

Laverda Corse at Spa 2008

It didn't seem as if two months had passed since Piero and his team debuted their newly prepared spaceframe race bike in a classic endurance race at Magny Cours. It was now time for the second race in the series at Spa and my first time at the famous 'Bikers' Classic', the event which was hosting the race. For those of you who aren't familiar with the format of the event, it's three days of classic bike track sessions interspersed with guest appearances by stars of yesteryear, topped off by an evening and an afternoon of endurance racing. Combining all these activities makes for an action packed weekend; in short it's a sensory overload of the very best of classic motorcycling.

Piero had assembled an impressive team consisting of Eduardo Dossena [technical chief] and his assistant, also present were Giovanni [lap timer and pit instructions] and of course the riders; 52 year old Francesco Greggio and 42 year old Diego Diessino. Organisation and hospitality in the pits were co-ordinated by the tireless Bruno Chevolet and Toni Cecci who both did a fantastic job and made everyone feel welcome

Spa is arguably the one of the finest and most picturesque race circuits in the world....imagine Cadwell Park on a grander, more dramatic scale with a much wider track and superb F1 specification paddock facilities. The track snakes sinuously through the Ardennes forest and makes for a challenging and very fast circuit. One of the defining features of the Spa circuit is the Eau Rouge section, a challenging left /right situated at the end of the steep start and finish straight. Clearly visible from the grandstand it can [apparently] be taken flat out in an F1 car, which must be quite a spectacle. On a classic race bike the speeds are correspondingly slower but still very exciting!

So, in between the track sessions and watching stars like Surtees, Spencer, Agostini and other 'A' list motorcycling celebrities do their stuff, I was also keeping a keen eye on developments in the endurance racing pit lane; Laverda were well represented with 4 separate teams representing France, Holland and Italy. Two of the teams were running twins with the heavy artillery being fielded by Laverda Corse and Team van Dijks. Gijs had brought along his spectacular pair of 3cs which were featured in the previous issue of LVV and Piero had brought along the potent-sounding Laverda Corse spaceframe.

I'm not au fait with the full extent of the engine modifications carried out on Piero's machine but it sounded quite spectacular in an explosive, make-your-ears-bleed kind of way. Despite its large capacity [1172 cc] the big triple had an impressively crisp throttle response and a large gathering of eager onlookers assembled whenever the engine was fired up.

Unfortunately disaster struck Laverda Corse very early on in practice with Italian pilot Diego Diessino taking a heavy tumble at Le Combe causing significant bodywork damage and putting the rider out of contention for the race. The machine was swiftly returned to the pits and a willing band of helpers set-to and put the machine straight in time for the next practice session.

Piero's reserve rider, Belgian Italo Ricci, was drafted in and the team crossed its collective fingers hoping that these early problems were now behind them; sadly, this was not the case and a mysterious misfire plagued the bike for the rest of the day. By late afternoon things were looking very bleak with a retirement from the race looking likely. Knowing the immense effort and considerable cost which goes into getting a bike on the grid in a race like this and also conscious of the fact that ILOC members were part-sponsoring Laverda Corse's entry, I decided that some positive action was required.

I had brought along my own spaceframe [chassis number 007] to ride in the track sessions at the event and had been developing it slowly since its debut appearance at Mallory last year in the hands of Roberto Gallina. Piero has taken a keen interest in the progress of 007 during the past 12 months and had provided much valuable advice on set-up etc; in fact, earlier in the day he had taken it on the track to evaluate it. We had been experimenting with jetting in the morning track sessions and the engine was running very well. Piero had made favourable comments about certain aspects of the bike, particularly the Phil Todd prepared engine and so I was fairly confident that he didn't regard my bike as a liability.

So, I tentatively suggested to Mr. Laverda that his team might consider entering my bike in the event. To my relief Piero didn't view this suggestion as a completely off-the-wall. He went away to have a quick team conference and returned with the news that yes, they would like to use my bike. A mild panic then set in because we realised that the bike was needed for qualifying in about 45 mins and there were some modifications necessary to make the bike track ready.

The main issue was to fit the Laverda Corse bodywork carrying the appropriate race numbers, lighting equipment and sponsorship decals [including those of the ILOC!] Eduardo and his team went to work swiftly and with some deft spanner twirling the bike was made ready with just a few minutes to spare. I must confess that my heart was in my mouth as the bike set off down the pit lane....not for fear of damage to bike, but for fear that the bike would somehow let the team down. I'm used to preparing bikes for hillclimbing and sprinting but an endurance race is an entirely different proposition. Thankfully qualifying passed without major incident and we found ourselves back in the race. After Friday's qualifying session the bike was put away for the night and we all looked forward to the first leg of the race scheduled to start at 7.30pm the following evening.

Saturday dawned bright and sunny and being an early riser I took advantage of the deserted pit garage and quietly got on with improving the hastily-installed lighting connections, checking and rechecking the security of anything which could conceivably rattle loose or fall off. Soon I was joined by Piero and Eduardo and under Eduardo's expert guidance we made the bike ready for its first practice session. During my track sessions on the bike I had noticed a front end chatter under heavy braking and Eduardo set about finding the problem and rectifying it.

The pits were a hive of activity during the day; my friends at Team van Dijks were sharing the garage and were busy working on their bike whilst Eduardo and his assistant worked on ours. Meanwhile, a steady stream of Laverda enthusiasts flowed through the pit passing on their good wishes. Every so often the general hub-bub would be shattered by the crisp bark of 120 Laverda race engine being fired up...paradise! The atmosphere at Spa is fantastic; there were 70 teams in the race and the pit lane was

filled with an eclectic range of exotic race machinery. Any activity in the Laverda garage soon drew large crowds and every time the Laverda track participants gathered at the entrance to the garage in readiness for the next track session a huge throng assembled accompanied by the constant flutter of camera flashes.

Finally the track sessions were over and we were ready to get down to the serious business of racing. After a hot, sunny day the notoriously fickle Ardennes weather became overcast and a light drizzle started. This is the worst kind of rain after a busy day on the track...lots of rubber and light moisture can make the surface very treacherous, particularly for heavy 1000cc race bikes. After two laps I was anxiously staring down the straight outside the pit in the hope of spotting the two distinctive yellow Marchal driving lamps fitted to our bike. The bike didn't appear and after 3 or 4 mins a call came through to say that Italo had taken a tumble at Radillon, the fast chicane after the start and finish straight. The bike was damaged but thankfully the rider was on his feet. There was great relief that the rider was OK and I think we all thought that our race was run, but at least we'd given it a our best shot. Fortunately we'd under-estimated Italo's gritty determination.....

After an anxious 20 minute wait we were delighted [and a bit surprised!] to see two yellow lamps flickering down the pit lane. As Italo pulled in it became clear that he'd made a heroic effort to keep the team in the race, the bike had taken a tumble on it's right hand side and damaged the fairing, footpeg and ruptured the fuel tank. Italo had up- ended the tank to prevent fuel spilling out and was cradling it in his lap, in this awkward riding position he had somehow gamely managed to bring the bike back to the pits. Race on! It should be mentioned at this stage that Italo is a very experienced Laverda racer with a successful race career campaigning a Nikko Bakker framed triple in International Superbike racing; just the sort of resourceful character you need when the chips are down.

The pit crew quickly descended on the bike and Eduardo and the crew commenced the repair operation. Fortunately my tank had been left in the pits with a fairly full load of Avgas, so this was quickly fixed in place, topped up and in what seemed no time at all 007 was howling off towards the pit lane exit. From then on the riders settled into a smooth steady pace. A decent placing in the results was by now out of the question and the team's primary objective was to bring the bike home in one piece and finish the first leg of the race. The bike ran perfectly although the previously mentioned braking glitch was still causing problems and holding the lap times down. Amazingly, despite all the set backs and losing over 20minutes due to the accident, the team managed to scrape into the first leg classifications in 31st place, the only Laverda entry to do so.

With the bike safely garaged for the night , the race strategy for the following day was to run the riders in two equal sessions , bring the bike home safely and hopefully climb a few places on the leaderboard. The team took advantage of the free time in the day to make a few adjustments and set the bike up ready for the final leg of the 4 hour race. Italo got off to an impressive start in the Le Mans style dash across the starting grid and 60 odd bikes plunged down the hill to Eau Rouge. The lap times steadily fell as the riders settled into a smooth , even pace. The pace was interrupted when the pace car and

ambulance were deployed to deal with separate incidents and in the intervening hiatus Italo pulled in and handed the reins over to Francesco . It was a relatively uneventful final leg and the team's strategy paid off with the final placing being a very respectable 28th place. I calculated that we had lost at least 6 or 7 laps due to the previous day's crash and if we hadn't lost so much time we could have been looking at a position in the top twenty.

One of the memorable images I will take home from Spa is the sight of 007 with Italo tucked in very tight, throttle pinned wide open as it thundered down the hill to Eau Rouge with the 120's soulful wail bouncing off the pit lane wall and echoing around the imposing grandstands. Spa is a beautiful but daunting circuit and the riders deserve utmost respect for maintaining these very high lap speeds for sustained periods. It's not a job for the faint of heart.

I'd like to thank the team for their customary warm hospitality and congratulate all the Laverda teams on a very impressive turnout. Commiserations are due to my friends at Team van Dijks who had the most undeserved run of bad luck. I'd also like to mention all the Laverda enthusiasts who turn out to support the team at these events; I know that this means a great deal to Piero and the team. There is a very real sense of community in the Laverda pits building up around these race meetings and I would urge anyone who hasn't sampled the unique atmosphere of an endurance race to come along and join in. Piero has asked me to pass on his warmest regards to ILOC members and thanks them for their support.

See you at the track!