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1977 MV Agusta America



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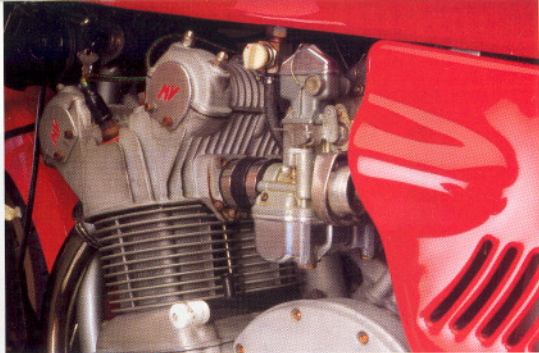
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1977 MV AGUSTA AMERICA

BY MARGIE SIEGAL



PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK CEDAR



In 1955 John Surtees was offered a place on the MV Agusta factory team by Count Domenico Agusta. Surtees was only 21 years old, but already had become one of the top riders for the Norton factory team. Although Surtees was actively looking for another factory ride—Norton could not contest all the World Championship road races in 1956—Surtees put Count Agusta off until he could test the machines at Monza and Modena.

In his autobiography, *Speed*, Surtees describes the MV racers that he first test rode: "On the first trial, I was greatly impressed by the engine's performance. The suspension seemed too soft, however, and had too much movement—a full six inches, I discovered." Assured that the frame would be modified, Surtees signed. He rode for MV-Agusta for the next four seasons, winning the World Championship in 1956, 1958 and 1959.

John Surtees was not the only world champion to race MV's. The list of MV Agusta factory riders reads like a Who's Who of postwar Grand Prix racing: Tarquino Provini, Umberto Masetti, Mike Hailwood, Giacomo Agostini and Phil Read all rode MV's at one time or another. When MV pulled out of racing in 1975, the factory had amazed 37 world road racing titles, truly a remarkable feat.

When the Agusta brothers commenced production of small two-stroke motorcycles during World War II, no one could have predicted that the firm would be leading championship racing less than 10 years later. The decision to start motorcycle production was a strictly commercial one, though, born of necessity to make some money in war-ravaged Italy.

The company was founded by Count Giovanni Agusta, one of Italy's aviation pioneers. The Count designed and piloted his own airplane in 1907, eventually forming his own aviation business in 1920. He died at the somewhat youthful age of 48 in 1927, leaving his wife, Countess Giuseppina Turetta Agusta, to run the company.

The eldest of their four sons, Domenico, eventually proved to possess a mind for business, and the company prospered.

When Italy surrendered to the Allies in 1943, the terms of surrender forbade Italian factories to produce aircraft. Domenico Agusta decided that the best use of the Agusta aircraft company's machinery and skills was to make small, affordable motorcycles. And so he formed Meccanica Verghera Agusta as a subsidiary of the Agusta firm in 1945.

The first MV Agusta bike was powered by a 98 cc two-stroke. In 1947 the company offered a newly-designed 125 cc two-stroke and a 250 cc four-stroke single. The four-stroke was a utilitarian cruiser, but the two-stroke proved to be an up-to-date machine with capacity for sport tuning. Basic transportation in post-war Italy was based on small motorcycles such as the Agusta line, and by 1950, there were more than 250 MV dealers throughout the country.

When MV Agusta decided to take the plunge into Grand Prix racing in 1950, the factory lured Ing. Piero Remor away from rival Gilera. Ing. Remor designed a four-stroke four-cylinder racer that debuted later in the year.

MV AGUSTA AMERICA

By 1956, MV built two racers, one for the popular 350 cc class, and a 500 cc for road racing's premier class. Both engines had double overhead camshafts that were driven by spur gears. Cylinders and heads were aluminum alloy, with cast iron liners. Lubrication was wet sump, the clutch was multi-plate and semi-unit with the engine. The 500 cc version had a bore and stroke of 54 x 54 mm. The frame was double cradle, with telescopic forks and two rear shock absorbers.

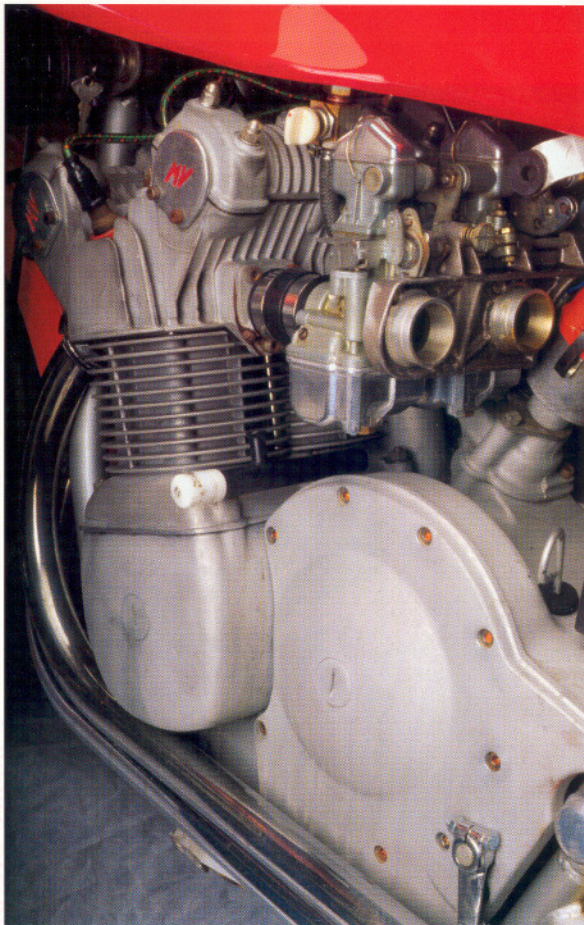
The crankshaft rode in a carrier separate from the cases, spinning on four inner and two side main bearings. Each component of the engine was easy to separate from the surrounding parts and could be removed, worked on and replaced very quickly.

The 500 developed 60 bhp at 10,400 rpm, had a five-speed gearbox, four Dell'orto carburetors and a Lucas racing magneto. The bike was available only to factory riders. Although MV produced a touring prototype similar to the 500 in 1950, it refused to market a road-going version of the four-cylinder engine until the 1960's. In hindsight, this may have been the wisest decision, as the four cylinder, with its multiple castings and gear driven moving parts, was very expensive to produce. MV made money selling single-cylinder two-strokes and pushrod-operated singles and twins. The multis, it turned out, were built exclusively for racing.

Even so, in 1965, MV Agusta exhibited a 600 cc four-cylinder tourer at the Milan motorcycle show. The 600 featured shaft drive, electric starting and disc brakes—innovative features for the time. The first production machines appeared in the summer of 1967.

The touring bike's engine had a bore and stroke of 58 x 55 mm. The streetbike engine's cylinder barrels were made of aluminum alloy, and compression ratio was 9.3:1. Aside from the milder state of tune and the cubic capacity, the engine was similar to the factory racer's. Unfortunately, the tourbike's gas tank looked like it had been grafted off of a Honda 305, the headlight was poignantly ugly and the disc brakes were mechanically, not hydraulically, operated. Two tiny carburetors throttled the engine. Evidently, Count Domenico Agusta had tried to produce a tourer that would be difficult to transform into a production racer and had gone overboard in limiting its performance.

Even so, enthusiasts bought the 600 just to get their hands on the MV Agusta four cylinder engine. No surprise, many of the



The powerplant of the 837cc MV Agusta America closely resembles the racing engines that made the company famous. Carburetion is through four 27mm Dell'Ortos.

new owners immediately set out modifying the in-line four. First order of business was to double the number of carburetors. High compression pistons became common aftermarket items for the big four, and the headlight and tank proved worthy fodder for the scrapheap. Other acceptable aftermarket

additions to the MV Agusta flagship included Ceriani forks, a Fontana front brake, and a beautifully sculpted Menani fiberglass tank. These items transformed the ugly tourer into a handsome sportbike.

Perhaps inspired by the public's want of such a machine, Count Agusta finally gave

MV AGUSTA AMERICA

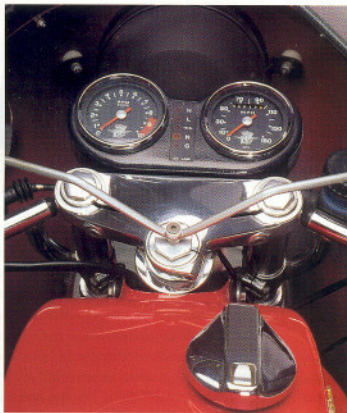
in. And for 1969, MV Agusta introduced the 750 S, a bike that, unlike its 600 cc predecessor, needed no help from the aftermarket. The new 750 cc engine had a bore and stroke of 65 x 56 mm, bringing the four-cylinder engine to a full 743 cc. Pistons were three ring Borgos, developing an impressive compression ratio of 9.5:1. Exhaust valves were enlarged as well, to accommodate the larger displacement. Carburetion was also improved, this time using a quartet of 24 mm Dell'Orto UB24 mixers to feed the thirsty DOHC engine. The multi-plate clutch operated a five-speed gear box. The new MV's melodic engine exhaust notes filtered through four race-bike-inspired, chrome-plated megaphones. The frame was a double cradle, similar to that used on the earlier 600. The new 750 produced 65 bhp at 7900 rpm. Although not incredibly fast, (top speed reportedly was about 115 mph) the 750 S was beautiful, comfortable to ride and smooth as caffè latte.

In 1971, MV introduced a faster version of the S, the 750 Super Sport. The Super Sport, made in very limited numbers, had a Fontana four-leading shoe drum brake, four 27 mm Dell'Orto VHB square slide carburetors and a German Krober electronic tachometer. In 1972 MV introduced the GT, which was designed more as a sporty tourer. Oddly, even though the GT's gearing was lower than the Super Sport's, its compression ratio was raised to 9.7:1.

In early 1974 MV updated the Sport. The combustion chamber was reshaped, compression was bumped up to 10:1, sporting cams provided 8.5 mm valve lift, the inlet valves were enlarged and the 27 mm Dell'Ortos from the Super Sport were added. As a result, the engine developed 69 bhp at 8500 rpm. Scarab 280 mm hydraulic discs reined in the beast.

The following year MV, with the aid of two American entrepreneurs, launched the 789.7 cc America. Intended more for the lucrative American market, the America had a bore and stroke of 67 x 56 mm. Compression ratio was 9.5:1, with a revised combustion chamber. Carburetors were changed to 26 mm Dell'Ortos with sealed tops. These changes raised horsepower to a respectable 75 bhp at 8500 rpm.

In early 1977, MV produced the final development of the 500 cc racing engine, the 850 SS, marketed as the Monza in England.



Bore was increased once again, to 69 mm, with the stroke remaining 56 mm. Brembo disc brakes were used on this race-evolved motorcycle. Further improved cams and a reversion to the bank of four 27 mm carbs further increased performance to a claimed 85 bhp at 8750 rpm.

At this point MV stopped making motorcycles. The major reason was the resurgence

of the aviation side of Agusta. In the early '50s Agusta began producing helicopters, which became increasingly profitable over the years. After Domenico Agusta died in February 1971, the Italian government declared Agusta a vital defense industry and bought 51-percent share of its stock. With government control came government "bean counters" who demanded that Agusta concentrate its production efforts on helicopters rather than motorcycles. When the glamorous Fours failed to bring in as much profit as expected, motorcycle production was doomed.

Bob Weckel, owner of this month's feature bike, and a longtime enthusiast, heard his first MV years ago. "I've been dreaming about them for a long time," says Bob. He started riding motorcycles—his first mount was a 1966 XLCH Sijtorster—while he was a teenager. He sold the Sportster to buy a 1957 FL Harley-Davidson. "It cost me \$300," reports Bob, wistfully adding, "I wish I still had that bike."

In 1968, he sold the FL to finance a trip to Europe. While there, he bought a Vincent—for the same price as the FL. After he returned to the U.S., he continued riding and collecting motorcycles.

Eventually, Larry Buskirk, a friend of Bob's and a Ferrari mechanic by trade, had an MV Agusta 850 SS that Bob wanted. "I lusted after it for the longest time," recalls Bob. Finally, Larry needed some money and Bob was able to pay the asking price. The deal hinged on one important condition, though: Larry would service the bike when necessary.

Larry had taken the MV apart before he sold it to Bob, because the bike had been misused by its original owner. Larry dismantled the engine, and replaced the needle bearings in the camshafts. Honda 750 valve stem seals fit the valves, and stopped oil leakage into the heads. After Larry replaced the rings, he reassembled the engine, giving it a careful valve job. All parts came from MV dealer Cosmopolitan Motors.

The transmission needed three new gears plus some other miscellaneous parts were replaced. Larry rebuilt the clutch with stronger clutch springs, and replaced all the moving parts in the electric starter drive. He painted the frame, tank, side covers, and replaced the front fender. While the engine was apart, he bead blasted the cases.

When Bob first acquired the 850 SS, it

MV AGUSTA AMERICA

lacked the factory fairing. After searching here and there, a replacement fairing turned up at Cosmopolitan. "It fit with a little fabrication," reports Bob. "These Italian things never line up."

The MV is now Bob's official Sunday ride. Bob says that, in general, the MV is very reliable. Its Achilles heel is the clutch cable attachment, which is located by a set screw that has a tendency to work itself loose.

Bob changes the oil once a year, about 1500-2000 miles. About the same time he adjusts the engine's points. "The bike uses a Bosch distributor, identical to the one used on an Alfa Romeo," he adds. The Dell'Orto carburetors stay in synch and seldom need adjusting. As Bob touts, "They just run."

The triple Brembo disc brakes are excellent and very reliable. Bob has never had to bleed the system. Early shaft drives had a reputation for kicking during up-shifts, due to the torque reaction, but the MV's system exhibits only the tiniest shudder when clicking to a higher cog. The quartz headlight is as bright as any modern bike and Bob considers the 12 volt electrical system adequate.

The battery and generator could be easily removed for racing, he points out. The MV does not run down batteries, although Bob charges his periodically. To start the engine, Bob says to pull the choke lever, turn on the switch and punch the start button. "It fires every time and warms up quickly."

He reports that the MV's low speed handling isn't inspiring. "It's a heavy bike and you have to be careful at very low speeds, especially with the fairing," says Bob. "Once you get rolling, it's very smooth. It handles beautifully and is very comfortable and stable in turns."

Around-town riding is another matter. "It doesn't like stop-and-go traffic and will load up and start missing," he points out. "It clears out once you get on an open road. The powerband is between 4000 and 8000 rpm. The estimated top speed is over 140, and up to at least 110 (mph) it is smooth and stable."

Despite any shortcomings that the 850 SS might possess, Bob loves his bike. "I think of the MV as a royal racing machine. The sound is unique, like no other motorcycle. It reminds me of a Formula One racecar. A friend described it as tearing silk." In this case, royal silk.

Margie Siegal is a freelance writer from Oakland, Ca. She is a regular contributor to Motorcycle Collector Magazine and has also written numerous articles about antique and vintage motorcycles for Classic Bike, Iron Works, Motorcyclist and other magazines.



ARTURO MAGNI SPECIAL

When MV abandoned racing in 1975, Arturo Magni, head of the racing department, engineer and designer, realized that he would soon no longer have work at MV. So he laid plans to go into business with his son, Giovanni.

Elaborazioni Magni di Magni Giovanni officially opened its doors in 1977, producing and selling cast alloy wheels. Eventually the company branched out into aftermarket frames, chain drive conversions, oversize cylinder and piston kits, and other performance parts. Much of what Elaborazioni Magni has to offer is adaptations from the MV works racers or ideas that Magni could not put into production when he was with MV. He is still in business, offering improved performance for BMW's, Hondas and Moto Guzzis.

Perhaps one of the finer examples to wear Elaborazioni Magni's MV high-performance hardware is Laney Thornton's 1972 750 S. Two of the more prevalent additions is the Magni chain drive, and the curvaceous Magni alloy gas tank. But what you can't see in the pictures is the 862cc bore kit that's fed by four 30 mm Dell'orto pumper carbs.

Much of the modified MV's refinement has been left to Magni's Motorcycles, a San Francisco dealer familiar with the Italian marque. In particular, Jeremy Bloch is the mechanic in charge of the project, spending a fair amount of time perfecting the jetting for Thornton's ride.

The exhaust also carries a Magni part number. Beautifully crafted, the racey exhaust system also enhances the big four's performance. "The baffles are very interesting," says Jeremy. "They've enhanced the performance of every bike we've put them on."

Thornton's bike is no exception. In fact, Jeremy's test rides on the special have left him especially impressed. "It revs up high like a modern four, but it has so much more torque. It is very exciting to ride."

Thanks to people such as Arturo Magni, the MV magic lives on. Because without their dedication, the MV eventually would be nothing more than a disappearing act.

MORE ON MV'S

MV Agusta four-cylinder machines are very red, very fast, very Italian-and very rare. Most of us will never be able to own one simply because there are not enough to go around. For the many aficionados of MVs, and the lucky few who have or will own one of the fire engines of Gallarate, an excellent source of more information is Mick Waller's MV Agusta (Osprey Collectors Library, 1987)

The MV Agusta Club of America, Box 185, Wiscasset, Maine 04578 publishes a newsletter with tech tips, sources of parts and historical information. David Laemmle, club organizer, also has MV parts for sale.

Arturo Magni, the mechanic and engineer who spent 25 years coaxing speed out of the MV racers, produces aftermarket parts for MV's, Guzzis, BMW's and Hondas. Scott Callan in Los Angeles now makes the MV go-faster kits developed by Magni. Callan can be reached through the MV Club.