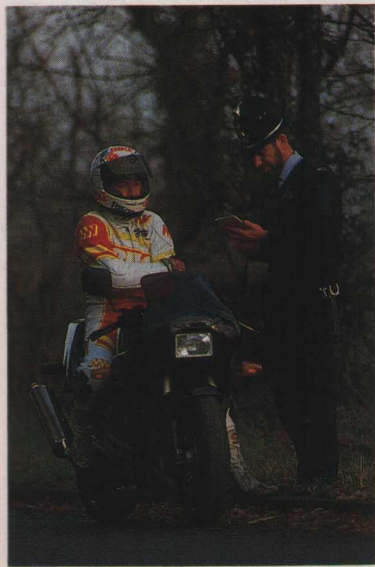


FOR A MOMENT, JUST A moment, the A38 was Snetterton and I was Trevor Nation. The cyclist was Rob Mac on his OW01, the disinterested sheep a massed throng of spectators at Corams. The policeman was Fred Clarke, waving me down to scoop the victor's blow-by-blow story. Forget that last bit, he was definitely a policeman. I was riding a Norton and I was in trouble, which was odd.



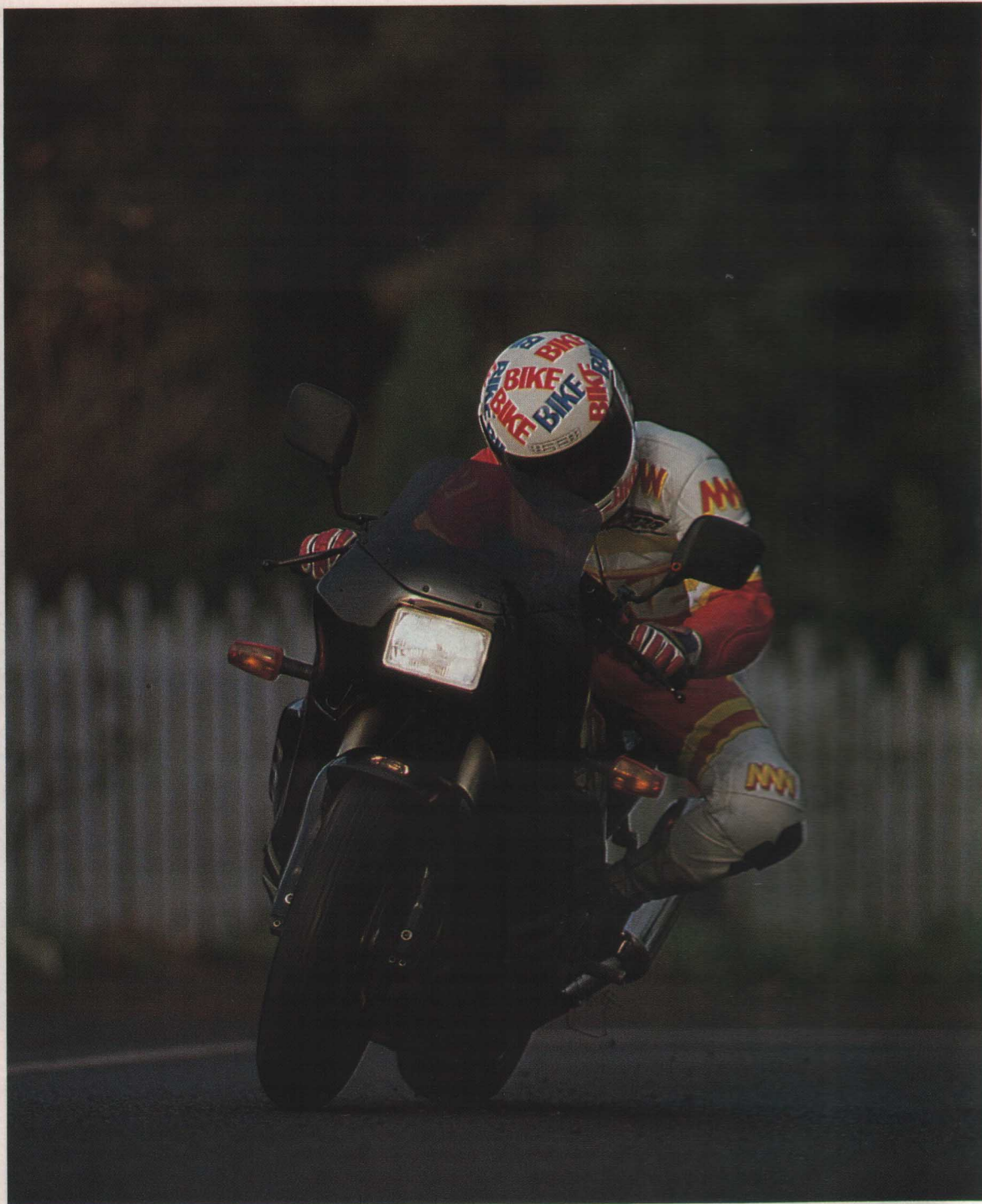
Well Fred, I'm over the moon, delighted for the team too

Two years earlier the F1 flagship completely failed to assert itself in the same way. Masquerading as a British Bimota it was ostensibly a confusing cocktail of interesting but unfinished engine, high quality chassis and smoothie bodywork trying to be everything at once, but failing. It was an overpriced pose searching for a label.

Re-styled, re-priced and re-christened as the F1 Sport, it now capitalises more directly on the largely successful and very famous JPS NRS588 racer. Freshly dressed in more aggressive track fibreglass with a sizzling £3699 slashed off its asking price, the Sport has become a blatant racer-replica. As such its faults — and there are still plenty — can more feasibly be interpreted as characteristic quirks.

The savings, which have already enticed a claimed 100 plus customers into Norton's order book, come mainly from lower specification chassis parts. The well OTT PVM wheels which cost Norton a small fortune are replaced by Astralites; cheaper versions of the Brembo brakes and White Power shock replace the top-of-the-range originals; SU carbs supplant Mikunis and a larger capacity fuel tank is thrown in for good measure along with a personalised paint job.

To confuse matters, Norton is fitting the first batches with PVM wheels and a top drawer White Power shock — while stocks last so



NORTON F1 SPORT

JUST LIKE TREVOR'S

After the F1, the new F1 Sport: more racing pedigree, more value for money, more Tim Thompson

to speak. Although this will hardly endear the factory to F1 owners, this interim version of the Sport is certainly the one to go for because so equipped it's no less than a better carburated F1 with 30 per cent

knocked off.

Cold starts still demand a handful of choke and are accompanied by belching white smoke. Once warmed, there's no going back for the temperature gauge needle which

heads for its upper reaches as heat pours onto the rider's legs. First clunks home, the hydraulic clutch is heavy and sharp, then the Sport quits its gentle throbbing and begins its slightly surreal glide.

The smoothness of the twin chamber rotary takes so much getting used to, I don't think I ever will. It's dead tractable and the billiard table of motorcycle power plants, but I'm never absolutely sure what's going on. A mile out from the Shenstone factory I was changing down when it should have been up, locking the back wheel via illogically spaced gear ratios and generally getting in a mess. Even at the day's end I was feathering the clutch on downshifts in case I was three gears lower than expected.

For me at least, rotary riding is ten



Problems? Yes, but it brakes, it handles and it goes

padding became. Psychologically speaking, I decided bugger all padding increased the quality of feedback coming from the rear tyre, which is crucial on a bike devoid of most sensory norms.

Only the front forks needed a few clicks more compression damping to iron out the beginnings of a wallow on sweepers and to reduce the initial dive on the brakes. The downgraded Brembo calipers and fully floating discs themselves are powerful, but, like much of the bike, lack an edge — in this case response — at low speed, the forks' early dive merely compounding the problem.

After admiring the Sport's new racer look — the distinctive tail, fairing lowers and exposed frame rails — I was distraught when my shins repeatedly smacked the new fibreglass. Either the fairings should be trimmed or the pegs should be moved up a few inches because I was forced to ride on my toes. And why not replace the surviving Seymour Powell upper fairing with one that also resembles the racer's?

That's definitely the way to go because I climbed off the Sport knowing it has changed little from the F1 but nevertheless liking it all the more for its raucous new image. It still needs more development, and word is it's receiving it; as a "super-bike" it still needs to be quicker than an indicated 140mph. But, price-wise especially, it's getting there. □



Maybe it does make a genuine 95bhp — it's so hard to tell

needs concentration at all times. The SUs, though, make it much easier on the brain cells by reducing hunting on the overrun as well as power surges off a cracked open throttle. The gremlins are still apparent but from 1500rpm the Sport now pulls much more cleanly into its responsive-elastic zone at 4000rpm, while closed throttles are not automatically associated with a worrying squirt of acceleration, just an occa-

sional delay.

It's no town bike though. Adequate steering lock remains AWOL and the slower it goes the hotter and more stall-happy the engine becomes. Despite the new fairing lowers, which expose the frame and offer heat more escape routes, the fans cut in at the merest hint of a traffic jam while legs just get warmer and warmer — which is actually rather pleasant in winter — until open

roads become a screaming necessity.

I was less than bothered by all this, mainly because we only touched one built-up area all day. Learning to recognise a distinctive rattle at 4000rpm enabled me to keep those deceptive revs on the threshold of the Sport's action. From there power builds along an amazingly flat torque curve. It revs on past its 9500 redline to the rev-limiter at 11,000, flattering to deceive as the powerband that never comes is eagerly awaited. Nevertheless, the Sport flies as it crashes up through its gears, feeling like it could rev to 40,000rpm — its twin stainless pipes trumpeting a violently evocative bellow to all and sundry. Just like Trev's (used to).

The handling on wet roads was spot on. The steering is precisely slow and, apart from at photo-snapping snail's pace when its bulk tends to flop it in, stays reassuringly neutral even on the brakes. The rider, seated down in the bike with the rearsets too low to figure in the steering equation, has to administer firm signals to the wide bars but it's no problem given the chassis' innate stability and the Michelins' excellent wet grip.

With the fully and easily adjustable suspension set up soft, comfort was surprisingly good so long as I was kept interested. The slower we went, however, the more noticeable the Trevor-replica tail unit's lack of

F1 SPORT

Price	£8999
Engine	liquid-cooled, twin chamber rotary
Capacity	588cc
Power	95bhp @ 9500rpm
Torque	57lb.ft @ 7500rpm
Dry weight	184kg (406lbs)
Availability	To order