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▶ TWO WHEELS

Neilson and Schilling, editor in chief and managing editor at *Cycle* magazine, had extensive knowledge about everything within the industry. Their decision to ride a Ducati, as opposed to a Kawasaki or a BMW, was definitely different. Nobody was riding Ducatis, but nobody knew that the 750SS could handle so well. After the '77 season, Old Blue and Neilson retired, but they left an indelible mark upon racing history. For this reason, NCR and Ducati decided to – in a sense – resurrect the beast.

Neilson, who had no knowledge of the project until days before it was unveiled, has said that NCR's New Blue is what Old Blue would have been with 30-plus years of technology. It has remained very faithful to the original and is first and foremost, a race bike.

NCR used the Ducati Sport 1000S '07 as the platform for the project. They went in, removed 38kg from the cycle,



NCR FACTORY NEW BLUE

or roughly 25% of its original weight. New Blue weighs just 150kg. NCR increased the model's power by adding their 1100NCR engine, which brings the power up 40% to 116hp. The braking system is of racing origin with Ohlins, Brembo, and Poggipolini Titanium components. The exhaust system is an extraordinary titanium 2-1-2, weighing just 4kg. The bike is being sold ready to race. Just like Old Blue, New Blue is strictly for track use only.

For more information, please visit www.ncrfactory.com





What is it about motorcycles – as opposed to very fast cars – that made you so interested in them? Did any one thing about cycles pique your interest?

I like 'em both. I had a 1969 Chevy Nova SS that I bought through Car & Driver Magazine. It had a four-speed manual and an L78 engine [396 cu. in., forged crank, forged rods and forged pistons, 375 advertised bhp]. I loved it. It got 8 mpg and used a quart of oil every hundred miles. Since then I've had an SC400 Lexus and an A8L Audi--both very fast cars. But fast cars are different from fast motorcycles in that fast motorcycles are quite a bit faster--and quicker. There are standard bikes out there now that run the quarter in the nine-second range with terminal speeds around 140 mph and top speeds electronically limited to 186 mph. These cost quite a bit less than \$15,000. Cars can't touch that.

Besides, I have a bit of an equestrian background, and the transition from being a steeplechase jockey to a motorcycle jockey was a logical one -- although my horsey friends didn't exactly see it that way.

You've been riding for a long time. How did you make the jump from drag racing on a Harley to winning the Daytona Superbike on a Ducati?

That's a long story. I loved drag racing. I loved my Harley, and I was very fond of the motorcycle drag racing crowd. But when we moved Cycle Magazine from New York City to Southern California, I quickly discovered that all the motorcycle drag racing was back East and in the Midwest. Then there was my job--essentially evaluating street and off-road motorcycles for our readers. Then there was the SoCal highway structure [not the freeway structure], and the weather, which was conducive to riding all day every day. As I got more and more proficient as a street rider it became obvious that continuing to go as fast as we were going on the street was not going to end well. So it made sense in 1973 to head for the race track. There were a couple of road race sanctioning bodies back then, concentrated in California, and they had access to

lots of tracks: Riverside, Ontario Motor Speedway, Las Vegas, Orange County, Sears Point, Laguna Seca. Not only that: they had classes for street bikes, or modified street bikes, which is what Cycle Magazine and I were interested in in the first place. It was made so easy for all of us: twist on some safety wire, tape up the lights, attach some form of number plate and let 'er rip. In the beginning, for us, it wasn't even all that expensive, although that would change extravagantly between 1973 and 1977.

As editor for Cycle magazine, you knew everything about each make and model out there. Why did you choose a Ducati?

My Managing Editor, Phil Schilling, and I were invited out to Bridgehampton Raceway in 1971 by Mike Berliner, the Moto Guzzi and Ducati importer, to ride something "new and different." It turned out to be the first 750 V-twin Ducati. As ugly as it was then, Phil and I both sensed that Ducati had crafted something extraordinary. In the first place, its V-twin engine didn't vibrate. The bike had plenty of power, it was remarkably stable in fast, bumpy corners, it stopped beautifully, and even though it was equipped with a kick-starter, you could start it with your hand. Of particular charm for me: it sounded like a Harley. Phil and I found it irresistible. By the time we were done in 1979 the Cycle Magazine staff had owned a total of 12 V-twin Ducatis. Six of these were 750 Desmo Super Sports.

When it came to racing there was something else, too. Back then Ducati was hardly a major player, so for us to build a major racing effort around our desmo V-twin was never



going to irritate any of the four Japanese majors, Harley-Davidson or BMW. You're right about the level of knowledge we held collectively about every other high-performance motorcycle: we rode, and tested, them every day. There was nothing out there in the early- to mid-Seventies that was remotely close to the Ducati in terms of handling and user-friendliness. We wondered constantly about the length of time it was taking for the message to get across to the rest of the country, but at the same time, competition-wise, we felt we were lucky that not too many folks were using the same tool we were. I

did have several chances to ride competitors' bikes. Some were faster than others, but none of them handled worth a lick. And since none of their riders ever got on our Ducati, they never knew what an immense advantage we had. What kept the competition more-or-less level? Those other Superbikes were always ridden by guys who were better than I was. Reg Pridmore, Yvon du-Hamel, Mike Baldwin, Wes Cooley, David Emde: these guys were all experienced world-class professionals. Phil and I were magazine guys, trying to prove a point with a home-built small-displacement V-twin.

Old Blue, or the California Hot Rod, has come to be known as the archetypal race bike and you have been inducted into the Motorcycle Hall of Fame. How do you and Phil Schilling respond to such enthusiasm? Did you ever foresee it happening?

COOK NEILSON

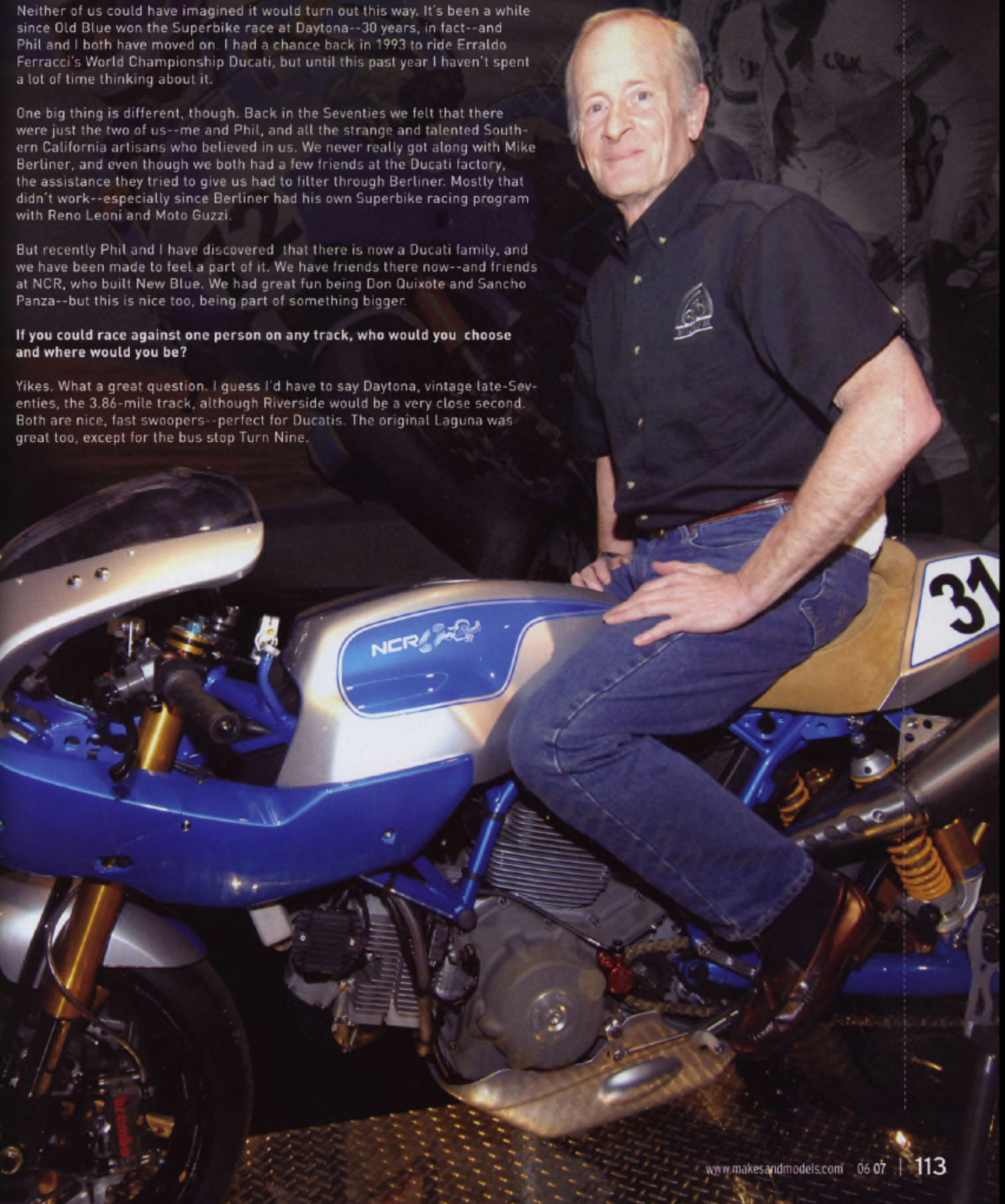
Neither of us could have imagined it would turn out this way. It's been a while since Old Blue won the Superbike race at Daytona--30 years, in fact--and Phil and I both have moved on. I had a chance back in 1993 to ride Erraldo Ferracci's World Championship Ducati, but until this past year I haven't spent a lot of time thinking about it.

One big thing is different, though. Back in the Seventies we felt that there were just the two of us--me and Phil, and all the strange and talented Southern California artisans who believed in us. We never really got along with Mike Berliner, and even though we both had a few friends at the Ducati factory, the assistance they tried to give us had to filter through Berliner. Mostly that didn't work--especially since Berliner had his own Superbike racing program with Reno Leoni and Moto Guzzi.

But recently Phil and I have discovered that there is now a Ducati family, and we have been made to feel a part of it. We have friends there now--and friends at NCR, who built New Blue. We had great fun being Don Quixote and Sancho Panza--but this is nice too, being part of something bigger.

If you could race against one person on any track, who would you choose and where would you be?

Yikes. What a great question. I guess I'd have to say Daytona, vintage late-Seventies, the 3.86-mile track, although Riverside would be a very close second. Both are nice, fast swoopers--perfect for Ducatis. The original Laguna was great too, except for the bus stop Turn Nine.



And who am I racing against? Let me have three: Calvin Rayborn, Gary Nixon and Kenny Roberts. I'm on Old Blue. They're on mopeds. That way I can keep up. If you insist on just one: Calvin. He's the best road racer I ever saw.

Pierre desRoches aided financially in the build of Old Blue. He also tuned Reg Pridmore's Kawasaki who you raced against in '77. Do you think it was for the love of racing or to make the races more interesting? Do corporate sponsorships today make races more or less interesting now that each rider has access to the latest and greatest?

Actually Pierre had nothing to do financially with Old Blue, while he had everything to do with contributing to its race-worthiness. Frame-stiffening and -lightening; swingarm modification; titanium and magnesium fabrication; fork assembly; exhaust system design, welding and assembly. I don't recollect that we paid him a dime for any of it, so I guess you're correct in saying that he played a financial role. If he had charged us I doubt we could have paid him, but I don't recall that it ever came up. He did what he did for us because Phil and Pierre and I were friends, and because I guess there was something about Old Blue, and our crusade, that attracted him. He was an incalculable resource for us. Besides, we just liked being around him.

I'm sure there are still Pierres hanging around motorcycle and automobile pits all over the country, but I don't know how many you'll find at big AMA Superbike events. Going by what I saw at Daytona this year, the factories, I suppose inevitably, run things. It's nice to see that Superbike racing here and in Europe is getting the coverage and the industry support and participation it deserves. It is also inevitable that when the elephants fight the grass gets trampled.

Upside? The street-going versions of the race bikes are infinitely better, and safer, than they were a few decades back. Of course modern bikes are faster--but they were fast then too, but they couldn't handle and they wouldn't stop. Now they all do everything beautifully, and there's no doubt there's been a pollenating effect from racing. Those large-beam alloy chassis you see everywhere? From racing. Same with suspension improvements, and brakes. So it's all good--unless you're the grass.

'77 saw many firsts in regards to cycle racing, including your contribution. Was there any one event that stands out in your mind that changed everything?

I left competition after the 1977 season, and the motorcycle world in 1979, so I'm certainly not up to speed on bell-ringer events. I do recollect that in 1977, Superbike racing's second real season, four different brands won events: Ducati, Kawasaki, Moto Guzzi, and Suzuki. I think that got us off to a good start. Since then three of these manufacturers have maintained a Superbike presence, joined by Honda, Yamaha, MV Agusta, Aprilia and occasionally Harley-Davidson and BMW, and probably several others I've forgotten about. It's a way for these factories to legitimize what they sell, which, added to what they learn from racing, is the best reason there is for factory-level competition. Modern Superbikes now all have some form of traction control; I'll bet you'll see similar systems on street bikes in a year or two, and some have been using ABS for years.

So I guess the one thing that stands out in my mind is that Superbike racing was seen as viable by the manufacturers

early on, and I think that their participation has led directly to better motorcycles for everybody. Besides, thanks to the AMA and the Frances (who own Daytona and Talladega, not to mention NASCAR), Superbike racing put an end to the Yamaha TZ750 and premiere-class road racing domination by a single bike manufacturer. Don't get me wrong: the TZ750 was a great race bike. But in the greater scheme of things, it was going exactly...nowhere.

You didn't know NCR Factory was building New Blue until right before it was unveiled. What was your first reaction?

I was stunned that Michael Lock and NCR would do such a thing. Then, of course, Phil and I were immensely flattered. I've had a chance to ride it--twice (at Barber first, then Daytona), and Phil is going to have a chance to see it for the first time this coming weekend, out in Santa Barbara. A health issue, which Phil is getting on top of, kept him from seeing the bike in New York or Alabama or Daytona, so Ducati and NCR are shipping one out to California for his perusal. I think he'll like it; I know he'll be touched by the effort Ducati and NCR are making.



There were easier routes for Ducati to take when they decided to do a New Blue. They could have easily whipped up wheels, pipes and a paint job, applied it all to a Sport Classic 1000 and then called it a day. They didn't. New Blue got the best of what NCR can do: titanium deep engine parts (like the connecting rods), titanium fasteners, extra displacement and horsepower, slipper clutch, carbon fiber here and there (like the wheels). The bike is light, it's fast, it's torquey and its rideable--just like Old Blue was. It is a pure race bike--just like Old Blue was. I think it's perfect in concept and perfect in execution. My only constructive observation has to do with seat color, so NCR is offering black as an option.

Do you own one of the New Blues?

Not yet.

After leaving Cycle in 1979, did you ever find yourself - red pen in hand - marking up a magazine or is that pleasantly behind you?

Pleasantly behind me. I do write the occasional piece for Cycle World, and so does Phil, but like I said earlier, we've both moved on. We both loved working for Cycle Magazine, we were very fond of the guys on the staff, our bosses always stuck up for us when things inevitably got rough. We both feel we were lucky to work for Ziff-Davis, lucky to end up in Southern California, and lucky to have each other for best friends. Neither of us would trade a second of any of it. ●●●