



RAYBORN'S LOST RIDE

WORDS: Aaron Frank PHOTOS: Kevin Wing

Uncovering the Brit-Bike Beginnings of Cal Rayborn's Otherwise All-American Racing Career

Team Obsolete's collection of more than 75 historic racing motorcycles is both stunning and stunningly diverse. There are so many marquee bikes: ex-Agostini MV Agustas (yes, more than one), an ex-Redman Honda six, the ultra-rare AJS 7R3 "Triple-Knocker" and E95 "Porcupine," and, of course, all those Harley-Davidson XRTTs—including the ex-Cal Rayborn "final edition" we recently rode ("Calvin & Rob," *MC*, Oct. 2010). But even among such distinguished company, Matchless G50 racing singles hold an extra special place in team owner Rob Iannucci's heart.

That's because Team Obsolete essentially began with a Matchless G50—specifically, the G50 CSR featured on the cover of the April 1962 issue of *Cycle World* magazine. "My first motorcycle was a Norton Commando," Iannucci recalls. "Through that I got involved with some Brit bike guys here in New York City. This was the late '60s. One of them showed me that *Cycle World* and that was it. The article included an exploded view of the G50 engine, and it was just so beautiful—from an engineering standpoint, from a mechanical design standpoint, and as a piece of art. It just blew me away."

Iannucci decided then and there that he needed a G50. It took until 1975, however, for him to finally locate an available one on a ranch in Nevada—coincidentally, a 1962 CSR just like on the magazine cover. It was converted for desert racing but came with all the stock street equipment, which Iannucci promptly reinstalled. That CSR served Iannucci as daily transportation throughout law school, and he and his bride even rode it to the altar on their wedding day. He still owns

it today, along with "quite a few" other G50s, including roadracers once belonging to Dick Mann, Bob Hansen, the Arter Brothers, and, of course, the ex-Al Gunter "1709" bike Team Obsolete's Dave Roper rode to victory in the 1984 Isle of Man Classic TT ("Me & My Bike," Jan. 2012).

Iannucci has probably bought, sold, rebuilt and raced more G50s than anyone else in the world. Each has an incredible history, but perhaps none is more fascinating than the blue-and-gold #286 shown here. How can that be? Purists might claim this isn't even a "true" G50—it's only a CSR model, the street-bike hastily pieced together by Matchless to homologate a machine for American competition. It was raced for less than two seasons, by an amateur rider, and it didn't win any major events—in fact, it may not have won any races at all. It's an unremarkable machine in every way but one—that aforementioned amateur was Cal Rayborn, and this very Matchless G50 CSR was the springboard that launched Rayborn onto the factory Harley-Davidson racing team.

This we know about Calvin Rayborn II—he was perhaps the most talented motorcycle roadracer America ever produced. He won the Daytona 200—then the world's most important motorcycle race—consecutively in 1968 and '69, both times riding the ancient, flathead-powered Harley-Davidson KR750TT against modern, overhead-valve European twins and ferociously fast Japanese two-strokes. In 1972 he dominated the Trans-Atlantic Match Races, winning three of six races against the very best British and American riders, on tracks he had never visited before, again riding an outdated



The last shard of the true cross: This modest Matchless G50 CSR was the springboard that launched Cal Rayborn to his Harley-Davidson factory ride.



The 36mm Amal GP1 carburetor is capped with a modern K&N air filter element; otherwise, the bike is exactly as Rayborn raced it. Even the tires are original.



An unusual, upside-down Smiths tachometer features a needle that sweeps around the bottom of the gauge. Redline is 7000 rpm, where the 500cc single makes 52 bhp.



In addition to the fuel petcock, the feed line from the remote oil tank also has to be turned on before starting the bike. Forgetting to do so can be a costly mistake.

Ironhead Harley-Davidson XR7T.

What we will never know is just how good Cal Rayborn could have been. Tremendous loyalty to the Harley-Davidson team meant Rayborn never enjoyed competitive machinery. It wasn't until 1973 that he finally became frustrated enough to leave Harley-Davidson, reportedly agreeing to race for Suzuki in 1974. Rayborn, age 33, was killed on December 29, 1973, during the first lap of a tune-up race at Pukekohe Park Raceway in New Zealand, when his Suzuki TR500 two-stroke seized and threw him into an unprotected guardrail at over 100 mph.

"What Calvin could have done" remains

one of motorcycling's greatest unanswered questions. What Calvin did do, however, has become the stuff of legend. Rayborn could ride the wheels off even the worst racing bikes. He learned how to do that early in his career. To a large extent, he learned how to do that by riding this very Matchless G50 CSR TT bike.

Rayborn grew up in San Diego during the '50s, when that city was a motorcycle-racing hotbed. His stepfather was a motorcycle racer who taught him to ride, and "Sluggo," as he was known to friends, honed his skills working as a motorcycle courier. There, each second saved put more money in his pocket. Rayborn's first "racebike" was a pedestrian

Harley-Davidson Model 165. "It was hardly a racer," remembers his friend Jim McMurren. "It was old, and the tires were so worn-out their profile was flat." But Rayborn's mentor, Lou Kaiser, had tuned the tiny, 165cc two-stroke with a reed valve and it was actually pretty fast. "Man, we laughed when Calvin brought that little Harley out to Hourglass Field, an abandoned WWII training airstrip where we used to race," McMurren recalls. "We laughed and laughed right up until Calvin beat our asses with it, winning his very first race."

Rayborn soon became a feared roadracing competitor at Hourglass, Riverside, and



220- Wayne Ordway - Bellflower
304- Tom Hughes - Imperial Beach
286- Calvin Rayborn - El Cajon
316- Al Anders - Spring Valley
120- Bob Bailey - Torrance
302- Edward Rosa - San Diego

Open Class Riders 'raring to go.

pop-up road courses like the one at Paradise Mesa drag strip. Next he took up TT racing at famed venues like Ascot, Gardena and his home track Cajon Speedway, where he raced alongside regulars like Eddie Mulder, Malcom Smith, and Don Vesco. "Everyone hated racing Cal," remembers another friend, Gordon Menzie. "The way he could scrub off speed using just the front wheel was unbelievable. You did not want to enter a corner alongside Cal, because he was going to beat you every time. He didn't know how to lift."

Rayborn rode whatever he could get his hands on in those early days—BSAs, Triumphs, even the very first Yamaha in America, the same two-stroke twin Fumio Ito raced at the 1958 Catalina GP. He was never afraid to ask for a ride. "One night at El Cajon this older guy named Grant Brown showed up with a brand-new BSA Spitfire," McMurren remembers. "He was really going to show us how TT was done. Anyway, he missed a gear going into the first corner and crashed into the fence. They were loading poor Grant into

the ambulance and there was Calvin running alongside: 'Grant! Grant! Can I ride your motorcycle, Grant?' Brown said, 'You can have the sunovabitch!' Calvin rode it, and of course he won."

Soon, Rayborn didn't have to ask. His first real sponsor was an eccentric San Diego motorcycle dealer named Saylor Main, who became famous for taking surfboards on trade for Honda Super Cub scooters at Sun Fun Sports, his beachside shop. Main gave Rayborn a Honda CB72 Hawk that he converted for TT racing. He immediately began winning races with that Hawk, especially at El Cajon, a short track that favored the fine-handling little Honda. While the 250cc Hawk excelled in the lightweight class, Rayborn needed something bigger for the open class—which is where #286 enters the picture.

Sun Fun Sports was also a Matchless franchise, and it had received one of the 25 CSRs built for AMA homologation. The AMA's archaic Class C rule structure, which dated back to the depression, prohibited purpose-built



These photos from the 1962 Cajon Speedway program are the only known images of Rayborn riding this bike. The program also lists two lap records he held.

(read: expensive) factory racers like the G50 from competition. As a result, there were just a handful of genuine G50s ever imported to the States, including a small fleet owned by Bob Hansen, then American Honda's national service manager, who mostly raced in Canada, and another that belonged to Don Vesco, by then one of Rayborn's closest friends, who rode his G50 at regional AFM events.

The CSR was soon nicknamed “The Golden Eagle,” due to its telltale, gold-painted magnesium engine cases. It made a better desert racer than a TT bike.



The custom primary cover was made by Rayborn and his friends, to simply service. They tried every trick in the book, but this CSR just wasn't a competitive TT bike.

The CSR (Competition, Sprung, Roadster) was created by combining the G80CS scrambler chassis with the SOHC G50 engine (replacing the G80's pushrod powerplant), and then adding a generator, lights, and a muffler for street-legal status. Rayborn and his friends did their best to prepare the CSR for TT racing, but by all accounts, it was unfit for this purpose. “You can just look at it and see it's not a great TT bike,” McMurren says. “The CS chassis was intended for scrambles, or desert racing. The forks were way too long and it was quite heavy—I bet it weighed over 400 pounds. It didn't handle worth a crap.”



The bike is fit with a single-shoe drum front brake, but Rayborn reportedly rarely used it. He much preferred to scrub off speed by plowing the front wheel.

(Actually, 360 pounds wet.—Ed.)

“We played with everything on that CSR,” Menzie remembers. “Timing, gearing, carburetion... We took the shocks off and put struts on it; one time we even swapped engines with Don's roadracer to see if it went any faster. It didn't. I just wasn't a very successful bike.”

Rayborn, of course, wasn't about to let an uncompetitive bike slow him down. No one remembers the Matchless ever winning a race, but the Cajon Speedway program from August, 1962, shows that Rayborn set both the four-lap and 30-lap track records on this bike. Setting records on such an underdog



Look closely and you'll see that the rear hub was swiss-cheesed with massive cutouts to save weight. The bike was still overweight for TT racing, at 360 pounds wet.

motorcycle—Open TT was a 900cc class, so Rayborn was riding this overweight, underpowered 500cc single against 650cc Triumphs and 883cc Harley-Davidsons—didn't go unnoticed. This was exactly the sort of performance that brought Rayborn to the attention of Southern California dirt track legend and San Diego Harley-Davidson dealer Leonard Andres. Rayborn quickly earned his expert plate and moved straight from the Matchless to Andres' Harley-Davidsons. Success on Andres' equipment caught the attention of Dick O'Brien at the Harley-Davidson factory, and the rest of Rayborn's racing career is history.



Follow me to Sun Fun Sports! In addition to the bike, Iannucci also owns Rayborn's original Sun Fun/Matchless racing vest, which was saved by Norma Vesco.

Except for those who were part of San Diego's early '60s dirt-track scene, few are even aware of Rayborn's Matchless-riding roots. Rayborn's professional career is so closely entwined with Harley-Davidson that most fans think he emerged from the womb wearing orange-and-black racing leathers. Even Iannucci—an unabashed Rayborn superfan since seeing him race at Loudon in 1973 and a Matchless expert *extraordinaire*—

the mid-'60s. Iannucci sat on the project for over 25 years, unable to find any photos or other documentation to guide him in restoring the bike to as-raced-by-Rayborn condition. Finally, in 2011, McMurren supplied him with two original Cajon Speedway event programs from the collection of Don's wife, Norma Vesco, which showed Rayborn in action aboard #286.

Using these programs for reference, Iannucci and Roper reconstructed #286 in

The “telehydraulic” forks are original spec—and still too long for TT racing—as are the extended Girling shocks. Period racing accessories like the “desert” seat, folding pegs, and megaphone exhaust—all from Bates—plus Flanders grips complete the package. All the chrome and cad plating is original, Iannucci says, and so is half the paint.

Iannucci reintroduced the machine at last summer's Ascot Flat Track reunion in Pomona, where it was seen in public for the first time in almost 50 years. For many Rayborn fans, seeing this motorcycle opened a previously unknown chapter in the racer's legendary life story. For Iannucci, seeing the bike in the light of day—and especially seeing it circulating a racetrack again, under our very own Thad Wolff (see sidebar)—realizes a dream almost 30 years in the making. This one unlikely motorcycle is the thread that connects the Matchless, Harley-Davidson, and Rayborn areas of his collection in a most unexpected way. To bookend one of Rayborn's first race-bikes, this Matchless, with the XR7T, one of his very last, is a special thing indeed.

“Rayborn could ride the wheels off even the worst racing bikes. He learned how to do that by riding this very Matchless G50 CSR TT bike.”

had no idea about this bike until he learned of it from Don Vesco in the early '80s.

Iannucci purchased this bike in 1985 from another San Diego motorcycle personality, Sonny Angel, who had the bike disassembled in the basement of his National City dealership—another of Rayborn's old haunts—since

exactly the form that Rayborn last raced it. The 496cc single is all original except for a modern air filter and NOS piston and liner—the flywheels and rod have never even been removed from the cases. It's fit with the correct 36mm Amal GP1 carb and Lucas Magneto ignition, to produce 52 horsepower at 7000 rpm.



IN RAYBORN'S SHADOW

Photo Model Makes Good, Rides History

WORDS: Thad Wolff PHOTOS: Kevin Wing

This all started, like it always does, with a call from the editor: “Hey Thad, it’s Marc. Are you available to ride a bike for us next week?”

“Sure, what bike?”

“A Matchless G50. The bike Cal Rayborn raced as an amateur.”

There was a moment of silence. It took a few seconds for my inner tach needle to move to the right. I always look forward to riding new motorcycles for photo shoots, but it’s different riding old bikes. Especially bikes with “History.” And this one had History in spades.

I called bike owner Rob Iannucci, who filled me in on the background. The more Iannucci told me, the more interested I became. Usually, I’m expected to ride with great care. The magazine editors always want a great shot, but more importantly, they want the bike back in one piece. Especially a one-of-a-kind artifact like this. Crashing is *not* an option!

Iannucci, on the other hand, had a different idea. All he wanted me to do was to ride the

bike hard and fast, just like its maker—and its former rider—intended. Pitch this Matchless sideways and gas it hard—again and again. This was going to be fun!

I rode with great care—after all, I knew I had the spirit of Rayborn watching over me, and I knew he would approve. I’m a bit of a moto-history buff, and I know more than a few things about the late Calvin Rayborn, but that didn’t stop me from doing a bit more research before embarking on this assignment. The more people I talked to, the more reverent I became. To hear just how much he was respected by *all* of his friends, even now, nearly 40 years after his death, tells me everything I need to know about him as a person. He was the greatest of the great.

So it was with maximum respect that I slipped into his very own race vest, the same one he wore at Cajon Speedway 50 years ago, and kicked his own G50 single to life. With an open megaphone exhaust, this big single has a sound all its own—*ooo-baaa!* Aaron already

wrote about the substandard chassis, and I’m here to confirm that the engine outperforms the chassis three to one. More than anything, it underlined the fact that Cal was able to ride anything fast!

Tires almost as old as I am eventually led to one particularly massive slide and heroic save—I didn’t go down, but the swapping back and forth was so violent that I actually had to straighten the front end by banging the front wheel against the blade of a tractor a few times. I couldn’t help but think that Rayborn might have done that himself once or twice back in the day. That made me smile.

What Rayborn learned on this Matchless was undoubtedly one of the reasons he went on to become the great racer that we remember him as today. One of the many former friends I talked to was the great Dan Gurney, who had given Rayborn space in the legendary All American Racers shop to build a Formula 5000 race car, just before Rayborn died. Cal had proven that he could make any machine go fast, and Gurney really believed that Rayborn had what it took to become America’s next top driver. Then Calvin went to New Zealand, leaving another unanswered question...

Riding his old bike all crossed up, throttle wide open, I pictured Calvin’s patented smile looking down: “All right! That was a good one!”