

Bill Uhl's reunion with history

<http://www.motohistory.net/news.html>

written by Ed Youngblood



What are the odds that you're kicking around a motorcycle salvage yard and suddenly you come across your first purpose-built race bike from more than 50 years ago? And what are the odds that you are a world-class rider and this is the bike on which you launched your career by winning the Idaho State Championship? And what are the odds that this bike isn't salvage junk, but exquisitely restored, just as it looked when you raced it? It could happen, and it did. . . . to ISDT great and Motorcycle Hall of Famer Bill Uhl.

Billy Uhl (pictured to the right) was born to Herb and Rose Uhl in Wooster, Ohio in 1950. He recalls, "Dad had a farm and a race track, which he sold for very little money, and we took off. We traveled all over the country. When we arrived in a new area, Dad would take whatever job he could get, then during his lunch hour he would look for a job he would like. When it was time, we moved on, time and again." By the time Billy entered the first grade, he had lived in 28 states. Finally, the family settled in Boise Idaho, where Herb opened a motorcycle dealership.



Motorcycle competition was part of the Uhl family history. Billy got his first rides sitting on the gas tank in front of his father. When he started riding his own bike, his parents watched from the sidelines because his legs were too short to reach the ground. When Billy had to stop, he rode along side a cut bank and leaned up against the bank in a slow motion fall. Then he asked for help to pick up the bike and get it going again.

By the age of eight, Billy was racing. One of his early competition bikes was a modified Honda 50cc step-through Super Cub (pictured below left), on which he won his class in his first cross-country competition, at the age of 10. Herb had to have a retired machinist hand-make a 72-tooth rear sprocket for the bike, in addition to many other modifications to achieve competitive performance from the little Honda. This unlikely bike earned such fame, and Herb sold so many Hondas, that American Honda's home office chief Jack McCormack came to Idaho to see what was going on. As a result, one of Herb's conversion kits was shipped to California where it was installed on a bike and tested by other Honda personnel. Then, the whole bike was shipped to Japan where it was studied for development of the Trail 50.



Still, the little step-through was never intended for such use, and based on his talent, Billy deserved better. So Herb and his associate Keith Millard set about building a proper racing bike, creating their own chassis around an 80cc Suzuki engine. It had an enlarged backbone frame tube which functioned as a fuel tank, and featured the unorthodox but effective use of a hand lever as a foot brake pedal. With a stylish seat and the tank upholstered from seat to steering head, the little Suzuki looked very fast even when it was sitting still. Bill says, "Originally, it was built as a hard-tail (pictured right), but all of our tracks were so rough that Keith and Dad later added the rear suspension."

Billy's ability and reputation blossomed on this bike. He became an Idaho State Champion, won a three-state championship, and won every trophy dash he ever entered on the machine. Proudly, Herb had a sign painted to display with the motorcycle when it was parked in his shop



or put on display at local recreation trade shows. Bill recalls, "I continued to ride the bike for years. Even when I had graduated to bigger equipment, I would enter three classes, including the 80cc, so I could get as much saddle time as possible." He adds, "This little bike put me on my way to a career in professional flat track racing. That's what I intended to do until I was offered a box-stock Sachs and a berth at the International Six Days Trial in 1969. For me it was all about riding. Six days of non-stop competition seemed a lot more exciting than short sessions on a scrambles or flat track."



Now we fast-forward a half-century to the day earlier this year when Bill was kicking around Boise Cycle Salvage, looking for a seat for his KDX. He recalls, "I walked around the corner, and there it was. It was absolutely beautiful. Someone had restored it to just the way I'd raced it, and it brought back a flood of memories. I could not believe how much time had passed. It seemed like just yesterday that I was racing this motorcycle." The display even included the sign that Herb had created (pictured right). The Uhl shop sticker was still intact on the rear fender of the bike.

Uhl learned that the man responsible for the restoration was Steve Myers (pictured below), an employee of Idaho Power, who is a life-long motorcycle enthusiast, a collector and restorer, and a director of the Idaho Vintage Motorcycle Club. Myers knew the Uhls because



he bought his first motorcycle—a Honda Trail 50 which he still has among his collection—from Herb in 1962. He explains, "About fifteen years ago, I was at a yard sale in Boise, and I found the Suzuki in a pile of junk. It was all cut up, and the frame cradle had been chopped to hold a larger engine, but I immediately recognized it." Myers bought the bike, and eventually bought four more junked 80cc Suzukis to get the engine and rolling chassis parts he needed to complete the restoration. He acquired the original shop sign from Herb, who, when he saw the restored machine declared it "incredibly accurate," right down to the unique brake pedal (pictured below), even though Myers had worked only from his memory. Because there were no permanent numbers in Idaho in the 1960s, and riders were assigned numbers from track to track, Myers put his own AHRMA racing number on the plate.



As discovery of his 50cc Suzuki brought back a flood of memories, Uhl recalled how quickly his career as a professional motorcyclist changed. He says, "I was ready to go big time with the 1970 season. I already had a sponsored BSA track machine lined up. Then I got the offer to ride the 1969 ISDT in Germany with my Dad. This was the end of any plans for a flat track career." Riding with Herb as an unofficial father/son team, Bill earned his first ISDT gold medal at the green age of 18, becoming the youngest U.S. rider to ever win a gold, next to Jeff Smith of England who won his first gold at 17. Only two gold medals were won by Americans that year—Bill Uhl (pictured below left) and Malcolm Smith.



Bill recalls, "On the final day of the road racing special test, my Sachs was completely worn out. It had no power at all. Dad would slow down enough for me to tuck in his draft. Then he'd gradually tow me up to speed, and as we neared the next corner I'd slingshot around him (pictured below right). Then as I began to slow down we would start the process again. We did it every lap and the spectators caught on, and they went wild! On the final lap, all of them were shouting and wildly throwing their hats in the air as I leaned over to shake my Dad's hand as we went down the front straight past the finish line. We had just worked as a team and finished our first 6-days, in fact our first timed event ever. This performance as an ISDT rookie set the stage for John Penton to

recruit Uhl.

Bill Uhl went on to qualify for the ISDT for ten years, riding nine. He explains, "In 1975, I was sponsored by Can-Am. They decided not to support the cost of going to the ISDT, but I was under contract so I couldn't ride something else. I had to drop out, but I will never regret this because my slot went to Dick Mann for his one and only ISDT where he proved without a doubt that he is the best all-round rider that America has ever produced." During his decade of international competition, Uhl won five gold medals, one silver, one bronze, and had one DNF. Uhl was named to the Penton Trophy Team in 1972 where he earned his second gold and the team won the Watling Trophy for meritorious effort. At the American ISDT in 1973, Uhl again rode on the U.S. Trophy team on a 125cc Penton, won a gold medal, and became the highest scoring American at the trial. In 1975, he was given a *Motorcyclist Magazine* All-Star Award, and in 2007 was inducted into the AMA's Motorcycle Hall of Fame. In 2008, the Antique Racing Motorcycle Association bestowed on Uhl its prestigious "Legends" title for his record in cross-country competition. To celebrate his induction into the Motorcycle Hall of Fame, Uhl wore his official 1973 ISDT dress uniform (pictured left), which surely made many of his colleagues with spreading waistlines green with envy.



At the end of his active competitive career, Uhl became a professional trail builder and consultant regarding the multiple use of public lands. He became the first Trail Ranger in the state of Idaho and helped establish the state's Trail Ranger Program. He is noted nationally as an effective communicator and teacher, and has helped establish the standards for environmental and ethical use of public land. He helped develop an off-road riding curriculum, and today is a Senior Instructor in the state of Washington. Uhl also trains individual students and companies all over the nation in the safe operation of off-highway vehicles,

including motorcycles dirt bikes, ATVs, side-by-side UTVs, and snowmobiles.

From his first cross-country victory aboard a Honda step-through to his induction into the Motorcycle Hall of Fame, Bill Uhl has compiled a lifetime of achievement on behalf of the motorized recreation community. To understand how far we've come, we often need reminders of when and where it all began. Thanks to another motorcycle enthusiast named Steve Myers, Bill Uhl's restored race bike was sitting on display in a motorcycle salvage shop in Boise, Idaho, awaiting their historic reunion.

To read Bill Uhl's official Hall of Fame bio, click [here](#). To access the web site for Bill Uhl's off-highway training program, click [here](#). To access the web site for Boise Vintage Cycle Salvage, which contains photos of Uhl's restored Suzuki racer, click [here](#). To reach the Idaho Vintage Motorcycle Club, click [here](#).

Postscript, from T.S. Eliot

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*