

It All Begins With A Road Trip

Mitch Klempf's 50-year love affair with a glorious Rob North triple

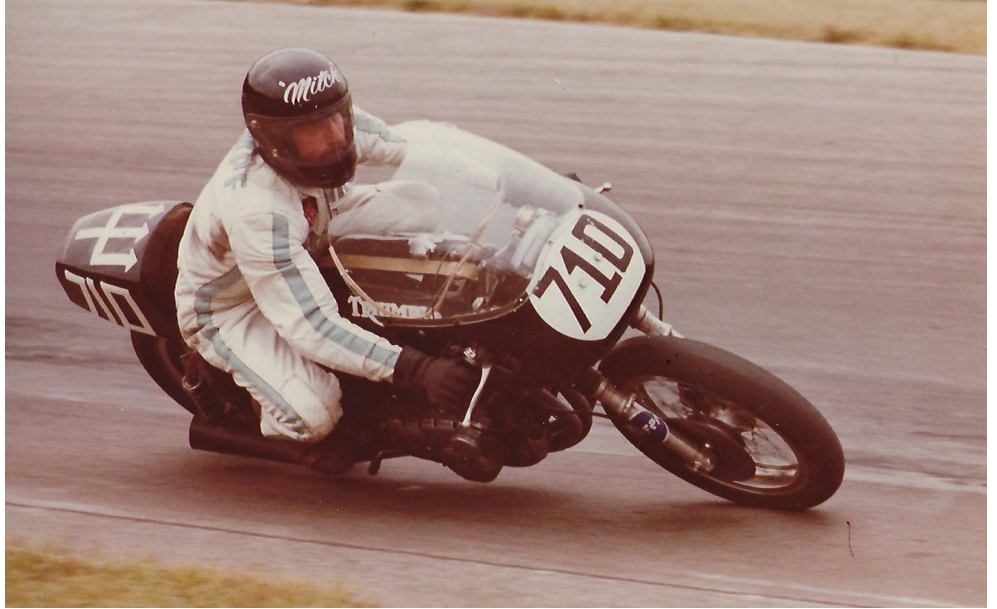
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Vintage Bike Magazine,
Winter 2024-25, Vol. 2021-4

NOTE: This is the corrected version of the article that appeared in print, Dec. 2024

It was barely 9 a.m. at Triumph's U.S. headquarters in Duarte, California, when the 1967 Chrysler 300 sedan pulled into the parking area. Two bleary-eyed young men stepped out of the car, its windshield framed in road grime. They'd driven nearly 2,000 miles over the weekend from Minnesota, with hopes to purchase an obsolete racing motorcycle.

Mitch Klempf and his pal Cory Rongstad were mechanics at WIW Cycle, the Triumph dealer in Minneapolis. They were avid club racers, running Klempf's 1973 T150V Trident in the Central Racing Association's 750cc Production and Cafe classes. With Mitch in the saddle and Cory manning the wrenches, the '73 triple earned regular podium finishes in CRA action against Japanese multis, Commandos, Guzzis and Ducatis, at circuits such as Brainerd and Indianapolis Raceway Park. In the paddock, Klempf was often ribbed by fellow clubmen for campaigning the "ancient" Triumph, before beating them by as much as 30 seconds on the track. But Mitch had his mind on higher performance during his epic 1975 journey to Duarte.

"I've always 'bled Triumph blue'—Gary Nixon and Gene Romero were my heroes," said Klempf, the owner of Klempf's



Mitch Klempf shows cornering style on his ex-factory Rob North lowboy Trident.

British Parts in Dodge Center, Minnesota. As a mechanically-skilled farm kid he had stepped up from his first motorcycle, a Honda 90, to "something with a little more power:" a 1964 T120 Bonneville. Later in his job at WIW Cycle, Mitch got to know the parts and service team at Triumph in Duarte. "We spoke frequently," he recalled. "I knew the company had quit AMA racing in '74. Did they still have any of the factory Rob North-framed triples? And if so, would they sell one to me? Because I seriously wanted to race it."

Klempf had conversations with Triumph west coast service stalwarts Bob Ellison and Jim Pearson. They revealed that they still had Romero's 1971 lowboy chassis originally built by Rob North in Britain. They also had the ex-Mike Kidd Trident with a California-made Wenco frame last raced in 1974. And they had a big store of parts for each bike. But on the phone, the Duarte guys would not confirm the equipment was for sale. And they wouldn't talk even a

ballpark price.

"Finally, I said 'Listen, if I show up at Duarte on Monday morning when your door opens, will you show me the bikes you have? And will you give me a price?'" Klempf recalled. Twenty minutes later, one of the Duarte staff phoned back. He told Mitch, "If you're crazy enough to drive 2000 miles to see these motorcycles, somebody will take the time to show you what we have. And give you a price on it."

1975 was a tough year for Triumph in America. The Meriden workers' factory lock-out had dried up the pipeline for both new motorcycles and vital service parts. The U.S. race program was axed for lack of budget and competitive machinery. Gene Romero had moved to the Yamaha factory team and won Daytona on a twin-shock TZ750 that had briefly seized on him during the race. But many Triumph enthusiasts didn't give up on the brand. When the door opened for them at Duarte, Mitch and Cory were escorted back to the former



Mitch among the parts aisles with popular goodies at his Minnesota shop in November 2024

race shop.

“In a corner of the shop was Romero’s old North-built lowboy frame. Boxes of related parts were piled on it, covered in about an inch of dust,” Klempf recalled. “The frame had been sitting there since after Daytona 1973, when they switched Gene’s bike over to the lighter Wenco frame. The seat was still in 1972 season colors with ‘Burrito’ painted on it. It was an incredible sight.”

The North frame and swingarm lacked an engine but had a nearly complete set of chassis parts with it. They included an oil tank; large and small fuel tanks; high- and low-tail seats; two complete “letterbox” fairings (one of them unused, in fresh original blue-and-white paint); North-fabricated triple trees, clipon handlebars, and a Krober tachometer. There was also a set of Romero’s 1972-season spoked alloy wheels. The front wheel was fitted with twin Pagehiln hard-coated aluminum brake rotors (rejected almost immediately by Romero and

Dick Mann) mounted on North-machined hubs. The rear wheel wore a Honda CB750 disc fitted at Duarte after Daytona 1970.

The dusty pile of engine parts was mind blowing. One box included the cylinder head from Romero’s 1970 championship road racer that qualified for Daytona at over 157mph, a record still unsurpassed.

Etched into the head is tuner Pat Owens’ engravings of qualifying speeds ‘157’ and ‘156’—the latter being Romero’s qualifying speed for the 1970 Talladega National. Boxes also contained the hot stuff that Triumph dealers and privateers begged for in 1970-71 but was off limits to them. A lightened and polished factory crankshaft. Doug Hele-designed TH6 camshafts. Sets of high-compression pistons. Racing valves with titanium top collars. Trick lightweight pushrods. Quaife five-speed racing gearsets and extra gearing. Amal factory 930 concentric racing carbs.

“It was enough to build an

engine except for crankcases,” Klempf said. “All was for sale. And all of it instantly had been made obsolete by the TZ700 and TZ750 Yamahas, which also obsoleted pretty much every four-stroke racebike at the time.”

Mitch and the Duarte staff agreed to a price for the ex-Romero frame and the mountain of race hardware. “Believe it or not, I don’t remember exactly what I paid for it,” he said. “I think they were asking \$2500 for the Mike Kidd Wenco bike. I had little money at the time, but I loved the factory triples and simply wanted to race one myself. I certainly wasn’t thinking about preserving history or what the bike’s provenance would be 50 years later. I just looked at the frame and the stack of parts and thought, ‘Romero’s old bike—I can’t do better than this if I want to race a Triumph.’ I was happier than a pig in mud.”

The Minnesotans filled “almost every square inch” of available space in my old Chrysler with the factory parts trove. Even with the car’s enormous trunk, “it was a job getting everything we bought into it, but we did,” Klempf said. “The Triumph guys were laughing as we squeezed it all in. They thought we were crazy.”

The two pals didn’t return directly to Minnesota. Instead, they drove from California to Dallas, Texas, to visit Triumph speed-tuning legend Jack Wilson at Big D Cycle.

“I’d wanted to meet Jack for years,” Mitch said. “I left the Romero 1970 cylinder head for him to refurbish and modify. My plan was to build a big-motor Trident for Open-class racing. Jack was making stroker crankshafts as part of a kit to take the triples out to 1000cc, and he wanted to build the cylinder

head to suit the big motor. When we were winning in CRA with the 750 Trident, the whiners at Brainerd were accusing us of running an oversize motor. I told them to hold their whining until they see what we can do with an actual big-displacement motor.”

Meantime, Klempf had made contact with Les Williams in England. Triumph’s former race shop manager provided Mitch with insider information about tuning the Trident race motors. He also contributed a steady stream of race parts and tires. Williams and Klempf forged a business relationship and personal friendship, regularly visiting each others’ homes while on holiday with their wives, that lasted for many years.

Mitch and Cory built the “big” motor around a set of T150 crankcases they had on the shelf, installing it in the fully assembled North chassis in 1976. It suffered two significant teething problems: The ring lands collapsed in a set

of custom-made Arias pistons; in another piston a valve pocket cracked. The Arias slugs were replaced by stock 71mm Hepolites used in 650 twins. No more piston issues. And one of the trick aluminum timing gears shed its teeth during a warmup, causing the valves and piston crowns to collide.

“It took us a while to get the bike sorted. It proved to be fast and tremendously reliable,” Klempf explained. “You can’t hardly kill a Trident lower end,” he said, noting that one of his triples has over 200,000 miles on them without any failures to the lower end.

Open-class podium successes with the ex-Romero ‘big motor’ triple in CRA races encouraged Mitch and Cory to enter the 1978 WERA (Western-Eastern Racing Assoc.) National event at Mid-Ohio. WERA was paying out \$40,000 in prize money, which attracted many AMA Pros—including Gary Nixon, Freddie Spencer, Gary Scott, and Dale Singleton. “I’d never raced



Ex-Genie Romero works Trident race head: Among the parts trove Klempf purchased from Triumph is the cylinder head from Romero’s 1970 championship triple, etched-signed by tuner Pat Owens.

WERA,” Klempf explained. “I found out they were going to run Experts, Juniors and Novices in the same race, because they had so many entrants that weekend. It was a zoo on the track.”

Mitch and Cory had driven 600 miles to win some money, expecting to race in the large Expert field because of their years of success in the CRA at Brainerd. “The WERA officials didn’t care about me winning in CRA; to them I was a nobody from Minnesota,” he said. One official laughed at Mitch when he told them he was racing a Triumph. Eventually they put him with the Junior wave, which was started several seconds behind more than 40 Experts, and several seconds ahead of the Novices. There had been no qualifying; the riders were gridded according to when they registered.

The pros up front in the Expert wave were on the latest 750 Yamahas and other top-flight equipment. Carter Alsop, the AMA’s first female Pro, was riding a Yoshimura GS1000 Suzuki. When the Junior flag dropped, Mitch and the howling North Trident jumped into the lead and steadily sliced through the back half of Expert traffic. He found himself finishing on the tail of John Fuchs’ big Honda



Klempf North Trident sans fairing: A modern front fender and Ceriani front fork legs are a couple of the few visible non-works pieces on the Klempf’s ex-Romero lowboy Trident racer.

Four—first among the Junior riders, sixteenth overall, and way ahead of Alsop.

“I rode the wheels off that ‘dinosaur’ Trident,” Klempf recalled. “It could hang with some of the big Yamahas in the corners but once we hit the straight, they were gone! But we flew the British flag high that day.”

Years later when Gene Romero got word that his old racebike had been resurrected, he told Klempf: “That’s one good horse you have there.” The former Grand National Champion always said that the North-framed Triumph’s handling was superior to that of the TZ750 he rode later.

Klempf quit racing after the 1978 season due to rising costs of race tires among other things, and the responsibilities of his growing British parts business launched in 1976. He’d started selling Triumph parts from his parents’ farmhouse while still in school and the business expanded significantly in 2007 when Mitch and wife Julie acquired Moore’s Cycle Supply, another well-known New England parts vendor.

As for the ex-Romero race chassis and related parts, they’ve been validated as the genuine article by Les Williams, BSA-Triumph F750 triples experts Richard Darby and Neil Payne in the U.K., and Jon Blonk in the U.S., and by U.S. AMA race history expert Bill Milburn. A “good horse” indeed.

In addition to Vintage Bike’s published pictures above, please check out the additional pictures and information below:



Above: The Gene Romero/Klempf Rob North Trident with large tank and seat.

Below: The Gene Romero/Klempf Rob North Trident with its fairing.



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