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Buell Motorcycles...



...just my thoughts

by Don Gomo

I should start off by saying that I am a Buell Owner. I bought my 1999 S3T Thunderbolt as a two-year leftover in the summer of 2001. I also have one of the first Blasts made, which I bought in February of 2000 for a family mem-

ber to learn how to ride motorcycles. I developed an interest in Buells when I first saw a S2T in a write up in an early H.O.G. magazine in the mid-Nineties. To me they looked cool, and I liked the idea of an American sportbike.

I will say that I had more than my share of problems with my S3T. Seemed it was a demon year for Buell, with its first year for introducing fuel injection into its lineup (the M2 model was still the only carbureted version). Along with computer problems, injection system problems and others, the bike was laden with recalls, which had me visiting the dealership on a very regular basis. During my first two years of ownership the bike was easily in the shop a total of five months. That sure sucks, considering the length of my riding season in upstate New York. A lot of people asked me why I

even kept it, and told me that I should just get rid of it. In most cases they would be right, but I really enjoyed riding the bike. It fit me well, handled good, had enough power for the style of riding I do, plus it had a feel and sound like no other sportbike I've ridden. Besides, all the work to it didn't cost me any money, just my time without it. The Buell Company stood behind all the work that was required to be done. I even had a situation where the paint on my gas tank blistered and the saddlebags cracked, and even after the warranty was over they replaced all the parts at not cost to me – that

was on a seven-year-old bike! Now get this one: a year after they replaced the gas tank, the new tank started to blister. I wrote an email to the contact person I had at the factory and stated that I am not expecting anything from them, that they did more than I expected last time, but that they should know the tank experienced the same problem as the one I returned.

Once again, they replaced the tank with a new one at no cost (even paid all the shipping), and to date it has been fine. I can say that I have never heard of a motorcycle company do such a thing; in fact I never heard of any kind of company standing be-

hind an eight-year-old motor vehicle. Needless to say, I was impressed and happy to have my bike taken care of.

I have run across a few Buell riders with similar stories. Now, some folks look at the negative and state that Buell considered that it was better, and cheaper, to replace random items on their bikes than have any further bad press. Maybe so, but it's still a great feeling as an owner to experience when their bike is down. Speaking of owners, for the most part Buell owners are a loyal and enthusiastic bunch. Many look at Erik Buell as if he were some sort of motorcycle guru. OK, the



guy is pretty smart, but he may also be the first one to shoot down the super-status his fans praise him with. One thing with Erik is how he was always accessible at Buell events. Meeting and hanging with fellow Buell riders was always a pleasure for him. I've even seen him start taking a person's bike apart when they had trouble in the parking lot. How many corporate heads have you seen hanging with their riders, and would actually start

working on a troubled bike? I don't know of too many.

So what does all this have to do with the recent demise of Buell? Maybe not too much; just some personal experiences tossed into the information. In a nutshell, I have always thought of Buell as a unique niche bike with a style and a company leader far different than the competition.

So you have a motorcycle company with a very enthusiast leader; owners that loved their bikes (for the most part); models of unique styling and the badge of being America's sportbike. So what the hell went wrong?



2010 Buell 1125

By now just about anybody interested in motorcycles knows about Buell's demise at the end of October 2009. You can search YouTube for Erik Buell's message about the decision made to totally shutdown Buell motorcycles. If you've seen the footage, you can easily see a man that seemed to

lose the world as he knew it. Perhaps at that moment he did, but I honestly do not think Erik Buell or his works were the reason for the sudden end of an era in American sportbikes. Sure, the Buell motorcycle company probably was only able to really survive because of Harley owning



2010 Buell Ulysses XB12

95% of it over time, but it is obvious that Harley didn't know what to do with the Buell badge.

I think that H-D's original thoughts were that Buell would bring sport riders and young new riders into the Harley world, which in turn would equal more dollars for the stockholders. Might have

been a good stepping stone, but they certainly did not handle the marketing too well. In a world of timed speeds from stoplight to stoplight, the Buell was never really much of a contender. Yes, it was impressive what Erik and his engineers were able to do to a basic Sportster

motor; good torque with a manageable powerband, but top speed with low second timer digits, it didn't have. Then you have to consider that even though these bikes handled the twisties well, especially with their torque; the general sport-bike market was more interested in the speed and HP stats.

Another thing I thought was always the dopiast thing that H-D did was try to sell Buells in a H-D dealership. Perhaps the thought was more exposure, but if you consider the demographics of the average H-D buyer or wannabe, a Buell would have zero interest to them. Add the

fact that most Harley salespeople during the past 20 years weren't sales people at all, they were order takers. They didn't have to sell Harleys. Through all the image, marketing and promotion of a lifestyle, the bikes sold themselves. Now take those people who really didn't "sell" and have them try to actually sell, and do it with a product that they have no idea or interest in (basically because they didn't sell themselves). Just those few things would make your year end bean count on the lowside. My opinion, as well as many others, is that Buell should have been sold in dealerships



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of similar bikes. They may have done far better to a market looking for something different, like a Ducati, Guzzi, or some of the metric bikes, but we'll never know now if that would have been a money maker.

The only people that every really knew what

Buell did money-wise would be H-D corporate bigwigs and accountants. The dollars were never listed separate, so the stockholders and public never knew. Now toss in a new CEO for Harley at a time when the motorcycle industry is hurting due to the economy, let

him look at the books and his first comments were more than likely, “Buell has been bleeding money for years, why are we dumping more into an endless well?”

Though he may have been correct, and the decision to whack the bleeding part off with a hatchet may have been

drastic, but it would also heal over time. It just seemed to happen right when Buell looked like it was picking up some steam, with a few AMA race victories, a new motor design that brought the bike into the new century, and more innovative ideas that were starting to catch on. One thing for



sure, the line that it is always better to go out when you're on top, didn't apply here. Buell wasn't there yet, and still had a lot of climbing to get there. To see the factory listed for auction online was troublesome for many fans, even more so for those who worked there.

So what now for Buell, if there is a now or later? Well, Erik Buell started Erik Buell Racing, which is building bikes for the privateer racing circuit and selling selected parts. He is back where he started but looks happy and excited to be there, too. There is also information floating around



the moto-mags and online forums of some recent news related to Buell's ex-parent. Seems that Harley spent about 125 million dollars to shut down Buell (should have used a bigger hatchet). That seems like a lot of dollars to end something. What makes it worse is the word that Can-Am was interested in buying the Buell Rotax rights and bike design, but Harley said "no." So Can-Am came back and offered to buy the entire Buell Company, and Harley still said "no." This has gotten a few stockholders, and of course the Buell loyalists, in a bit of an uproar louder than a Harley it-

self. No one has been able to clearly explain why the thought of spend all those millions to shut-down Buell seemed a better idea than selling it for money. Harley may never have been able to sell Buell for an overall profit, but even I know that getting some money coming in is better than spending a lot. I don't think we'll ever hear the real story about that for a long time, if ever.

But you never know. According to floating info, Erik agreed to a duration (some say 16 months) where he cannot compete or join a competing corporation/company of Harley. If so, that time will end quickly, and



I do not think we will see the end to Erik Buell's drive to design and engineer motorcycles that will always be considered different. I for one hope that is true. We need an un-

derdog that thinks outside the box to cheer for. Plus, I think that Erik may have learned few lessons to make him a bit stronger and wiser.

Only time will tell.