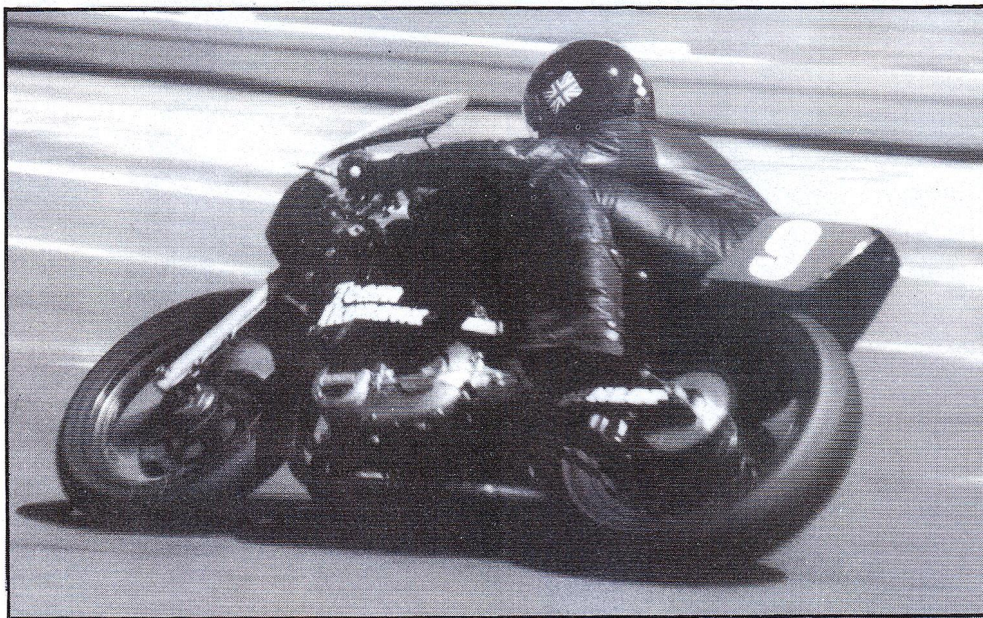


My Bonnie Rides Over The Ocean

How a rather special Triumph put one over on the Japs

Story by Alan Cathcart



It find it very ironic in several different ways that the Team Ikuzawa RGB-Triumph should have won the 1986 Japanese Battle of the Twins title, not least because most people in Britain are completely unaware of the fact. But we're like that, y'know; doesn't do to get too excited about winning, old man — bad form and all that, what. Mean to say, we Brits are so damn used to seeing Japanese bikes winning all the races, we more or less gave up caring where the machinery comes from. Gracious in victory, sporting in defeat — that's the British for you.

Yes, well, the Japanese BoTT may not be the biggest deal in the world but it is competed for by around 100 competitors, some of them with very well-prepared, dealer/importer-backed factory models. And besides, when did a British bike last (or ever?) win a Japanese road racing title? More to the point, it's highly ironic that a collection of high-tech racers like Bimota DB1s and Ducatis of all shapes and sizes had to give best to a humble pushrod parallel twin based on a design which first saw the light of day in 1938. Because winning is exactly what the Team Ikuzawa RGB-Triumph did in the 1986 season, and in so doing permitted a last defiant flourish of the Union Jack to be made right in the heart of the enemy's territory.

The architects of this unlikely victory are Japanese former car racer turned bike dealer Tetsu Ikuzawa, and Welshman Gary Bryan, formerly a leading sidecar racer till a mass pile-up at Oulton Park 15 years ago left him confined to a wheelchair. Gentle-mannered but incredibly determined, Gary fought back from this cruel fortune to continue pursuing a career in motorcycle racing, based on the construction and development of a series of Triumph-based race

bikes. With the late Bob Smith aboard, these bikes wreaked havoc amongst the TZ700/750 Yamahas in British Superbike racing in the late 1970s; and then, once the BoTT series got off the ground in Britain five years ago, repeated the trick on the hitherto all-conquering Ducatis.

Back then, there wasn't a Bologna desmo V-twin which could hold a candle to little Bob and his muscular British parallel twin, not even the works bike of TT F2 world champion Tony Rutter. Bob's tragic death at Scarborough in 1983 on an RG Suzuki all but sidelined the British bike, but its effectiveness had already been proved. So when my friend Tetsu Ikuzawa asked me last year if I could recommend someone in Britain to build him a BoTT bike that could carry the Triumph name into battle back home in Japan and defeat the BMWs and Ducatis that up till then were dominating the class over there, there was only one name I could offer: Gary Bryan.

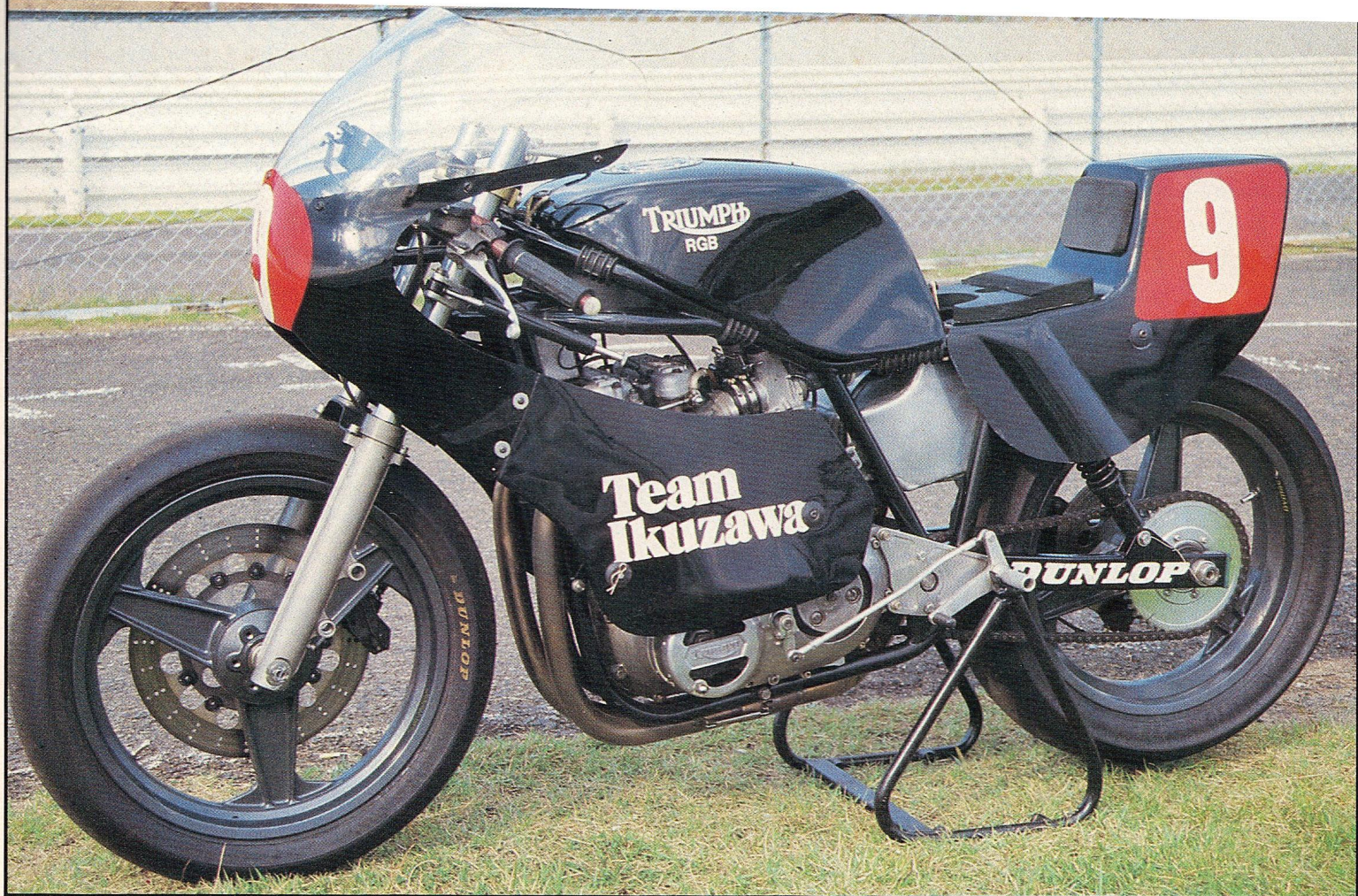
Besides his Honda agency, Ikuzawa's bike shop concentrates on selling Triumphs of all types and eras, hence Tetsu's interest in fielding a killer BoTT bike. He certainly got what he wanted: after preferring not to take part with his own ex-Bob Smith bike for sentimental reasons, Gary Bryan built him a near-replica, incorporating some detail improvements. After some teething troubles in testing once it got to Japan, it promptly won its first race on the tight and demanding Tsukuba circuit near Tokyo. This autumn, I sampled the bike at the faster, more open but hilly Sugo track, and in doing so was able to make a direct comparison between the original RGB (Gary's initials) which I tested back in 1983 before Bob's death, and this equally successful updated model and proven winner.

There are quite a few subtle differences. To begin with, Gary opted for a smaller 875cc engine measuring 77.8 x 91mm instead of the 80.5mm bores in his own bike, which yield 927cc. Though maximum power is thus dropped slightly from 103 to 98bhp, the lighter pistons improve reliability, especially if you keep the revs down to 7500rpm or below. And with the bike's Achilles heel being its standard T140V Triumph gearbox, a little less power is actually beneficial without really affecting performance. In any case, most Japanese circuits favour torque and mid-range rather than absolute peak power; with the aid of a shorter exhaust system, Gary has maximised the bottom end power accordingly on the Ikuzawa bike.

Apart from the gearbox and T140V crankcases, the rest of the engine is more Weslake than Triumph, with a one-piece, 360-degree nitrided Nourish crank (stroked from its normal 88.5mm in standard 850cc form), 11.5:1 pistons, and eight-valve Weslake head, plus the company's own 320 road racing cams. Amal 38mm smoothbores are fitted, with the inlet ports opened up and flowed to match, and there's an Interspan electronic solid state ignition system, the clean and convenient answer to the acid battery which is such a necessary evil to bikes in general and to road racing in particular. Everything is contained within the lightweight black box, which is self-generating and which feeds current to the twin 6v coils. The bike will run for one hour and 20 minutes on a full charge, but however long it's been run for, you simply connect the Interspan to a 12v battery for the same length of time to bring it up to full charge again. Brilliant.

That other archaic remnant of motorcycling tradition, the primary chain, has been junked on the RGB in favour of a 32mm wide polyurethane belt, matched to an alloy clutch of Gary Bryan's own design. Having had problems with rubber





belt drives having to be changed every other meeting to stop them stripping, he's now done 15 races on the same polybelt without noticeable wear. Not surprisingly, he's now marketing the conversion, along with the Interspan ignition and many other race bits aimed at the Triumph/Weslake racer, from his new business in Wrexham, North Wales.

The original RGB had a John Caffrey chromemoly chassis, built very much around the diminutive Bob Smith. When I came to ride the bike, with its 25in seat height and close-coupled riding position, I found it very hard to make space for my extra length on the tiny 134kg machine. Gary Bryan himself built the chassis on the Team Ikuzawa bike, basing it on the Caffrey design but modifying it slightly (especially in front of the seat) to give better access to the engine. But the bike is still very small and low for a 900cc machine, and ideally suited to the small stature of its Japanese rider.

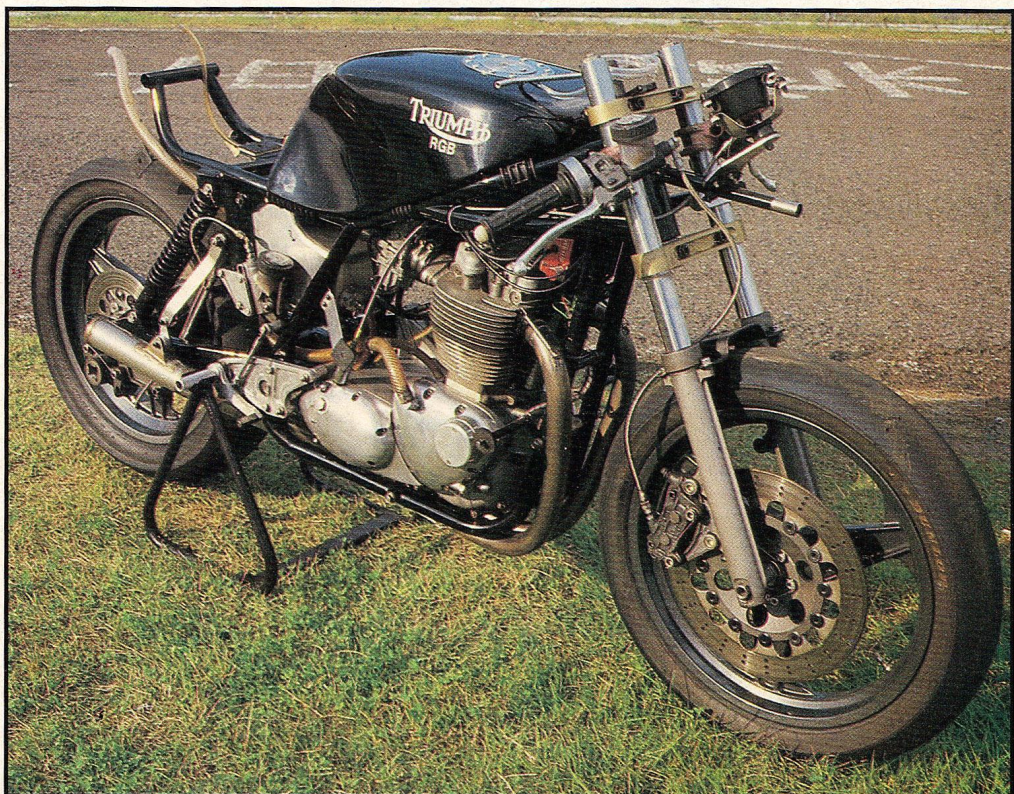
It also scales 2kg less than the original machine, thanks mostly to the use of just a single front 320mm disc brake rather than the pair Bob Smith insisted on fitting. However, both bikes employ the same running gear, namely 38mm Spondon forks with the Derbyshire firm's own mechanical anti-dive, copied from the Udo Geitl BMW Superbike and as fitted to the Honda Britain works TT1 bikes in the old one-litre F1 days. At the rear, the twin-shock swingarm uses a pair of cheap but effective Girling gas units, with 18inch Dymag wheels fitted front and rear. Wheelbase is a tight 54in.

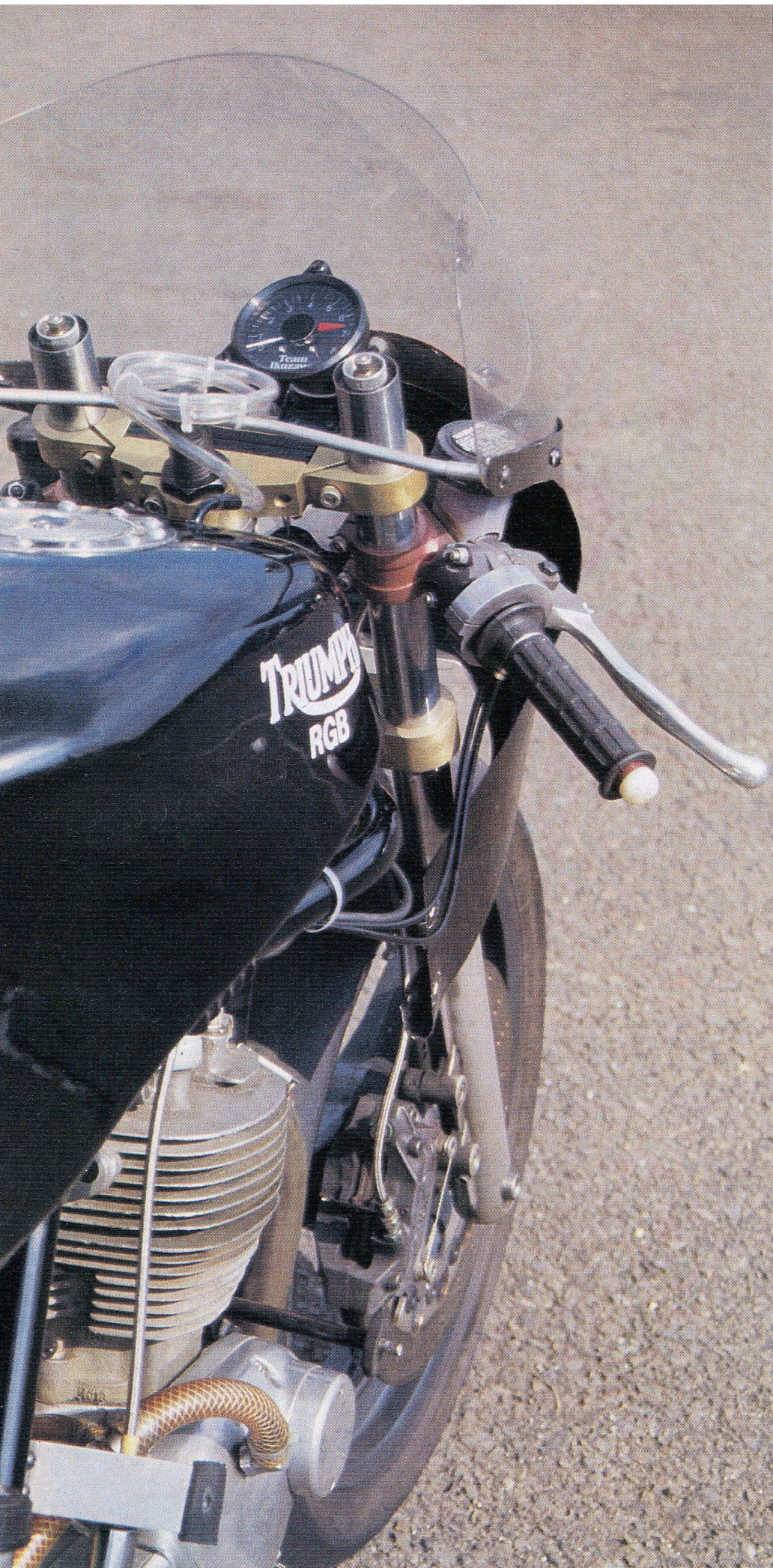
Time is a great healer, with the memory acting as an effective means of filtering out experiences you'd subconsciously rather not remember. I'd forgotten before I came to sit on the Ikuzawa RGB just how daunting an experience my ride on the Bob Smith bike had been. Well, let's not beat about the bush: it was horrific, actually. Fifty

yards up the pit lane at Sugo, the memory banks had unlocked and my mental computer had pressed the panic button. Total recall, just when I least wanted it. Help!

The problem was, and is, the immense vibration which manifests itself at almost all engine speeds and at all contact points between your body and the motorcycle — fingers, hands, feet, toes, knees, seat, you name it. I felt like I was getting an even more uncomfortable version of one of

those Japanese massages, where a lady stacked like the country's female all-in wrestling champion tries to dismantle you limb by limb, joint by joint. The whole bike literally shakes from end to end, especially if you can screw yourself up to wind open the throttle and send the needle on the Scitsu rev counter round towards the 7000rpm mark, which Tetsu, mindful of the bike's reputation for having a short fuse, had asked me to observe for the test.



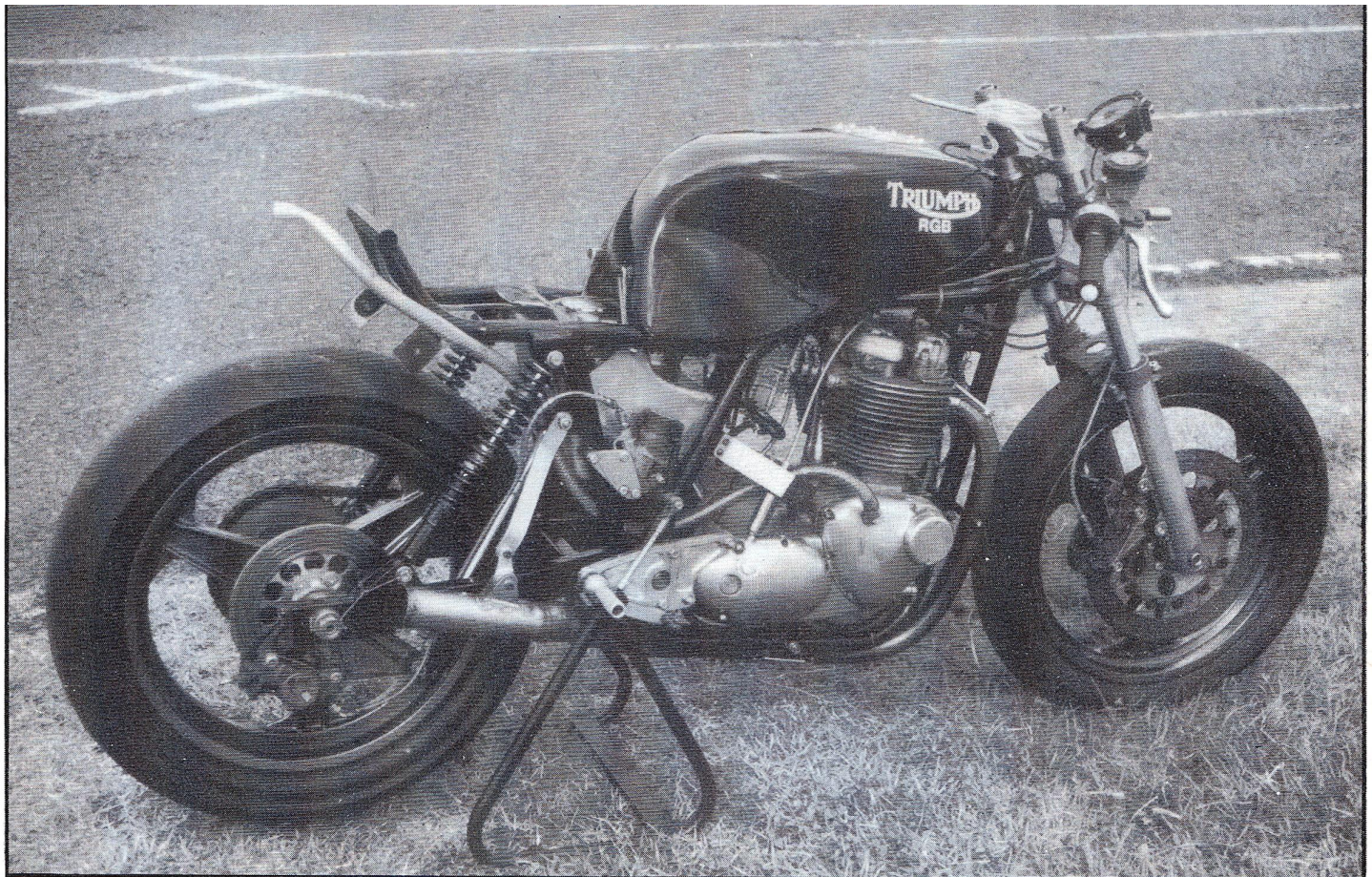


At first, you try to minimise the discomfort by wriggling around to find a less exposed posture — I even spent most of the first lap balancing my weight on the footrests to avoid placing my behind on the seat. But it doesn't work, and you're only prolonging the inevitable. How can anyone ride this thing at any speed, let alone fast enough to win races, I asked myself? At that moment, blessed relief arrived on the second lap when the engine cut out dead going down the hill: I freewheeled to the bottom and parked it, and I don't mind admitting that I actually hoped whatever was wrong couldn't be repaired. I just didn't want to have to get back on the bike again.

Unfortunately or not, depending how you look at it, all that had happened was that a pair of ignition wires had unsurprisingly vibrated loose and short-circuited together. Soon all was repaired; I took a deep breath before setting out for another dose of masochism. Now I know how those Indian guys feel on their beds of nails. I'd given myself a mental target again of ten laps as the minimum feasible in order to conduct a worthwhile test — but then, halfway through the allotted number, a strange thing happened. I actually found myself enjoying the bike, vibromassage and all. In the end, I did 15 laps before I pulled in. I had to — my hands were quite numb!

So how and why did I learn, if not to love the Ikuzawa RGB, at least to make friends with and respect it? Let's face it, this is no cuddly toy of a motorbike, but it certainly is damned effective — a functional device par excellence, built with victory in mind rather than comfort, making no concessions in its pursuit of racing success. "I'm sorry about the vibration," said Gary Bryan apologetically when I phoned him up to tell him I'd tested the bike, "but it seems completely unavoidable with a 360 degree parallel twin once you start getting real competitive horsepower out





of it. I've proved I can reduce the vibration by about 70% just by dropping the compression ratio to 10:1, but since that's the secret to getting real power from these older four-stroke engines, it would ruin it. What I am doing now though is to build a 180 degree crank for it, which smooths it out to an unbelievable extent — we've had one in a test bike and there's no more vibration than on a Japanese four."

The trick, as I found at Sugo, is to think positively. By trying to shut my mind to the horrific vibration, I found myself suddenly aware of the RGB's several good points, and especially the take-no-prisoners torque and bottom end grunt out of corners and up the hill from the bottom chicane. On one lap I had an excellent demonstration of this, as a 750 Ducati closed in on me under braking so that he was just on my tail going into the chicane. Just for laughs, I took the RGB up to 7500rpm that time in the gears accelerating up the hill; the Weslake engine responded like a turbocharged tractor and took off like a March hare towards the pits. As I crossed the start line I looked behind and saw the Ducati about 75 metres behind. That says it all about the RGB: unlovely manners, devastatingly effective performance.

Tetsu had obviously deliberately overgeared the bike for my ride in the interests of longevity, so that the best I could get in fifth gear down the straight was 6800rpm. But with gobs of power on tap from as low down as 3000rpm and seemingly as much torque there as at 6000, there's really no need to redline the engine. In fact, I soon discovered that the trick to making good lap times on this bike is to let the engine slog from low down out of corners and hold the same gear all the way between turns, letting the engine's wide spread of power work for you and cutting down on unnecessary gearchanging — desirable in any case because though a modified camplate has resolved some of the gearchange problems I experienced when I rode the Bob Smith bike, the change on the left foot, one-up linkage is very

slow and requires you to be really positive and to use the stiff clutch for all changes. I found myself able to run the whole two-mile Sugo circuit with just eight changes: amazing.

Pulling 6800 past the pits, I needed to drop down just one gear to fourth for the faster of the two chicanes, hold the gear round the next right, then get top again down the hill. Thanks to the sure-footed, stable handling of the RGB frame, I could stay in top round the first right sweeper; if the front wheel started washing out, there was no need to back off the throttle. On the contrary, the pinpoint handling would allow you to pull it back in by cracking the throttle a bit further open and steering it into the apex. Still downhill, the next left needed fourth gear, notched on the overrun, but here the forks pattered badly on the ripples located on the racing line, starting the front wheel chattering. A quick squirt took me down to the next right, a Clearways-type corner where you have to aim for the outside of the track while braking hard, and coming down two more gears for the lower chicane. It's very important, given the fragility of the standard transmission, not to use too much engine braking, especially with the high compression pistons; but the enormous front disc and the Lockheed four-pot caliper are excellent, with the mechanical anti-dive doing its job in stopping the suspension freezing under heavy braking, but not at the expense of taking over the steering.

The RGB frame is beautifully poised, its low centre of gravity enabling you to flip-flop through the chicane almost on auto-pilot before opening the taps and getting an early drive up the hill while still cranked over to the right. First the front wheel gets light as the engine power comes on strong, then the rear Dunlop starts to step out and scuffle for adhesion, but it's all perfectly controllable and in no time you're streaking uphill past the start line to complete another lap.

I ended up enjoying my ride on the Ikuzawa RGB far more than I initially expected, but I can't deny that the intense vibration made it quite the

most tiring bike I've tested recently. Fifteen to 20 laps at Sugo on it felt like 50 on something else! I wasn't surprised to learn afterwards that the bike's regular rider has opted out of joining forces with it again to defend his BoTT title next year. If you can put up with the horrific vibration — and please don't think I'm overstating the case; after all, I race another kind of 360 degree parallel twin regularly in classic events — the RGB Triumph is a mean, macho machine that delivers the goods in potent and uncompromising fashion — the Charles Bronson of motorcycles. I just don't think I'm that much of a masochist to want to ride something so uncomfortable on a regular basis. I reckon motorcycling should be more than this. I can admire what the bike is and has achieved, but just don't leave one in my Christmas stocking!

RGB TRIUMPH 875

POWERTRAIN

Air-cooled pushrod, OHV 360-degree parallel twin. Capacity 875cc. Bore × stroke 77.8 × 91mm. Compression ratio 11.5:1. Max power 98bhp at 7500rpm. Induction by two Amal Mk II 38mm smoothbores. Interspan electronic ignition. Primary drive by RGB belt. Five-speed Triumph gearbox. Dry multiplate clutch (six steel, six fibre). Final drive by chain

CHASSIS

Full duplex cradle in chrome-moly tubing. 38mm Spondon tele forks with Spondon mechanical anti-dive, twin Girling gas shocks at rear. Dry weight 132kg (296lb). Wheelbase 1370mm (53.9in). Brakes: single 320mm floating disc front with four-piston AP Lockheed caliper, single 220mm fixed disc with Lockheed caliper rear

PERFORMANCE

Top speed — 152mph (with short circuit exhaust system)