

The Gurney Boys and Their Naughty 'Gator

HE'S LEGENDARY FOR HIS EAGLE RACE CARS. SO WHY IS DAN THE MAN REINVENTING... THE MOTORCYCLE?

BY PETE LYONS

His office walls are festooned with mementos of race cars and races and racing friends, but one picture of a street-going motorcycle tells you a lot about Dan Gurney the man. Snapped in the early '70s, it captures him blasting along on a CB750 Honda, then the King Kong of Superbikes. In a baby sling on Gurney's back is his six-month-old son Justin, little fists gripping dad's shoulders. Both boys' hair is blowing free in the wind, and identical grins split their faces.

Think whatever PC thoughts you will about it, you see the real Dan Gurney on that bike. What's more, "Justino" survived the ride to become not only a keen rider on his own, but stylist and project manager

for the Gurney Alligator—a hand-built, high-performance street bike produced by Gurney and his family in the same shops, and by some of the same hands, that once built F1- and Indy-winning Gurney Eagles.

Thus one April evening Justin, now 30 (and this time wearing a helmet), burst out of a giant plastic foam "Alligator Egg" aboard the 001 bike during a hatching ceremony at the Petersen Museum in Los Angeles. Gurney, who recently turned 71 but doesn't behave like it, assisted the birth wearing surgeon's garb along with that famous grin.

For once, product outshone presentation.

Gurney's 'Gator is not just another motorcycle. Startling in both appearance and specification, it features a radically low solo seating position, a single hopped-up Honda cylinder and a price tag of \$35,000.

Idiosyncratic? Sure. Dan Gurney did not become famous for his orthodoxy. The American was never content to be one of the finest racing drivers in the world, often mentioned in the same breath with the great Jimmy Clark and named to F1 teams by the likes of Ferrari, Porsche and Brabham. Gurney won three Grands Prix, and placed as high as third in the world championship (1961) with established factories. Yet he stepped off a seemingly assured career ladder to make a marque of his own.

In 1964 Gurney and then-partner Carroll Shelby founded All American Racers in Santa Ana, California, to build Eagle open-wheelers for FIA, USAC and SCCA racing. Eagles became a major force in Indy competition, with three victories at the Speedway and many more elsewhere. AAR also built contenders in F5000, Can-Am and Trans-Am. Later, Toyota-Eagles dominated the endgame of the old IMSA GTP series. That engine manufacturer then chose AAR to carry it into CART, though results were disappointing to both parties.



Gurney himself continued winning races through his last year in the cockpit, 1970. But probably his personal highlight came on the 18th of June, 1967—one magic week after co-driving a Ford to first at Le Mans—when he scored his fourth GP victory with his very own Eagle on Belgium’s fearsome Spa-Francorchamps circuit.

Thirty-five years later, that remains a unique American accomplishment. It’s being deliberately recalled by the dark metallic blue and pearl color scheme of Gurney’s Alligators, same as his F1 Eagle, and by the 36 limited-edition “Grand Prix” ‘Gators he’s planning to turn out initially.

eyes. “You mean: You old fogey, why do you keep pushing...?” The steely retort actually is answer enough; the man simply is made that way. But he does have a specific rationale for what he’s doing.

It starts with the loss of his engine sponsor, which took AAR out of racing. That was a bitter blow at the time, but although Gurney has been mentoring son Alex’s career, he has no interest in returning his company to the fray.

“I feel as though we’ve escaped,” he recently wrote to friend John Surtees, “and I do not want back into an arena which has been taken over by bureaucrats and rich

personal reason: the challenge of reaching a long-visualized goal. “It’s a bit like a parting shot,” he admits. He daydreams about building a sports car someday, but right now he’s intent on this sport bike project. He loves motorcycles, and the Alligator is very much his motorcycle. He thought it up. He helped design and build and test five prototypes. He persisted with his idea for 26 years, he paid for it and now, dammit, he means finally to manufacture and sell it.

Doing so climaxes a fascination for bikes incurred in boyhood. “One of the first books I ever read was called *The Speedwell Boys on Motorcycles*,” Gurney remembers,

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Justin and Dan in the AAR shops, discussing the finishing touches on Alligator 001.

Why 36? That’s the number his car wore at Spa. Okay, but why a motorcycle? Why such a weird one? And why “Alligator”?

Again, it’s the genuine Gurney coming out. Behind the movie-star face and easy amiability lurks a ferocious heart and stubbornly independent mind. Though infamously unable to leave well enough alone, he stands unrepentant. “Don’t you want to win?” he’ll snap impatiently.

Dare to suggest that a man his age, of his accomplishments, his stature in legend, could decently fade into retirement, and you get a flash of anger from those raptor

corporations. They have come up with rules that stop creativity and progress, so they don’t have surprises.”

But Gurney has loyal, longtime employees to think of, including three of his six children—older sons Danny and Jimmy also work at AAR with Justin. So does wife Evi. The present staff numbers 35. Many are busy on a project for the U.S. Navy, in addition to the Alligator, and the company still has facilities and expertise to offer the racing and/or restoration industries (www.allamericanracers.com).

Besides those factors, Gurney has a

smiling. “My infatuation with racing cars and motorcycles occurred almost in concert.” As a teen he had both, and freely modified them. “Those were great days, when you were allowed to do that.”

One modification he made on a dirt bike led directly to the Alligator. Tall, Gurney often felt unstable on steep hills, as though his weight were about to pitch the short-coupled machine over its downhill wheel. So he tried taking the seat off. “I’m sitting a little lower, and it felt better. I thought, ‘How about if we went as far as we can...’” The result was a 1976 experiment now dubbed The Grandfather. Based on a 350 Honda dual-purpose model, its wheelbase was lengthened so the rider could sit down low behind the engine. “We liked it a lot,” Gurney says, “but pretty soon it was not powerful enough and too heavy, and it got more laughs than it should have...”

Disregarding the jibes, Gurney, his sons and his friends continued experimenting with his “long-low motorcycle” idea, building and evaluating a series of ever more refined prototypes. Along the way they abandoned the original off-road concept and honed the bike for highway sport riding. For years it was no more than a weekend hobby, but dropping out of CART forced Gurney’s business into survival mode—his words. It was time to find out if the Alligator had commercial potential.

The name? It was suggested by AAR head machinist Jerry Whitfill, and Gurney immediately agreed it was perfect for a long, low-slung, “naughty” machine that “has a good bark to it.”

Sixth in the line of designs, the A-6 production model has a graceful, finished



Eagle Over Spa

If you coddled kids of today want to know why Big Dan Gurney is such a hero to us old-timers, one clue is what he did one June day 35 years ago. He won a European Grand Prix in his own F1 car—one he’d helped design and produce in his own factory in California. Only once before had a like feat been accomplished, and in the 1921 French GP Jimmy Murphy wasn’t the owner/builder of “his” American-made Duesenberg.

Nor has any American car won a third GP. Not even Gurney’s.

Way back in 1967, all bright things seemed possible. Americans loved road racing. Phil Hill had won the world championship, and now Dan Gurney seemed a good bet to follow him. His new Eagle was world-class, quick and aesthetically gorgeous too, a shapely missile of titanium and magnesium packing a British-made Weslake V12 thought to be the most powerful in F1.

Car and driver together made a promising combination for the Belgian GP at Spa-Francorchamps in the Ardennes forest, an 8.75-mile natural road circuit of the classic style: narrow, hilly, frighteningly fast and desperately dangerous. Gurney relished the challenge. He qualified second for the three-wide front row, between the Lotus-Fords of world champions Jimmy Clark and Graham Hill. Behind them were the likes of Jochen Rindt, Chris Amon and Jackie Stewart, and such machines as Cooper-Maseratis, Ferraris, BRMs and Brabham-Repcos.

appearance despite the unusual seat. The wheelbase looks long, but at 60 inches it’s only a couple of inches longer than a conventional sport bike. The solo rider sits just above hub level, legs extending forward almost as in a car. Though the position recalls that of a recumbent bicycle, the

Gurney messed up his start, losing seven positions before the first corner, and spent the first stage of the 245-mile race driving catch-up. He was closing on second-place Stewart when Clark dropped out of the lead with a bad plug. But at the same point Gurney made a quick stop to report low fuel pressure. When he dashed out again, Stewart’s advantage with the 16-cylinder BRM was 16 seconds.

Gurney in a hurry was one of motor racing history’s great sights. Tall in the cockpit, face a frozen mask of concentration but fists a blur on the wheel, he directed the car with an uncanny blend of fluid delicacy and utter determination. Swooping through woods and farmland, touching 196 mph in places, the Anglo-American Eagle once again caught and this time passed the all-British BRM. The effort earned Gurney the lap record at nearly 149 mph. His race average was 145.74—the fastest ever run in Europe.

“As I look back on it I’m more amazed that we could do that with the resources we had, or didn’t have,” Gurney grins today. “It was enormously gratifying for a professional racing driver that dreams of such things... Of course, you have targets that include doing it more than once!”

“In view of the fact that it hasn’t been done since, and that we did it, even though it was only one it was quite a thing. I mean, you talk about puttin’ the mark up on the tree as far as you can reach, it’s a pretty good one!” ■

spine has to be more erect so the hands can reach the bars. What appears to be a traditional gas tank is actually an intake plenum for the fuel-injected engine; fuel is in a 3.3-gallon composite cell just ahead of and beneath the seat, protected by framework.

Gurney takes credit for laying out

the multitube chassis backbone, based on knowledge absorbed during his friendship with Colin Chapman. AAR veterans including the legendary Phil Remington fabricate that frame, the extruded aluminum rear suspension swing arm and most other parts, though the front forks and brake package come straight from Honda’s ultra-fast 954. Front and rear lights are from another Honda, but the carbon fiber bodywork is laid up and baked in a corner of AAR that used to make Eagle GTP and Champ Cars.

The air-cooled one-cylinder starts life as a new Honda 650 with electric-start made for an enduro bike. Subcontractor Drino Miller punches it out to as much as 710 cc, adds hotter cams and replaces the stock carb with fuel-injection. Output is better than 75 horsepower. Competitive four-cylinder bikes offer more power, but weigh more than the Alligator’s 320 pounds and their riders catch more wind. Without admitting he’s tried it, Gurney reckons his bike should do 140 mph. He’s confident it’ll go 0 to 60 mph quicker than anything on the road. (“It explodes off the line!”) He also claims exceptional braking performance and reassuring handling, both thanks to the low center of gravity. He is careful to emphasize the importance of never letting one’s forward-jutting foot snag on the road or a curb, to prevent potential injury.

Gurney admits he’s probing a tiny niche market. Customers? “Someone who wants to buy the Ferrari of Singles... that loves ‘More Smiles per Mile’... has a naughty element in his character, and one that can afford to pay 35,000 bucks for a bike.”

The Alligator is not intended for racing, Gurney emphasizes, but he tried to put a lot of his racing experience into it. “If you have been a race driver, you were kind of on top of the pyramid and you got to sample a whole bunch of really cutting-edge machinery that nobody else did.

“So you say to yourself, wouldn’t it be nice to make something [cutting-edge] that I could still ride, and also my friends or customers could ride. Is there something I could bring to the table that maybe otherwise wouldn’t get there, because of my background and all the efforts we made to understand what makes one race car good and another one not quite so good.”

Does he mean to reinvent the wheel? Of course not. Everybody knows that’s the definition of futility. But reinventing the two-wheeler? Dan Gurney, born maverick and relentless competitor, is happy to gamble that’s another story. ■