

Even if he hadn't started building the roadbikes bearing his name a quarter of a century ago, 77-year-old Arturo Magni would have been a legend in his lifetime. He was a backroom boy, made famous by the racetrack success of the products he was responsible for creating, although under another badge: MV Agusta



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Magni-ficent machines

As the team manager and technical coordinator of the two-wheeled Ferraris, Magni was the driving force behind such racing legends as John Surtees, Mike Hailwood, Giacomo Agostini and Phil Read. Their red-and-silver 'fire engines' dominated Grand Prix racing's 500cc blue riband class for a quarter of a century. This was in the face of Honda's four-stroke challenge of the 1960s, right up until the FIM's short-sighted noise regulations, and the huge budgets devoted by Japanese manufacturers to defeating MV, brought that era to a close. And, when that happened, Arturo Magni assumed another challenge – that of becoming a motorcycle manufacturer in his own right.

Arturo Magni was born in 1925 in Arcore, a small market town the other side of the

wall from the Autodromo race circuit in the parkland of Monza. Nowadays it is notable as the base of the Mondial/VOR factory but, until 1993, for more than 80 years it had been the home of Italy's oldest and most historic bike manufacturer, Gilera.

In fact, motorcycles were originally of little interest to Arturo who, as a boy, was more interested in building model aircraft, then later designing and constructing the full-size gliders with which he became a star turn at pre-World War Two air shows. In 1942, he won the Italian powerless endurance title in his own self-made glider with a ten-foot wingspan.

*Below left: Magni Sfida 1100 laid bare shows the pedigree of its hand-built components
Below: A Magni-Guzzi 1100 Classico part way through assembly at the factory*



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Ironically, in those war years, Magni's first paid job was overhauling engines for Italian Air Force planes. This inevitably came to an end, but one of his gliding team colleagues was Ferruccio Gilera, son of company boss Giuseppe, who found a job for him after the war, working in the Gilera factory.

A Grand Prix apprenticeship

In 1947, when Giuseppe Gilera decided to re-enter 500cc Grand Prix racing, Magni applied to be one of the mechanics chosen to help develop Gilera designer Pietro Remor's all-new unsupercharged four-cylinder racer. This, in due course, would go on to win six 500cc world titles in the hands of Duke, Masetti and Liberati. But, in 1950, Count Domenico Agusta lured Remor away from Gilera to design the first four-cylinder

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MV Grand Prix racer – and Magni went with him, to Cascina Costa, as the fledgling MV team's chief mechanic.

His first task was to supervise assembly and development of Remor's shaft-driven 500cc four-cylinder, parallelogram rear suspension design Grand Prix contender. (Thirty years later, this design would form the basis of the Magni-Guzzi chassis.) Although MV's lead rider Les Graham, the 1949 500cc World champion, liked the bike, it was too radical for the time and was set aside after 1951. The more conventional chain-driven machine, which replaced it, was honed by Magni and the team into a world-title-winner in the hands of John Surtees, in 1956, although the following year Liberti regained the crown for Gilera.

But, after the retirement of both Gilera and Moto Guzzi from racing, 1958 would see the start of an unparalleled 17 years of successive world title victories in the 500cc class by the MV Augusta team under Magni's direction. This was particularly after 1959, when Magni was appointed by Count Domenico Agusta to head up the management of the entire MV Agusta racing department, under the Count's guidance.

Magni stayed in that job until MV Agusta retired from Grand Prix racing in 1976, after winning no less than 75 road racing World Championships, including a total of 37 Riders' titles, in the hands of Sandford,

Below: A Magni MV (in front) poses with a Magni BMW. The latter was built at the behest of Magni's German importer and boasted handling far superior to the donor machine. 150 were built but buyers were not convinced



Provinci, Ubbiali, Surtees, Hocking, Hailwood, Agostini and Read. During all this time, Arturo Magni was in sole charge of MV's racing department. Count Agusta paid the bills, but Magni ran the race team and supervised the entire technical operation, including the development of benchmark designs like the legendary title-winning triples, the later fours, and the six-cylinder prototypes.

A new challenge

After MV pulled out of racing Arturo, together with his two sons, Carlo and Giovanni, founded his own company, Elaborazioni Preparazioni Magni (EPM), in nearby Samarate, north-west of Milan. To begin with, they concentrated on producing special components for the shaft-driven four-cylinder MV Agusta 750 road bikes, such as chain-

drive conversions and big-bore kits to bump up engine capacity to 861cc.

But EPM was also one of the world's first suppliers of aftermarket cast-alloy wheels and, in due course, eldest son Carlo spun off this side of the business on his own, leaving Arturo and his kid brother Giovanni (today 44-years-old and running the company full-time after his father's semi-retirement) to

...the Magni-BMW suffered from the 'Not Made Here' syndrome...

concentrate on the bike-building side under the Magni name.

Inevitably, from 1977 onwards, the first Magni frame kits were built to house the four-cylinder MV Agusta roadster motors built just up the road. But the end of MV Agusta motorcycle manufacture forced EPM to find another source for engines – and who more natural than Honda, the first Japanese company to copy the Gilera/MV in-line four-cylinder layout and bring it to the street?

Using the CB900 Bol d'Or engine, the first Magni-Honda appeared in 1980 in two versions: the MH1, a budget-level naked bike using suspension and wheels from the original Honda, fitted to a twin-loop chrome-moly tubular frame, and the MH2, a fully-faired café racer using the same chassis, but with uprated Italian hardware like Brembo brakes, Ceriani suspension and EPM wheels. Around 300 Magni-Hondas were built in the two years of production (1980/81), with by far the largest number going to Germany, where the bikes attained must-have cult status.





Above: Pretty Magni-Guzzi 1100 Sfida displays its fine handling prowess as Cathart hustles it through another bend

Boxer enters the ring

This meant that, when Magni's German importer asked for a BMW Boxer-based café racer, the father and son team swiftly obliged, and the result appeared in 1982 in both MB1 and MB2 guises, again in both naked and fully-faired form. Magni's experience in making the shaft-driven MV roadsters handle properly was applied to the BMW – and its box-section swingarm and twin-loop frame, which unbolted to allow engine removal, set new standards for Boxer behaviour.

But the timing was off. The bike's debut coincided with the launch of BMW's four-cylinder K100 'Flying Brick' range and the temporary suspension of Boxer production, quite apart from the fact that Arturo felt that the Magni-BMW suffered from the 'Not Made Here' syndrome as far as German BMW owners were concerned. 'They seemed to believe that, whereas a European chassis builder could certainly improve on what Honda or another Japanese company could produce, the same could never be true of their beloved BMWs,' he says.

The switch to an all-Italian twin

'We built 150 BMW-powered bikes, but it was hard work selling them, and the last ones took more than ten – yes, ten! – years to dispose of. But now we understood that what the market wanted from Magni was an all-Italian motorcycle and, with our shaft-drive experience, the obvious target was Moto Guzzi.'

'The owners, De Tomaso, liked the idea of having an upmarket, limited edition sportsbike to add depth to the Guzzi range, especially if they could make money out of selling us the engines to make it! So we built the first Magni-Guzzi Le Mans in 1985, and have constructed over 700 Guzzi-engined Magni motorcycles since then. The peak years were in 1990 and 1991, when we built 170 bikes each year, and we'd have made even more if we could have obtained more engines from Guzzi.'

Resisting the temptation to develop a chain-driven conversion for the transverse V-twin Guzzi motor similar to the one they produced for the MVs, Magni instead worked at eliminating the handling disadvantages of the shaft-driven transmission by adapting the parallelogram rear end fitted to the prototype MV Augusta 500cc GP bike which Arturo had helped to produce way back in 1950. This became a trademark feature of the Magni-Guzzi café racers, and worked so well that race team owner Dr John Wittner produced a modified version for his own BoTT (*Battle of The Twins* – ed.) racers which, in turn, the Moto Guzzi factory adopted on its Daytona eight-valve machine launched in 1989.

By then, the Magni range had been expanded to include three other models, besides the fully-faired Le Mans with its razor-edge styling and square-tube chassis. The first of this trio of retro-themed models were the naked Classic and its half-faired Arturo counterpart. With wire wheels, stainless-steel mudguards and big round headlamp, they were both launched in 1987 to evoke the 1970s' café racer era. Response to these models was so favourable – especially in Japan, which has since become Magni's number one market – that in 1989 Magni launched the first Sfida.

This was a throwback to the 1960s, with a new round-tube version of the twin-shock, double-cradle chassis and styling based on the grand prix racers of that era.

Engine supply difficulties

Demand for Magni motorcycles had by now begun to outstrip Moto Guzzi's ability to supply its 1000cc pushrod two-valve V-twin engines which had powered all Magni-Guzzis built to date. This problem became so serious that, at one time, Giovanni and Arturo seriously considered switching to desmo power, by obtaining a supply of 900SS motors to produce a Magni-Ducati. But, uncertain whether Ducati would be able

to do any better in maintaining a regular supply of motors, the Magnis decided to stick with Guzzi.

A small batch of 60 Sfida 400s for the Japanese market helped to bridge the gap but, in 1991,

Magni's Australian importer, Ted Stolarski, commissioned a new race bike, fitted with the fuel-injected high-cam Daytona eight-valve motor, for BoTT racing. Using WP suspension, this first Magni design, with a monoshock rear end, was so successful in the hands of Owen Coles that Magni developed a street version which debuted in 1993, naturally called the Australia 8V.

Subsequently, 120 of these have been built, in spite of the chronic shortage of engines Magni suffered in the final days of the De Tomaso ownership of Moto Guzzi, when annual production at the Mandello factory declined to barely 3000 bikes a year. Building even a small batch of 20 motors for Magni became a big deal.

But, after Finprogetti took over operation

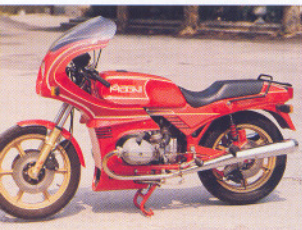
Below: Arturo Magni and son Giovanni here proudly show off their Sfida 1100 (in front) and an 8V Australia (behind)





Above: 1100 Classic powered by Moto Guzzi's venerable 1074cc longitudinal V-twin is epitome of the all-Italian Magni bikes

of the Guzzi marque, new company boss Arnulfo Sacchi made improving the supply of engines to Magni an integral part of his company plans. This led to the long-awaited debut in 1996 of the all-new Magni Sfida 1100 café racer, which the father and son team had held back from putting into production until they could be sure of getting a supply of engines to meet customer demand. By this time, just over 500 Guzzi-powered Magnis had been constructed in the Samarate factory.

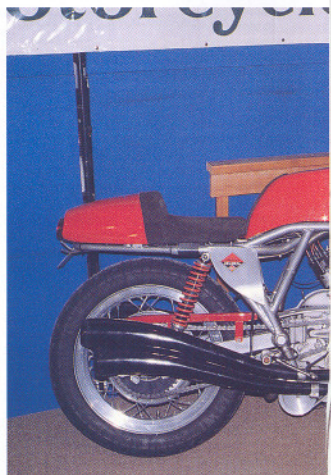


The need to look East

But ongoing problems with the supply of engines, coupled with the uncertainty surrounding the future of the Moto Guzzi factory leading up to its acquisition by Aprilia in 2000, led the Magnis to return to their roots once again. They developed a new model employing a four-cylinder Japanese engine – the Magni Sport 1200S – which

Giovanni and Arturo seriously considered switching to desmo power, by obtaining a supply of 900SS motors to produce a Magni Ducati

Left: Magni-BMW belies the German heritage of its powerplant by looking every inch the Italian thoroughbred
Right: Magni-MV 900 displays chain drive conversion pioneered by Magni and the curving exhausts so typical of period MVs





debuted in the autumn of 1999.

Weighing just 196kg dry, this employed the air/oil-cooled in-line four-cylinder motor from the Suzuki Bandit 1200, mounted in a set of cycle parts carefully tailored to resemble the most desirable MV Agusta roadbike of the classic era, the 1970s' 750S with its chrome mudguards, distinctive 'anatomica' fuel tank

Above: Magni 8V Australia outside the gates of the factory at Samarate

Top right: Gorgeous early Magni-MV

Above right: Magni-Guzzi Le Mans uses 1000cc version of Moto Guzzi V-twin

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and bright red seat. Oh, and the four gracefully curved separate exhausts which make the kind of music any lover of Made-in-Italy multi-cylinder motorcycles has come to expect, even from a Japanese engine.

The Sport 1200S continues in production, mostly to satisfy the ongoing demand for Magni products in Japan. It's ironic, really, that after spending 25 years fending off Oriental claims on bike racing's holy grail, that Arturo Magni should nowadays owe the continued existence of his bespoke bike-builders to an appreciative and faithful Japanese clientele...

"I'm an extremely fortunate person," admits Arturo Magni. "I spent more than a quarter of a century working on the most exotic and most successful racing motorcycles in the world, during which life was full of challenge and enjoyment, and no little success. But then, at



the age that most men retire to spend more time with their families, I began a new career as a specialist manufacturer – and had the privilege of doing so together with my wife and sons. The restoration work that our company regularly carries out on MVs and other historic bikes keeps me in touch with the past.

"But, under Giovanni's guidance, Magni looks ahead to the future, too, with a succession of new road models incorporating the latest technology and the finest components. It's the best of both worlds, old and new, and the fact that so many of our customers around the world have also become good friends makes me feel my family is a very big one – and it's constantly increasing in size, too, every time we complete another bike!" 

Below: Latest model is the Magni 1200S, powered by Suzuki's inline four-cylinder engine. Styling is unmistakably evocative of earlier MV-powered Magni machines



Pic: Three Cross Motorcycles

