

AS SOON AS I ESCAPED FROM FORMAL education, I went to the races. I went to the drags, to the scrambles and to road-races. My bike-enthusiast friends and I did a lot of foolish things then and later, including trying to straighten bent valves, running cracked pistons by drilling the end of the crack, and putting a Triumph engine into a Honda frame (please don't ask; it seemed like the thing to do at the time).

At the same exuberant time, we sent off for every speed-equipment catalog, which were free and came with stickers. We covered our toolboxes with the stickers. Well, I didn't have a real toolbox yet, so I therefore went to buy one with a fiancée to whom I am no longer married, in a Sears store that no longer exists, in a city I no longer inhabit. Then I covered it with stickers. We learned to recite nonsensical ad phrases from drag mags like, "Crower Imperial fully rollerized roller tappet cams and kits give results that are positively unreal." Then we called everything "unreal," and experimented with adding the word "now" to the end of everything we said, just as the Beach Boys did in their songs. We drilled for lightness and decorated our bikes with red or blue-anodized carb stacks—no air filters. We made a cult of hard acceleration, hard braking and frequent valve adjustment. It all seemed right and proper at the time.

Then we began trying to enter races instead of just watching them. We floated on chilling waves of our own ignorance and inexperience, pinching inner tubes, creating unnecessary fuel leaks and falling down. I managed somehow to get in the way of someone in a hurry on a BSA Gold Star (I know because I remember the sound before the smack) and get my collarbone broken. Even that was not quite peace with honor; the ambulance driver made me sit up front, not languish dramatically in the back. As always, we papered everything with stickers—colorful, glorious stickers. Then one day came a Terrible Awakening. Gary Nixon walked by and asked, speaking as he does through his teeth and without moving his lips, "You guys get paid for all them stickers?"

Wham! In the world of professional racing, stickers are not decorations.



They are not wallpaper for covering up pimples on your fairing. They are paid advertisements. A Champion sticker, a Castrol sticker, a Bell Helmets sticker—any of these on fairing, tank or seat meant that someone in the corporate world had handed out real money to a top rider in exchange for a good chance of seeing those stickers in victory circle, where they might win friends and influence people. We, in slathering our bikes with these stickers, had felt quite grown-up. Now we felt foolish, as if we had voluntarily painted our houses as huge "Chew Mail-Pouch Tobacco" billboards—for free. And so we had to develop methods for removing stickers. Pulling them straight off left a sticky residue that was soon outlined by dirt. Any solvent that removed the adhesive also pulled the paint. Finally, we learned to set the fairing or tank out in the sun; once warm, the stickers came away cleanly. Back to zero. Then commenced the long process of attempting to earn the stickers.

Other lessons: At the very beginning, we learned that bolts and nuts fall off racing motorcycles. No one had ever heard of a balancer shaft, and rubber mounts were for car engines. It was typical for a mid-'60s two-stroke racebike engine to break the mounts out of the frame about half-way through the season, so mere bolts and nuts were easy meat for metal-eating vibration. The first answer we learned was 3M Weatherstrip Adhesive, the tough, yellow, rubbery stuff made for

installing auto door seals. Polite users called it 3M; others called it "gorilla snot." Applied to things like threaded fasteners and chain masterlinks, it held like nothing else, but of course that was the problem. This stuff had to be hacked away with a sharp knife before the secured item could be removed for service. If it got into threads, removing the item was a long, hard twist. We'd learned to use 3M from a man of a kinder, gentler era, one in which service was a yearly affair, not a minute-by-minute crisis. Our fingers were perpetually stuck together with 3M, and we kept open pans of lacquer thinner in our shop to painlessly soften and dissolve the stuff.

One of our number began riding in national events, here and in Canada. He broke the news to the rest of us gently. Gluing your nuts on with yellow rubbery stuff wasn't cool in the pro world. Lockwire was the word. Able to be cut away and replaced quickly, wire was ideal for our frequently serviced machines.

Now we plunged in, converts to a new religion. Following a diagram in a magazine article, I made a primitive wire-twister out of a screwdriver. How do they drill those little holes in the sloping flanks of bolt and nut heads? We had to learn how, breaking countless 1/16-inch drill bits. And then someone showed up with military-surplus safety-wire pliers; now, surely, we were pros, securing everything with evenly twisted, stainless-steel wire, bought at the aircraft service shop.

Not quite. Everyone who learns to twist wire, at first punctures his fingers on the sharp, cut-off ends. These punctures are especially bad in the end of a thumb, because they hurt for two days. So we learned to twist over the cut-off end—a simple thing but important. In time, the surplus twisters sprang apart. Several years later, I would feel delightfully self-indulgent for buying a pair of gun-blued Robinson wire-twisters, 9 inch, with needle nose. I have them still.

No one ever completely sheds unprofessionalism, of course. The unprofessional enthusiasm that made us stick stickers, talk funny and glue our bolts was still enthusiasm, and without that, you have no special will to do anything. □