

CycleNews

MOTOGP TESTING

ROSSI'S NOT
DONE YET!



SAN DIEGO
SUPERCROSS

MASTERFUL
MILLSAPS

FIRST RIDE:
MV AGUSTA F4/F4RR

MOLTO BELLA

BY LARRY LAWRENCE

MEDALIST, COLUMNIST AND TRAIL BLAZER

Racing alongside his father at the International Six Days Trials in 1969, Billy Uhl won his first of five ISDT gold medals and, at just 19, became one of the youngest riders ever to win a gold medal. In 1973, he was the top-performing American at the first-ever ISDT in the United States and won the Count Lurani Trophy for the top performing U.S. rider at the event. After reinvigorating the Idaho State Trail System and beginning the Idaho State Parks Trail Ranger Program, Uhl became the Senior Instructor at OHV Training, using his trials experience to educate motorcycle, ATV, and snowmobile riders of all skill levels and teach trail design, building, and maintenance.

Uhl was born in Wooster, Ohio, on April 22, 1950. The Uhls moved frequently in the 1950s and by the time Billy was in the first grade he'd lived in 28 states. The family finally settled in Idaho and his father, Herb, became a motorcycle dealer in Boise in the mid-1950s.

Herb was a motorcycle racer. At an early age, Billy followed in his father's footsteps. At first little Billy rode on the tank of his dad's bike, but at the age of eight he started riding on a Harley-Davidson 125cc two-stroke. He was so small he had to ride to his parent's side to be able to stop because his legs couldn't reach the ground. Later, as he gained confidence, he would start and stop on the side of a hill where he could quickly jump on or off the bike. Later, Billy began racing on a 50cc Honda step-through that his father had modified; Honda even used elements of Uhl's design in its line of small off-road machines in the early 1960s. In his first cross-country race, Billy placed first in his class



on the Honda. Racing against adults, Billy moved up the ranks and competed in motocross, trials, TT, hillclimb and dirt track events, turning pro at the age of 17.

Uhl became a promising motocross and flat-track racer. He scored well in Trans-AMA 250cc races in 1971 and was a leading novice flat track racer. He was even offered the opportunity to race flat track with backing from BSA in 1968. However, it was in off-road events that Uhl excelled

and he decided to focus his attention there. He won numerous state cross country championships and quickly became considered one of the top up-and-coming off-road talents in America.

His breakthrough came in 1969. He'd become a member of the International Six Days Trials (later changed to the International Six Days Enduro in 1981) as a last-minute substitute for an injured rider. He and Malcolm Smith were the only U.S. riders to score Gold Medals that year in West Germany and Uhl became one of the youngest in the history of the competition to win Gold.

Interestingly, Uhl went to the ISDT in Germany in 1969 with his father, who was also on the U.S. squad. They became the first father-son team to compete together and the German press followed them with great enthusiasm. In the road race special test, Billy's stock Sachs was underpowered. His father realized the plight his son was in and temporarily slowed his more powerful bike to let Billy ride in his draft. That gave Billy the extra speed he needed and it helped him go on to win Gold that year.

"That was my first time ever racing in a timed event," Uhl said. "I'd always ridden

cross country type events. I wasn't sure what was going on when I came to my first checkpoint, it was a totally new experience for me." The German spectators in '69 became fans of Uhl and his father. In the road race special test, the crowd showed their enthusiasm by throwing their hats up in the air as the father-son pair sped by.

Uhl returned to the ISDT in 1970 and earned a Bronze. In 1971, Uhl had a good ride going at the Isle of Man ISDT when his Puch broke a motor late in the Six Days. It was the only time he didn't finish the event. Uhl was named to the U.S. ISDT Trophy team for the first time in 1972. That year in Czechoslovakia Uhl again won a Gold riding a Penton. The American Trophy Team was given the Watling Trophy that year, awarded for best effort or most improved.

The zenith of Uhl's participation in the ISDT competition came in 1973 when the U.S. hosted the prestigious international competition in Dalton, Massachusetts. That year, riding for the Trophy team, Uhl once again earned Gold and was the top scoring American riding a 125cc Penton. Sadly his mother passed away while attending the event that year. She had been battling illness and her last wish was to see her son compete in the race on American soil.

"That was probably my biggest achievement in racing," Uhl explained. "At the same time it was an incredible low spot in my life with my mother's passing." In 1975 he was given the Motorcyclist magazine All-Star Award.

During the 1970s Uhl began writing a regular column in Cycle News called "Down the Trail with Billy Uhl."

Uhl continued participating in the ISDT through 1977, only missing 1975 when Can-Am pulled its support at the eleventh hour. By the 1977 season, he was having serious problems with carpal tunnel syndrome. His last competitive motorcycle-racing event was the 1977 Olympiad. After that, he retired from competition and for a time left motorcycling behind.

He returned in the mid-1980s when he be-

came active in trail building, design and maintenance - as well as off-road riding advocacy. Over the years of building and maintaining hundreds of miles of trails, Uhl developed new trail specifications to design trails that were sustainable and resistant to erosion. Some of his trails remain in great condition decades after they were built. His building methods and designs served as a model for other trail builders. "I remember my first season of trail building in the woods I think I saw three people that entire time," Uhl said. "The areas were so remote and this was before trail riding became so popular."

As a lifelong advocate for multiple trail use, Uhl also used his leadership status to ensure that the trails remain open for everyone to enjoy. Uhl planted the seed at Idaho State Parks and Recreation that started the successful State Trail Ranger program. In fact, he was the first Trail Ranger in the state. Uhl is also a Master Tread Trainer for the national Tread Lightly! program which teaches people how to recreate responsibly.

"As impressive as his riding skills are, what impresses me even more are his riding ethics," said Terry Sexton a District Ranger for the Jefferson Ranger District in Montana. "He's the Goodwill Ambassador for motorized trail riders. Bill has the perfect personality to be a good instructor. His knowledge of riding and trail management, coupled with his common sense teaching style, makes Bill an effective communicator and instructor." In 2002, Gas Gas invited Uhl to race in the Idaho ISDE qualifier and after years of not competing, and despite being terribly out of shape, he still showed some of the skills he'd had 25 years earlier. "I couldn't walk for two days afterwards," Uhl joked. Uhl raised two boys, often taking them on the tank of his motorcycle to trail-building sites like his father had done with him. They both became good riders. Uhl will always be remembered for his ISDT accomplishments and for his vast contributions to off-road motorcycling. He was inducted into the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame in 2007. **CN**