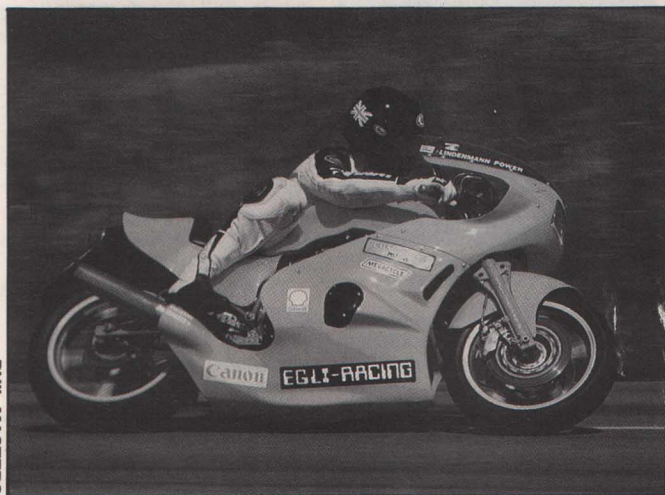


EGLI RED LIGHTNING II



PHIL MASTERS

The Egli Red Lightning II is simply the fastest road bike available

EGLI RED LIGHTNING II

Fritz Egli has every reason to be pleased with life – but instead, he's not a happy man. The Swiss constructor who effectively invented the modern big bore cafe racer, who pioneered the development of European after-market chassis to tame the performance of four-cylinder Japanese engines, who then proceeded to extract large gobs of horsepower from said engines, and whose name has become a byword for high quality and big numbers – on the price tag as well as the dyno chart – has become a legend in his own lifetime. But he's still distinctly disgruntled – the greys and greens are finally getting to him.

'It's very hard being both Swiss and a motorcyclist right now,' said Fritz as we sat in his well-appointed office in the converted wood store atop a mini-Alp in central Switzerland that is the HQ of the Egli tuning emporium. 'The pressure from the environmentalist lobby is getting stronger all the time, and the bureaucrats are responding to this by making ever stricter regulations about performance and emissions which, being Switzerland, are enforced to the letter. The greens don't stop to consider that actually motorcycles are much less damaging to the environment than cars, and should in fact be encouraged. They'd like everyone ideally to walk

everywhere or take the train; the idea that anybody should actually be allowed to have fun on a motor-propelled vehicle like a bike is absolutely against their principles, and we have a strong fight on our hands to prevent ourselves being legislated out of existence.'

But in spite of the increasing hassle, Egli is still committed to two-wheelers, even if inevitably most of the bikes he builds nowadays are for export markets, and especially Germany where, if you can overcome the tough bureaucratic hurdle of the TÜV regulations, the freedom of the autobahns and their (for the time being, anyway) absence of speed limits is yours at the twist of a wrist. All of which made one of the bikes I was there to sample a supreme act of defiance: the Egli Suzuki Red Lightning II. After all, to build what is almost certainly the fastest street legal, catalogued motorcycle available anywhere in the world from a registered manufacturer, in the country which at the same time has the most restrictive laws of any nation in the world governing the construction and use of motor vehicles, can only be construed as such. And bloody good luck to him, say I.

When the V-Max Yamaha was set loose on the highways of California a few years back, lots of hacks tried to liken it to a two-wheeled version of a 428 Cobra, on the grounds that it was a) very fast in a straight line and

'Nailing it to the line in the first three gears produces a fast-forward effect akin to a 500cc GP bike'



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especially over the traffic-lights quarter, b) looked mean and aggressive even at rest and c) didn't go round corners very well. Forgiveable, if obvious – but wrong. As the finely-detailed product of a Japanese factory, the V-Max lacked the Cobra's essential hybrid qualities, and moreover was much too refined: no raw edges, see. Half a decade later, Fritz Egli has now produced the true two-wheeled Cobra, and moreover to do so he's based it on the bike engine that is surely our counterpart of the muscular 428 Chevy V8: Suzuki's timeless air-cooled GSX1100EF mill. 'This is an engine which responds very well to tuning, and has huge performance potential,' says Fritz Egli. 'We sell more Kawasaki-powered bikes and chassis than anything else, but the Suzuki's my favourite. It's very strong and reliable.'

In tuned form, the full-on Red Lightning II has the original 1135cc Suzuki engine bored out to 78x66mm (1258cc) with the help of 11:1 Cosworth pistons: a 1320cc option is also available and Egli says that he has made street-legal engines measuring as big as 1400cc, but 'for the street, this is enough, I think.' Er,

yes! With the stock Suzuki crank reworked and lightened by Hoeckle in Germany, the cylinder head extensively flowed by Egli and fitted with Megacycle cams and 28.5mm inlet/24mm exhaust Cosworth valves, mated to 36mm Mikuni carbs and Egli's own 4-2-1 free-flow exhaust system which is surprisingly quiet at low revs but develops a healthy snarl as the motor comes on the cam, the resultant powerplant produces no less than 174hp at the gearbox at 9200rpm. 'The 1320cc engine has even more torque, but makes no more power,' he says. 'However, even with the smaller engine, though we use the stock five-speed Suzuki gearbox, we have to undercut the dogs six degrees to ensure constant engagement, and the standard clutch can't take this sort of power, so we replace it with a US-made Barnett clutch which is developed for drag racing. It works OK.'

Yes, it does, as I discovered for myself when I gingerly straddled what apart from the occasional NR750 Honda or suchlike is almost certainly the most powerful motorcycle I've ever ridden that was designed to go



Handling is firm and secure, if on slightly out-moded suspension

round corners as well as in a straight line. With a compression ratio that isn't too outlandish, the stock starter motor manages to crank the big-bore engine into life first prod of the button every time, and it even idles in reasonably docile fashion albeit at a fast pace of around 1500rpm and with the distinctive lumpy-bump cadence of a tuned Yankee V8, which of course it ain't. Well, some of it must have rubbed off on the flow-bench... The Barnett's clutch action is fast but not grabby, so that riding away from intersections under the stern

gaze of the local Polizei is not too fraught with concern – apart from subconscious guilt feelings about that strident exhaust note and the brilliant red hue which is the only colour you can have the Red Lightning delivered in (well, what did you expect?). Guilt? Well, this is Switzerland, after all, and being able to trickle off the mark at not much more than walking pace so as not to frighten the populace going about their essential business of making money and living free, healthy and boring lives on the proceeds, is an essential ingredient of motorcycle construction.

Though it pulls cleanly away at 3000rpm with only a little work with the left hand needed, the Suzuki engine comes on the Megas (Megacycles, not megaphones) at 4500rpm, where it really takes off in a big way. The stock Suzuki ignitions has a cutout incorporated now at 9500rpm, and that's just fine, because if you're brave enough and can convince yourself you have enough room to do it, the motor'll redline easily at that figure, thanks to the lightened crank and free-flowing head and exhaust, accompanied as it does so by a furious howl from the Egli



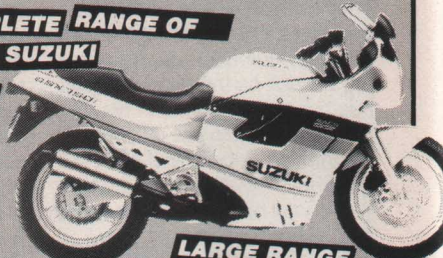
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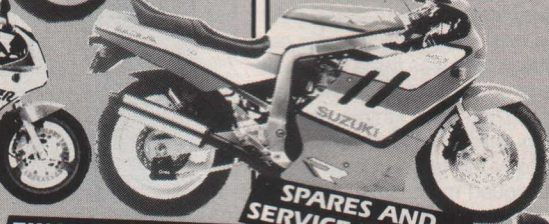
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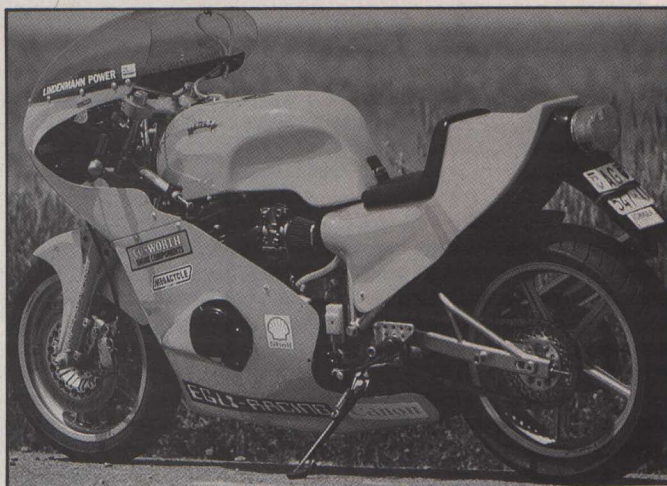
pipe. Sorry, but no way I ever came close to examining the Red Lightning's performance in the top two ratios, tho' nailing it to the line in the bottom three gears produced the kind of fast-forward effect in my view of the surrounding scenery that only 500cc GP bikes have ever succeeded in delivering. Hell yes, it's quick. For once, a bike's chosen model name is not hyperbole. A German bike magazine recently clocked it at 170.26mph!

Harnessing this kind of performance requires a sturdy line in chassis design, and the other half of the Egli equation provides it, in the shape of his time-honoured, trademark spine frame design derived from '50s Guzzi and Reynolds practice and first employed by Fritz on the Egli-Vincent specials he made his name on in road racing and hill-climbs more than two decades ago. It may not be very avant garde any more, and the cantilever rear suspension may seem outmoded by today's rising-rate standards, but the White Power rear unit delivers acceptable suspension response over smooth Swiss roads, and more to the point, by using the

engine, underslung from the chrome-moly central spine, as a semi-stressed member, it's stiff enough to permit enthusiastic use of the right hand even with the colossal power output of the tuned EF motor at your disposal.

Even so, this is a point and squirt motorcycle, just like you'd expect a true four-wheeled Cobra to be. Though the power delivery is pretty controllable inasmuch as you *can* ride it off the cam if you want/need to, exiting a corner at anything more than 5000rpm requires great care and a deft touch, simply because there's so much grunt on tap. The fact that the rear 170/60VB17 Metzeler worked well, and with the steering geometry concocted for the old Nurburgring, for which the bike was essentially designed, there's a good compromise between fast-ish handling and stability is the dominant factor in the Egli chassis philosophy, perhaps just as well when you have 174hp available for use via a production street tyre.

The 38mm Egli forks look unfashionably skinny by today's standards, but the twin braces in their patented design give added torsional rigidity which partially compensates for a rather



The Egli looks as mean and fast as it is. But then for £10,500 you want it to

wooden feeling to their compression damping. Though the 300mm twin Brembo front discs (and 220mm rear) would stop an even heavier bike than the RL2's 445lb dry weight, the forks didn't feel so good under hard braking, either, but on the other hand the bike steered beautifully, swinging in light and positive fashion from one side to the other along winding Swiss country roads, through pastureland and meadows, under the calm scrutiny of

countless heads of brown cows.

No doubt about it, Fritz Egli's Red Lightning II is the two-wheeled reincarnation of the AC Cobra, a big-bore hybrid with old-fashioned styling — well, conservative, let's say — mind-blowing performance from a supposedly low-tech, outmoded motor — and an inbuilt fun factor of about 1000 per cent. Too bad about the £10,500 price tag, but then Cobras aren't exactly bargain basement, either/**Alan Cathcart**

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