

Black Thunder

Racing

Words & Pics: Paul



A plane roars overhead and as we watched the wheels retract into the body another noise breaks through the air and starts getting closer. This noise though is slightly more familiar; it's a motorbike with motor screaming, the rider clicking cog after cog as he bursts through the haze and whistles past us...

Alan Thoresen is a man on a mission, and as you read this, he will hopefully already be the holder of the 'modified gas' motorcycle speed record at Bonneville. Alan has had an interest in going to Bonneville since the late eighties when he saw a documentary on the salt flats. But it was the culmination of him turning fifty, two years ago and the hype surrounding the Burt Munro movie that made Alan decide it really was time to do it. Alan explains, "I got the Burt Munro DVD which had a second disc showing loads of footage of Burt over on the salt doing his runs, and it had a lot of interesting information on it." Alan admits to having huge admiration for the great man and especially the way he went about making it to Bonneville, so he thought it would be great to follow in his footsteps.

Alan had a freight sponsor from his days of drag racing and over a social drink Alan mentioned his dream of running at Bonneville. The sponsor, Chris from Go Logistics, said that if he was serious and decided to go for it he wouldn't mind getting involved. And being that transport is his thing, could help get the bike over. So with the major hurdle already overcome, Alan decided that this was it.

Alan has always been a Kawasaki man, owning 50 or 60 bikes during his riding career and having road raced and drag raced the brand for many years. Alan's last drag bike was a ZZ-R1100 so the obvious choice for his new race bike had to be the new ZX-14. With a claimed 200PS @ 9,500rpm out of the crate, a long wheelbase and the all-important Ram-Air, the latest missile to join the Kawasaki stable would be perfect for the job.

Alan got the bike and first returned to drag racing after a long layoff, straightaway taking 2nd in the NZDRA series (the only reason he missed first was that he couldn't make it to the two South Islands rounds). He also won the champion points series for modified bikes and admits he generally gets a win or a place unless he does something silly like give it too much power off the line.

Local Kawasaki dealer, Hamilton Motorcycle Centre got behind him and put a great deal together for the bike and servicing. At the same time, Alan teamed up with HMC mechanic Neil, who is joining him on his trip over to the States.

And Neil explained to me that he's going to play a very important role, not just in keeping the bike going and making any changes to help it go faster, but he'll also be required to strip the bike completely to be examined by a scrutineer if they achieve a record, just to make sure they've abided by all the rules.

Testing, testing

When we met Alan, it was during one of his tests at Hamilton Airport, which I understandably presumed was on a spare runway. But no, Alan was testing the ZX14 on the main runway, which



Air-shifter means Alan doesn't have to alter his crouch to change gear.

was still in use by planes! This took Alan months of negotiation to arrange and also meant that he needed qualifications to be able to speak to the tower, just to make sure a plane wasn't about to land on his head.

The bike itself is pretty much standard, just with a large Nitrous Oxide (NOS) bottle strapped to the rear. It also has an air-shifter, which allows Alan to swap cogs with a simple press of a button and also the clutch has been beefed up to deal with the extra horses.

Alan is aiming to break the modified gas record at Bonneville, which lets him run with NOS, although he's hoping that the organisers don't put him in the much faster Streamliner class. The record for modified gas bikes is currently 214mph and he's been pulling 212mph on the one-mile airstrip in Hamilton. With the speedo being useless at these sorts of speeds, (it does well to get to 280kph but after that the needle simply bounces around the dial!) Alan uses a GPS to record his fastest time.

At Bonneville he'll have the luxury of a 2-mile run up

before entering the timed zone so he's pretty confident that he should be able to achieve a higher top speed than on the 'short' runway back home. And as you will no doubt remember from the movie, he then needs to turn around and do another run the other way with the average taken as his top speed. With 212mph under his belt, Alan will have smashed the NZ record already but as yet he hasn't had the necessary adjudicators present to verify it, and anyway, it's Bonneville that he's really interested in. Once he's back from there, Alan says he'll then concentrate properly on the NZ record.



Sexy Yoshi and a bottle of go juice - just what every ZX14 needs!!!



Alan had to keep a watchful eye out for landing 747s..!



One switch arms the Nitros, the other switches between auto and manual.

Gas Please

As explained, the bike is basically standard with just a few electronic gadgets to remove the factory speed limiter. The pipes have been modified although it still runs standard headers and obviously the gearing has been changed to give Alan that extra top-speed. Once it's armed using the toggle switch on the left-hand fairing, the Nitros is set up to either run off a button on the bars or when the bike is at full throttle. With the full throttle option used primarily for drag racing where Alan wants maximum boost all through his run, on the runway he uses the Nitros through fifth and sixth gears to enable the bike to pull the taller cogs and battle the incredible drag which occurs on any vehicle nearing the magic 180mph mark.

You'll notice from the pictures that there's two bottles on the ZX, one either side. The right one is the important one with the NOS inside, but the left is an air cylinder to power the shifter. The air-

INTERVIEW FEATURE

shifter enables Alan to change gear at the touch of a button letting him remain in his aerodynamic crouch. But since these photos were taken he's heard from the officials at Bonneville that any bottles have to have shrouds over them to protect them in the event of an accident. Alan's had some bars made up for the air-bottle and has cunningly mounted the NOS bottle under a specially made seat-hump. But with the air tank still sitting out in the draft, he might ditch it and change gear manually.

The bike runs 'Z' rated tyres with the guys from Darbis hooking him up with a set of Continentals when the man from the factory was over. They've been fine so far running on tarmac, but what they'll be like on the salt is a complete mystery. Some

local car guys who've run on the salt a couple of times have said he should expect to lose about 8% traction with the salt and that actually a bit of weight helps. So, with this in mind, Alan hasn't been too worried about watching his waistline!

He's also ordered another set of sprockets for the trip, with computer simulations showing the highest gear could produce a top-end speed of 420mph at 10,000rpm in top. But, he's got to get there first. "It should be quite exciting, especially pouring the NOS in!" Alan commented to me quite nonchalantly, "As long as I can get to where I was at Hamilton and a bit more, I should be able to start taking some records out."

Alan's been trying to gain as much knowledge as possible before reaching the salt and he's picked up hints from some Hamilton guys that have raced there before. They said the most



Tank-mounted GPS gives Alan accurate speed readings.



Quite possibly the fastest man in NZ on two wheels.



Conti Attack tyres should cope with the enormous top speeds.

important thing is to get his ticket signed at the end of the run and then get the bike straight into Parc Ferme. They also said they took a record with their car even when it blew up on the second run. They simply dipped the clutch and coasted across the line and when the average was worked out, they still got the record!

The crate with the bike in has already arrived in the States and is black with the silver fern on it, as Alan said he's trying to fly the flag for New Zealand. His local Ulysses Club have written him a letter of encouragement and as he's a Ulysses member he's left his number on the bike, because as Alan says, "there's no better way of growing old disgracefully!"

Alan says he'll be in touch with us as soon as he's finished and we'll post everything we can straight onto our website - www.brm.co.nz

We wish Alan and the rest of the guys going over all the best of luck and we'll hopefully be announcing their records in the next issue of BRM. **BRM**



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