

Bol D'Orange. A Race of Two Halves.

Getting to the Bol to see Laverda Corse and the other Laverda race teams was a bit of a last minute affair for me, hurriedly planned in the previous 48 hours. I was starting to question the wisdom of this last minute rush as I handed over a large wad of crisp Thomas Cook supplied Euros to a French traffic policeman who, with a Gallic shrug of the shoulders and a friendly warning to reduce the vitesses , waved me on my way. Somehow I couldn't quite see that happening in Yorkshire or North Wales if I'd been nabbed at almost 100mph . I love France.

The Bol D'Or Endurance race has moved quite a few times in its history, originally starting out in 1922 as a combined bike and car event. It moved to Le Mans in the early seventies but for many, the Bol's spiritual home will always be the Paul Ricard circuit in the South of France. Since 2000 the event has been held at Magny Cours at the Circuit de Nevers, and for the past 5 years the organisers have been running a Bol D'Or retrospective event . This year the circuit was the host to the 6 eme edition du Bol D'Or.

To find the circuit just stick a pin right in the centre of a map of France, its just to the left and down a bit. Magny Cours is about 10 clicks out of the town of Nevers and is the current home of the French F1, consequently the circuit facilities are absolutely first class. The track itself is twisty and very technical and is flanked by some of the best spectator viewing galleries you will see at any race circuit. Out of respect for the older machinery taking part the Classic Bol is run over two 3 hour sessions; a classic night time session on the Saturday night followed by a 3 hour finale on the Sunday afternoon. The night session gives spectators the chance to see the spectacular sight of big bore race machines flat out past the well- lit pit lane, twin spotlights blazing away and then watch the tail lights disappear into the inky blackness or the rural setting .

Arriving at dusk on the Saturday evening it didn't take me long to locate the Laverda racing contingent in the pit lane, with all the various teams sharing two pit garages. The Laverda Club de France were very much in evidence and splendid bunch of chaps they are too. They had brought along a bike ramp to facilitate repair work and had even donated two French riders to the Laverda Corse team for the weekend! It's a tough job but somebody had to do it... Joking apart, I have big respect for anybody who is prepared to ride a race bike for hours on end on a cold, wet track in the pitch black. The two riders were Max and Fred Collonge and they did a fine job keeping up a brisk, steady pace during the race sessions. The Laverda Corse riders lacked some of the outright speed of the other teams but endurance racing is all about bringing it home in one piece.

Teams are allowed one expert rider , but he or she must be partnered by an amateur 'gentleman' [or lady] racer . This is a good leveller and prevents teams signing up a couple of pros and romping away with the silverware. There were some famous names in the programme and a quick look around the pits revealed a selection of typical French hard nut endurance racing types, these guys typically have about 25 years racing under their belts and aren't there for the sightseeing. It was good to see a selection of UK teams mixing it with a interesting variety of race hardware including P&M Hondas, Bimotas and one brave set of lads had entered a very stock looking Z1R .

The sounds of the night define the Bol and the aural treats are somehow intensified by the darkness. At night the evocative howl of the big fours punctuated by the occasional rasp of a triple and the flat drone of the Guzzi and BMW twins is quite unforgettable. Just for good measure there were a couple of fierce sounding TZ 750s to add a bit of two stroke variety. It's a very intense racing experience and quite unlike anything I've ever seen before.

Back in the Laverda camp Team van Dijks owner Gijs was beavering away on the bike, whilst Marnix adopted the role of Race Directeur with his characteristic efficiency. The van Dijks team had been sidelined by ignition gremlins when one of the pick up sensors failed, unfortunately the bike was too far away from the pits when the disaster occurred and it was impossible for the rider to push the bike home. If the rider strays too far from the bike [I think the rules say 40m] he forfeits the race and so the team were forced to retire from the night time leg of the race. Highest placed Laverda team after the night session was team Le Roy Racing, who were placed a very creditable 22nd place on their 850 twin. Laverda Corse were lying in 26th place. A disappointing exclusion from the race was the husband and wife Laverda team of Rob Den Tieter and Jose van Meurs from Rotterdam on their very attractive Barcelona 500 replica, under normal circumstances their qualifying time would have secured them a start but the oversubscribed entry meant there was a surfeit of teams and they were denied a start place.

On the second day van Dijk team pilote Henk van der Mark signified his intentions by posting fastest lap in practice. As the start of the second race loomed the heavens opened and Gijs, Henk and his riding partner Dirk Brand decided to retire. Their decision was a tough one but they had already forfeited the race when they broke down in the first leg, to race in wet conditions always carries a much higher risk of accident and the team [quite rightly in my opinion] decided that going on track with nothing to win and everything to lose was an unnecessary risk.

So the responsibility of flying the flag for Laverda fell upon the shoulders of the two remaining teams, Laverda Corse Italia and Team Le Roy Racing. Both teams ran very smoothly with few dramas and were well placed when the race was ended about 10 minutes early due to a crash, the final placings saw Team Le Roy secure 30th spot and the Collonge brothers bring home the Laverda Corse spaceframe in 26th place, a very respectable result for a first outing in such a hotly contested event. Laverda Corse were very impressive in the way they ran their race in a very relaxed, calm manner. I suppose one has to remember that Piero has done this sort of thing before! Even so, they appeared to have everything well under control and I was left with the distinct impression that this was a shakedown run that had all gone to plan and that it was going to lead to bigger and better things. It was great to see Edoardo Dossena acting as technical director for Laverda Corse. Edoardo was the man who brought Moto Laverda their first major win in the large capacity classes when he won the '68 Giro Italia on a 750. He was also a team mechanic and rider throughout the seventies.

On Sunday afternoon during the race I received a text from chairman Ray and it gave me great pleasure to announce to the team that ILOC members had just voted to provide some financial support for the teams racing budget. Piero was genuinely delighted and sends a message of thanks to all ILOC members.

