

OLD AGE AND TREACHERY LAND SPEED RACING GEORGE NACHTSHEIM MOTORCYCLE BUILDER AND RACER





Having a passion for motorcycles (or anything for that matter) can keep us young at heart long into a time that many of our generation used to think was nothing more than waiting around for that call home to our maker. George Nachtsheim, motorcycle builder and racer, shows us how being young at heart can truly be the best state of mind.

George got his start with motorcycles after graduating from High School. While working for Autonetics division of North American Aviation in southern California in 1959, he purchased his first motorcycle, a 1949 BSA 500cc model B33, plunger frame with cast iron barrels and head. He knew nothing about motorcycles at that time except that he wanted to have one! This one was a beauty, candy apple red with lots of chrome! It took him two days on the street in front of his house to learn how to ride it. (If this happened to him today instead of 1959 he might have taken an ABATE or Motorcycle Safety Foundation Class to get him started)

That bike turned out to be a street rider, dirt bike and drag strip racer before he traded it in for his first brand new bike, a 1961 Triumph Bonneville that was Robins Egg blue and silver. He bought it from Bellflower Triumph in Bellflower, CA. and remembers that the salesman that sold it to him was the famous "Flying Flea" Sammy Tanner; national #7 flat track and TT rider.

George remembers putting 500 miles on that motorcycle in the first week he had it so that he could get it back to the dealer for the 500 mile checkup on the Friday after he bought it. On Saturday morning he was packed and off up Highway 101 on that Triumph to his home town of Portland, Oregon.

During this time he lived and breathed motorcycles and had quite a few memorable bikes, from a 250cc Maco dirt bike setup to run on straight methanol, to a 90cc Honda dirt bike, to a 500cc Matchless G80 flat track racer that he turned into a

desert racer without any front brake! At one point he became enthralled with the class "A" Speedway bikes and found a complete and original 500cc JAP speedway racer. He never got good enough to actually enter any races with it but boy did it attract attention on the local sand lot! 16 to 1 compression running on straight methanol, no transmission only a clutch, total loss oil system, a foot peg on the right side only with a hook to hold your knee in and no way that you could hold the front wheel on the ground during acceleration. In 1962 he and a friend bought another 500cc JAP engine and stuck it into an old Ariel Red Hunter frame and ran it at the local drag strip, they took a couple of trophies with it in their class.

During the 1961 - 1963, George got into street bike drag racing at the Lions Drag Strip in Long Beach, CA. Danny Macias, who was the head mechanic at Bellflower Triumph, did the tuning on his bike and taught him a lot about making Triumphs go fast. In 1963 he traded the '61 Bonny in for a new unit construction 1963 Bonneville. These were all white and the first year for the unit construction 650cc. Triumph had found all of the unit construction defects in the 350cc and 500cc unit bikes that they had been making since 1957 and incorporated the upgrades into the '63 Bonny so it was relatively trouble free.

In 1963 he went to work for Norm Reeves BSA | Honda dealership in Lakewood, CA as a mechanic in their service department. Jim Hunter of BSA Gold Star fame was the service manager at that time. He was one of the most cantankerous people that George ever had the pleasure of working for but he was one hell of a mechanic and George benefited from his mentor.

Just as the 1964 models were hitting the showrooms a friend of his begged him to sell him his '63, so he did! He then took that money and bought the first 1964 Bonneville



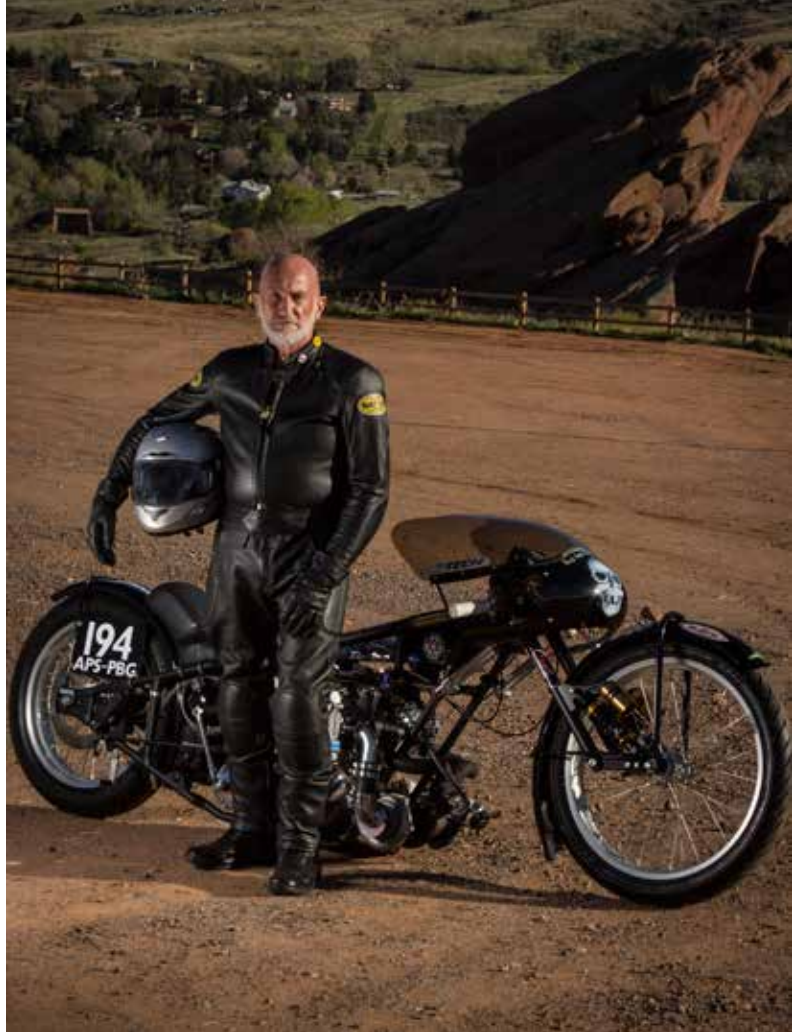
that came in the door at Bellflower Triumph. It was Gold over White and rode even better than his 1963. It was a keeper!

In 1965 George became interested in Bonneville racing when his friend, Danny Macias took his 1957 Triumph 350cc to the salt and had turned a remarkable 120+ MPH! That was when he decided to build his own Bonneville Land Speed race bike. He started the design by constructing a hand built all-aluminum frame into which he mounted an early 1950's all alloy close finned TR5 500cc engine. He completed the bike and was able to run it at El Mirage Dry Lake, Lions Drag Strip, Orange County International Raceway (OCIR) and the Fontana Drag Strip and won many races but never made it to Bonneville with that motorcycle.



In 1971 he quit his good paying job as a machinist for Douglas Aircraft Company to follow his dream and opened a motorcycle shop on Pioneer Blvd. in Norwalk, CA - "George's Custom Cycle". At the shop he and his employees built every make and model of custom bike, Triumph, Honda, Suzuki, Harley, Yamaha and more, doing everything from extended front ends with "tweak bars" to full on frame-up customs, chrome, paint, molded frames, custom upholstery, custom wheels. He did back then what Jesse James and the Orange County Choppers do today.

In 1976 one of his employees approached him about buying the shop. Since the shop had become a gathering place for the Vago's, Galloping Goose's, Devils Henchmen, Hells Angels and the like, by that time George had tired of it and took him up on the offer and went back to working as



a machinist in aerospace. He continued to play with bikes, racing the aluminum framed Triumph and doing some desert racing until he moved to the Denver area in 1987 and opened his own machine shop in Englewood, CO.

Since He had liquidated his bike collection, he didn't end up getting back into motorcycles for twenty years. Then one day in 2007 he happened to pick a copy of Cycle magazine which featured an article on racing at the Bonneville Salt Flats. That article reignited his interest in building a fast bike for land speed racing.

This is where I met George when he called me to pick my brain on Bonneville since I had just began racing and set my first land speed record in 2008 on a vintage 350 cc Triumph 3HW 1945 British military surplus dispatch rider bike. I filled him in on some of the fine details I had learned about racing on the salt and George began construction of a clone of that aluminum framed drag bike he had owned "back in the day" using the same basic design. He purchased a motor from Craig's list was that advertised as a 500cc twin but when he got it home he discovered that it was actually a 650cc in a 500cc case giving him an even more robust power plant to use on this project.

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In 2009 I was going after my second land speed record but seized the engine on my vintage 1954 BSA 650cc A-10 Golden Flash, so I was out of the running. George accompanied me and a couple other buddies out to Speed Week to observe the races first hand and we all learned a lot by prowling the pit area, taking a lot of photos and asking a lot of questions of the racers. Also in 2009, he accompanied a group of racers that were also friends of now deceased Danny Macias to the BUB race event on the salt flats where the team attempted to better Danny's prior land speed record as a tribute to him. In fact they did better the record but, unfortunately, during the engine tear down at tech inspection (required to certify the engine size), a technical infraction with the displacement put the bike out of the 350cc class and caused disqualification for the record.

By 2010 George had his land speed bike complete and with his team "Old Age and Treachery, Land Speed Racing" got three runs in at Bonneville in the APS-PG (Altered Partial Streamlined – Pushrod Gas) 650cc class. This was a "shakedown" year to find the bugs in the bike and he only achieved two runs (76 mph and 89.9 mph) before his hand made aluminum tank split open from vibration. This was a disappointing end of his first year of racing with no record to take home.

In 2011, he constructed a new tank and made other innovations and that year got the bike up to 108 mph before his front fender supports collapsed at speed and ended his further assault on the record of 114.567 mph. Now he was in the zone!

In 2012, George came back with a vengeance and ran 112+ mph but burned a hole in his piston! Bonneville is a cruel mistress and his racing was finished for the year. To further frustrate his efforts another racer came out in the same class running an unbelievable 150.176 mph on a Honda and moved the goal out of reach. Time to drop back and regroup, and George not being a quitter did just that.

By 2013 he had reworked the bike for the APS-PBG (Altered Partial Streamlined – Pushrod Blown Gas) class which had no established record so his chance of being the first to set the bar would only defeat him if he fell off or broke the bike. Well, happy to say he did neither and reached a credible speed of 116.05 mph and the legend of "Turbo George" was born with his first victory at Bonneville. He was even honored by a member of the French team who crafted two beautiful oil paintings of George and his bike at Bonneville.

So this is George's story of persistence. Starting back in 1959 and after a 56 year long history of building and racing motorcycles it yielded him the prestigious title of Fastest Land Speed Racer in the world in his class at the tender age of 73 years.

But the story is far from over. George made further innovations on the Turbo bike but due to heavy rains Speed Week was cancelled in 2014 and 2015. It's frustrating waiting a full year to for the next event but patience and persistence come with age so George is resigned to watch the clock slowly ticking until he can race again. Hopefully, Speed Week will not be cancelled in 2016!

To connect the dots of history further, George has also purchased his old friend Danny Macias' bike and has fitted a new cylinder and piston to make it compliant with the Bonneville technical standards for the M-PF (Modified – Production Fuel) class 350cc which has a current record of 79.702 mph. So it looks like George is destined bring home at least two more trophies to add to his collection and in the process honor his old motorcycle Buddy, Danny Macias. At 75 years of age, I would say George is one of my role models and I look forward joining him on Bonneville Salt Flats at the next running of Speed Week. So in closing, a quote attributed to the late actor James Dean, "Plan like you will live forever, live each day like it's your last"!



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