

XVS650 Dragstar

by Barry Dubber

My story begins in early 1981 when I left the navy riding a clapped out GT250 I had been riding round for a year or so after buying it from a small dealer and learning to ride it round the back of the shop before taking to the busy streets of Plymouth. Leaving the dockyard for the last time I had a pocket full of savings and one mission in mind, the Yamaha 250 custom had come onto the market and I was going to get one or so I thought. Within the week I got to the dealer only to find he had none in stock, but he did have a gorgeous looking Kawasaki Z400 custom and I knew it was mine as soon as I saw it. It went through my mind that I hadn't passed a test so wouldn't be able to insure it or tax it but trivial things like that meant nothing to me at that time and ten minutes later I was riding it. I rode that bike around for months with no problem at all, regularly riding between Plymouth and Portsmouth and I felt as one with the bike. Then came the night I decided to blow away the cobwebs and open her up a bit, I admit I had had a few drinks but I felt all right (*thinking back now I must have been quite a way over the limit*). After riding about twenty miles I passed a car and looked down at my speedo (*just under a ton*), then looked in my mirror for the car I had just passed, then looked up just a split second before wrapping myself and my bike around one of those chevron signs that indicate sharp corners.

When I woke I had both arms lying side by side next to my face, it looked odd but I couldn't figure out why and my right leg was tucked under my chin, then the pain hit. The one thing that still makes me smile about that night was that the people I had just passed saw what happened and stopped. The first thing the bloke said to me was "Could you keep your language down as my wife is in the car!" it just about did the trick and stunned me to silence.

After days of X-rays and scans I found out I was lucky enough to only have broken my leg in four places, my right arm was broken in quite a few places, elbow smashed, and to top it off I had something called a complete brachial plexus. (*I say lucky because I do count myself lucky and know it could have been a lot worse*). I had no idea then how that one injury would affect the rest of my life.

I spent six months in hospital learning how to do everything with my left hand, I think in a way it proved to me that we are all ambidextrous and just need a reason to put it to use. I thought that was it, I would never be able to ride a bike again and so I gave up even thinking about it. My right arm was left hanging for a year before I asked for it to be taken off. I suppose I accepted losing it a lot better that way.

A few years later I glanced through an Easyrider magazine and was amazed to see a bloke riding a chopper with a false right arm. It lit the flame again and I can still see that picture clear as day now. Although I never did anything about it straight away that image gnawed at me until in '95 I wandered into the biggest bike dealer around here and just looked at the bikes wondering what would be involved. I had never heard of NABD and I asked if the workshop at this dealership would be able to help me out by adapting a bike, they looked at me like I was

mad then told me it couldn't be done. Luckily one of the salesmen overheard and gave me the address of a bloke in Newton Abbot who might be able to help and suggested a combo (*wasn't sure I'd have the balance*), he also told me of this organisation called NABD and said they may be some help. Within an hour I was talking to the Newton Abbot bloke who said it should be no problem as long as I could get the bike to him. Well that was it the fuse was well and truly alight I scanned all the papers and bike mags till I found a Neval combo in Scunthorpe.

Next day I hired a trailer and drove up to get it, it wasn't my ideal bike but it would get me back on the road, by the time I got back to Devon it was too late to drive the bike to the engineer and I couldn't afford the trailer for another day I unloaded it at home and returned the trailer. All that night I worked in my garage coming up with a makeshift throttle (*made out of an old bit of copper tube*) just to enable me to make that one journey of around 25 miles. It worked pretty well though I could see it bending, and I got to Newton Abbot without a problem apart from nearly tailgating a police car when I found the rear brake wasn't enough to stop quickly. I rode straight round to the engineers secure in the knowledge that I wouldn't have to ride the bike back home in the same state only to be met at the door by his girlfriend who told me that the man I was relying on had been sent down for 6 months the day before. She told me that there was another bloke who might be able to help me and steered me in the direction of John T. at Newton Motorcycles.

John had been building bikes and trikes for years and as I told him my problem his eyes lit up, he wanted the challenge so I left the bike with him and arranged to pick it up a few days later. I left all the adaption ideas to him and he came up trumps. He moved the throttle down to be operated by my right heel and the front brake down to my left heel, it wasn't pretty and it took some getting used to but it did the business. I had joined NABD by now and was suprised to find that my problem was pretty minor really and more ambitious adaptations were happening right across the country.

I started to get quite fond of the Neval, I loved its simplicity and the fact that I could load up the sidecar with logs and get up the steep hills around my home with no problem. After a few months I got lazy and didn't clean it so often and crap started accumulating in all the nooks and crannies, including the cable for the throttle by my heel. Exiting a roundabout one day quite fast the throttle stuck open and I panicked instead of using the gears or braking I opened up to try to release it, I hit the crash barrier head on and because I was attached to the handle bar by my artificial arm I just got flipped straight over breaking my pubic bone (*balls like ripe plums*) and smashed into the other side of the barrier breaking my pelvis. Again I consider myself very lucky, at one point I thought I might have broken my back. I had bent the forks on the bike but John T. picked it up and fixed it while I was in hospital and before I could even walk properly I was back on the bike. I never really trusted the foot throttle again so in a way I was quite glad when after another year the camshaft bent (*apparently a common thing on these Russian bikes*).

I couldn't afford to fix it so I just sold it on and took to a car again but I just wasn't happy. I needed to ride, I could see all the good work NABD was doing getting people back on the road but I still didn't want to ask so I struggled until early in '99 I could afford a small scooter (*I needed to see if I had the balance to go solo*) and could get it adapted with a hand throttle, I didn't really want to travel down to Newton Abbot again so I looked closer to home and found a small shop MET Customs, that specialised in custom work (*surprise*). After a chat with Phil (*owner*) and Steve (*miracle worker*) I arranged for the scooter to be sent direct to them. I made it clear that this was just a trial bike but needed to know if an adaptation could be done so that it didn't stand out like a sore thumb. When I got the scooter back the only difference I could see was the right brake lever was missing everything else was hidden away. Six months later my mind was made up I had found my engineer and found the bike (*a beautiful XV650 dragstar*) I just needed to get





the money to get them together. I was in a catch 22 situation I had to use the scooter in part exchange but had to have it put back stock first. So I could afford the bike and put the scooter back to stock, or I could afford the bike and a good chunk of adapting it but not both. I was stuck and I needed help and that's where the NABD came in, I applied for a grant to help put me on my dream machine, I had some money to put toward it but just couldn't get enough. The price of the bike was going up so the longer I left it the worse off I'd be so I had to buy the bike even before I heard from NABD or lose it, knowing that it could sit unused in my garage for years till I could afford to get it done myself. I waited patiently for any news from NABD then I waited impatiently, I was starting to think that I would have to dig out the push bike then one morning it was there, I had the go ahead. I think Phil was a bit surprised to see me outside his shop at eight in the morning waiting for him to arrive to tell him I had the job number and he could start work, I was a bit fed up that he sat and had a cup of tea first but I had waited a long time for this and as far as he could see a few minutes more wouldn't hurt. Inside I was screaming at him to get on with it and I have never known a bloke drink a brew so slowly. Because they had the bike stored in a corner of the workshop for a while and they knew what I wanted they already had a few ideas. My main request was that the adaptations were carried out sympathetically to the character of the bike so nothing stood out as not belonging and as you can see from the pictures the boys at MET did a fine job.

The throttle has been moved to the left hand but they had to use a different assembly to get the throttle operating in the normal way. The brakes are linked so they are both operated by using the rear brake pedal but they can still be used independently if needed (*as is required by the MOT*). They also fitted a kind of hand brake so that if I stall on a hill or something I can lock the brakes on while disengaging the gears to restart, it's then a simple case of knocking it back into first and a tap of the foot knocks the

choke knob on the bars is the handbrake. All work was either made from stainless steel or painted to match and as you can see by my face I'm bloody well chuffed with it.

Thankyou NABD, to all the lads at MET Customs, to John T. and a special thanks to that salesman (*Earl Richmond*) because if he hadn't stepped in when he did I might have given up again. I look forward to meeting a lot of you at future events/rallies, any excuse to ride, I'll be the one picking the flies out of his teeth because of this silly grin I seem to have when I'm in the saddle.

Ride safe but have fun.

Photos

1. Throttle and hand brake(*choke knob*).
2. Ain't she lovely, he's not bad either. (Wot?)
3. Black cylinder is operational part of hand-brake, pull on to lock foot lever down, springs back when lever tapped with foot. Also shown is linkage to front brake lever.
4. Shows other end of front brake link.

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