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CW EXCLUSIVE

The Demise of the Buell Motorcycle Company



PHOTO BY BRIAN J. NELSON

An in-depth look at the forces that brought down America's sportbike maker

BY STEVE ANDERSON

Hachette Filipacchi



Erik Buell, the building that bore his name and the street-going superbike that didn't make it to production.



A MOMENT IN 1993, IN A LAWYER'S OFFICE IN Wisconsin: Erik Buell sits at his attorney's desk, with a contract from Harley-Davidson in front of him that will terminate the then-current Buell Motor Corporation while creating a new entity, the Buell Motorcycle Company.

In many ways, this is a fulfillment of Erik Buell's dream: He will finally have the resources to create the American motorcycles he has passionately, fervidly wanted to make. But his attorney sits there urging that he not sign the contract: "It amounts to indentured servitude," he says. "You're putting yourself in bondage if you sign this contract."



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In exchange, Harley-Davidson would inject just \$500,000 in capital for 49 percent of the company and take Erik's house as security in case the investment goes bad. "If you insist on signing this," his attorney warns, "you have to sign a letter saying this law firm has most strongly advised against such action." Erik eventually signs both.

Another moment, much, much later: In the fall of 2007, at a board meeting at Harley-Davidson, Buell CEO Jon Flickinger presents Buell Motorcycles' accelerated growth plan, complete with the usual PowerPoint slides of upward-marching trend lines. The plan requires additional investment in racing to strengthen the Buell brand, along with a multimillion-dollar expenditure and headcount increases to create a radically designed middleweight family of three-cylinder sportbikes to broaden the range. The board and Harley management approve, though the additional expenditures required for the new middleweight guarantee that Buell will not be profitable in 2008.

A later moment: In January of 2009, at another board meeting, H-D's directors hear again about a new building for Buell Motorcycles. Flickinger had many months earlier proposed that Buell own such a building, but the eight-figure expenditure was rejected. This time, to preserve capital, the building's owner is to be a commercial real estate company, and Buell is to

sign a long-term lease for the 163,000-square-foot space. Consolidating various operations spread around five buildings in East Troy, Wisconsin, and various rented warehouse spaces into one huge, new and efficient showcase would actually reduce operating costs.

The board approves. Leases and agreements are signed, press releases are released and ground is broken. Inside Buell, every department struggles to plan its space and technical requirements in the new building.

On May 18, just before serious construction is scheduled to start, Harley's new CEO (he'd been at Harley two weeks), Keith Wandell, cancels the building. Harley-Davidson spokeswoman Rebecca Bortner says that the decision shouldn't be viewed as a decision on Buell's future. Inside Buell, work continues, and millions of dollars are spent on the development and tooling of the bike code named Barracuda 2 (B2), Buell's first full-on street superbike (see riding impression, pg. 46). Danny Eslick goes on to win the Daytona SportBike title, while Corey West and Taylor Knapp demonstrate that the 1125RR Superbike is surprisingly competitive at the New Jersey AMA race.

The terminal moment, five months after the building cancellation: On October 15, a Buell employee town hall (a monthly event) is set for 7 a.m. instead of the more usual 8:45. Flickinger gives the bad news—Buell is to close—and shows a video presentation from H-D head Wandell minutes before the press release flies. More than half of Buell's 180 full-time employees are in attendance. Many eyes glisten with tears, while others show more anger. Erik Buell was told three days earlier of the upcoming action; Harley executives thought he would attempt to derail the action and shouldn't be told until necessary. Erik makes his recorded statement on the closing for the Buell website—barely holding his emotions in check—just days after he found out his namesake company would be closed.

The story of how the Buell Motorcycle Company got from beginning to terminus twists like the roads that Buell Lightnings were made for. It also hasn't been fully told yet. And in telling this part of it, I am duty bound to point out that

I'm both uniquely qualified and disqualified, all from not being your typical "neutral" journalist. I have known Erik Buell at a distance from the late Seventies, buying parts from his Pittsburgh Performance Products company and sharing a race-track upon occasion. I've known him more closely from the late Eighties, and carried on regular frank and candid conversations with him from the early Nineties to date.

From October, 2005, until

December 18, 2009, I was a Buell employee, one of two Platform Directors reporting directly to Erik. I led the design teams for the XBRR, the stillborn "Griffin" motocrosser and "Sugar" middleweight, and for 1125R racing components for Daytona SportBike and American Superbike. Also, I have signed confidentiality and severance agreements with Harley-Davidson that forbid me from disclosing company secrets and have double-secret clauses that can't even be mentioned.

But those agreements don't prevent me from being the journalist I was before I went to work for Buell. The story that follows is, as close as I can make it, just the facts, obtained not from my inside knowledge gained from working at Buell, but from what I knew of Buell before joining the company, and from more than 20 hours of interviews with people who worked at Buell and have since been laid off, from knowledgeable outsiders, and from people who currently work and plan to continue working for Harley-Davidson. Very, very few people I approached were unwilling to talk. Most of those who did must remain nameless for obvious reasons.

Buell Motorcycles came into existence because then-Harley-Davidson Motor President Jeff Bleustein, who had



The first Buell, RW750 four-cylinder two-stroke racer, produced in 1985.

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once been Erik's boss in Harley's engineering department, wanted a skunkworks, someplace that could cut through bureaucracy and get engineering jobs done quickly when necessary. The small investment required to launch Buell Motorcycles was well within his authority and didn't require board approval. Bleustein may have been thinking bigger, but his subordinates at Harley thought that Buell might build a few hundred bikes a year; Harley marketers estimated the demand for a new Buell sportbike would be no greater than 300 a year.

When purchasing engineer Lars Lavine joined Buell in 1993, he found the other 16 employees of the new company in a 10,000-square-foot space on recently renamed Buell Drive, and the design for the S2—a semi-naked sportbike based on the previous, tube-framed Buell RS model—well under way. Tooling for the S2 reflected the capital available and the small volume expected; Lavine recalls that the total expenditure for the S2 couldn't have been much more than \$100,000—an amount of money that wouldn't buy a single large bodywork mold for a high-volume motorcycle project. At the time, there was one Harley representative at Buell—Mark Cunningham—and he indicated that the intent was to keep it that way: a single Motor Company point of contact in the everyday running of the business.

But the S2 sold far beyond expectations. Instead of 300 units, the first year saw more than 1400 motorcycles sold. Soon, with the addition of the S1 Lightning naked streetfighter, the numbers would continue to accelerate upward in a way that was originally undreamed, rapidly exceeding 5000 units a year.

During this time, patterns were set that Buell Motorcycles would live with for the rest of its existence. Harley-Davidson controlled marketing and distribution of Buells, and even accessory parts sales. Buell product plans would have to be approved through Harley channels, namely the PPC (Product Planning Committee), the same group that made decisions on Fat Bobs. Buells would be sold only through Harley dealerships, and the dealership contract was essentially the same as Harley's, much to Erik's dismay. Tuned in to the emerging World Wide Web, Erik had wanted a different sort of agreement that would allow some freedom for factory-to-customer direct sales, particularly in accessories; instead, a clone of the Harley dealer agreement was used, and all sales of motorcycles and merchandise would have to go through a dealer. In addition, a viewpoint was hardening among Harley executives: Buell was to serve as a starter brand, and eventually, Buell customers, as they got older, would trade up to a Big Twin. It was only in the last several years that Harley insiders increasingly saw the sportbike market as an entity unto itself.

There were counter-currents even then. Harley's VP of marketing, Anne Tynion, who came from a New York advertising background, had consumer studies conducted after the S2 sold far better than expected. The result: Buell was doing exceptionally well selling air-cooled sporty bikes, because the total market for air-cooled bikes in that segment was small. If it wanted to grow big, liquid-cooled sportbikes were required.

This insight resulted in the Loki 1 project, in which Erik enlisted Porsche to design a modernized and streetable version of Harley's VR1000 race engine, then housed it in something very much like the eventual XB frame—or for that matter, the first chassis for the VR1000 that the original Buell Motor Corporation had built back in 1988. (The VR team had never elected to test the Erik-designed chassis). The intent was to have a full-faired Buell Superbike ready for 1998 model year production and for AMA Superbike racing. Porsche would design, test and build the engines in



The 1998 S1 White Lightning, a stark, essential tube-frame streetfighter.

Germany. Engine tooling would be flexible, and cases would be sand-cast rather than die-cast to keep project costs within reason. As the project moved along, however, loud voices were heard within The Motor Company: The VR was *our* engine, and Harley needs a bike with it, as well. The Porsche project grew in scope, as now two versions of the engine were required. The tiny engine that Erik wanted with its unusual and efficient sump cast into a hump at the front of the cases would never do; the Harley engine (eventually used in the V-Rod) required visual mass, with no odd shapes, no matter how functional. It also had to be made in America and tooled for tens of thousands of

annual sales. Development stretched out, the engine became bigger and more and more expensive, and eventually Buell said "enough." The engine had gotten too big, too heavy, too expensive and too late for what Buell had been trying to achieve. A liquid-cooled Buell would have to wait.

Jeff Bleustein brought Buell its next big project—its biggest yet—and outside the mainstream of the sportbikes Buell wanted to focus on: the Blast. Bleustein was convinced that Harley had to create new motorcyclists for its next generation of customers and pushed the Rider's Edge training program into existence. He also believed the corporation needed a range of small and inexpensive motorcycles for these new riders, but he hadn't been able to get an acceptable machine through the Harley organization.

Enter the skunkworks. Gary Stippich, the Harley engineer assigned to Buell powertrains, crafted the first proof-of-concept Blast engine in East Troy. He and Buell technicians quickly created a running motorcycle in a standard Buell frame that proved a single-cylinder slice from a Sportster/

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Buell powerplant could work. Part of the project, though, was to position the Blast at a very low price point, and the production Blast engine was designed from the beginning with that in mind, a rationalization and simplification of the Sportster engine that had grown from its Fifties roots without modern manufacturing requirements in mind. Harley engineers and managers quoted a very low price for the new engine.

At the same time, Buell was looking at the Blast engine as the centerpiece of its future air-cooled product line and was shaping its design so it could be readily converted back to a Twin, and a high-performance, large-displacement (up to 1400cc) one at that. The Blast was designed with a new depth of analysis and engineering discipline at Buell and proved outstandingly reliable. But it suffered from a fatal flaw from a business point of view: The Harley-produced engine came in 80 percent over budget, multiple hundreds of dollars more than the liquid-cooled, twin-cam, four-valve Singles available from suppliers such as Rotax. Such an overrun would be unheard of from an outside supplier, but when your supplier also owns you, you grin and bear it.

That project, the most expensive one Buell would ever do, was a great engineering success and also very objectively fulfilled Bleustein's wish to bring new riders into Harley dealerships, particularly in its use as a Rider's Edge training vehicle. A substantial percentage of Rider's Edge students ended up buying a new motorcycle from the training dealer.

As such, it was a solid financial success for Harley-Davidson, Inc.

But it was a financial disaster for Buell, with the smaller company actually losing significant money on every Blast it sold. All future Blast derivatives, such as the 600cc model and sportier versions waiting in the wings, were cancelled as being economically unviable as long as the engine price remained where it was.

But the technical success of the Blast, particularly the fact that its warranty statistics far outshone those of any other Motor Company model, did give Buell the credibility with Harley management to move on to its next project, the XB series. The original intent was to take the chassis design concepts of the Loki 1 and to combine them with an air-cooled Twin based on what was learned in the Blast project. The result was to be three distinct performance powertrains: a short-stroke 984cc engine to be used in motorcycles priced between \$7500 and \$8000, right atop current Japanese 600cc prices; a short-stroke 1300 to 1350cc or so engine for higher-performance machines priced between \$8995 and \$10,000; and a turbo charged version (code name Diablo) of that bike making 150 horsepower and 120 foot-pounds of torque, representing the top of the line. The last was no dream: I rode a proof-of-concept (POC) 1200cc prototype in an X1 chassis in 2002 during a visit to Buell, and it would straighten your arms like a Hayabusa, if not more so; and

turbo-lag with the sophisticated variable-vane Aerocharger turbo was minimal. An ECU-controlled waste gate allowed the engine to use more boost and make more power on every gear shift, keeping full-throttle acceleration constant and the front wheel just skimming the pavement to well past 120 mph. Diablo POC prototypes also ran through durability test programs, and with their lower compression and the ECU limiting the time at full boost, they proved more reliable than the existing non-turbo engines.

Once again, however, the XB project became yoked to a Harley project: The new engine design would be shared with the Sportster, and, unlike the Blast engine design, none of the engine project team would be co-located at Buell.

The goals of the two companies immediately differed. Harley manufacturing and P&A wanted to minimize changes to the existing design, so the high deck height of the Blast engine—essential for larger displacement with a short stroke—was almost immediately deleted. But that

was fine with Harley Product Planning: Bill Davidson insisted on keeping long-stroke 883 and 1200 Sportsters because of the “brand equity” in the displacement names. The larger company got its way, and the big Buell engine became a long-stroke 1200 despite Erik's fist pounding. Then the Diablo died when Harley was unable to forge a supplier agreement with Aerocharger, and an in-house effort to develop its own turbo cost millions (in part charged to Buell) but never produced a working product.

All of that paled compared to what happened to the XB engine cost: Much like that of the Blast power-

plant, the price rapidly soared over the original business case promises, escalating by enough to almost single-handedly push the price of the first 984cc Firebolt from the intended \$7995 to \$9995. In addition, the long-stroke 1200cc engine of the big XBs never offered the performance premium over the 984 that had been planned. Still, the XBs proved reliable and very profitable for Buell, even if they never sold in the volumes that had been projected at the lower prices.

Indeed, the revenues produced by the XBs allowed Buell to finally get its liquid-cooled motorcycle. Because The Motor Company didn't have a suitable engine, Buell was given permission to reach outside to source its own, and soon partnered with Rotax for the project. But there were caveats: Buell would have to fund the project from internal cash flow, requiring the project to be done on a shoestring—perhaps 15 to 20 percent of the V-Rod project cost. The business plan was for essentially a re-engined XB with minimal changes, recycling bodywork and as many components as possible—all that was allowed by the tight budget. It was either that or no project. Additionally, the highest leadership at Harley-Davidson insisted that the 1125R not have a full fairing, so as not to compete directly with the Japanese.

Some might call that “taking a left turn,” while others,



Prototype “Diablo,” a turbocharged XB12 making 150 horsepower and 120 foot-pounds of torque.

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like Jon Flickinger, characterize it as a lack of confidence that Buell could build a world-class sportbike the first time out. Erik Buell put it more bluntly to me on the phone at the time as he was agonizing over the decision: “It’s about not listening to the voice of the customer.” In any case, the 1125R that emerged was a bit of an oddity, graced with high performance, good handling, a comfortable riding position and a torquey, powerful V-Twin—and unique styling that was accepted only slightly better in some European markets than if Buell had covered it with purple ruffles.

To top that, Buell Motorcycles was blessed both with bad luck and a serious self-inflicted wound. The wound was the initial spark map; in this first project with Rotax, the book-length contract called for Buell to be responsible for the ECU and the engine calibration, and for Rotax to be responsible for the spark mapping—work that Harley had always done superbly for its engines. Unfortunately, the division of labor was confusing, and the spark map delivered by Rotax was crude, indeed. Buell, without its own engine dyno and rapid, in-cylinder pressure-measuring equipment, didn’t fully catch the problem until the bike had already been released. The map caused some bikes to run poorly at low cruising speeds, and it raised engine temperatures and reduced fuel economy on all of them. The imperfect running at low speeds became a point of criticism of early 1125Rs until the map was updated.

The bad luck was that the dollar plunged versus the Euro during the development of the 1125R, making the imported Rotax engine more expensive than anticipated at the same time the U.S.-sourced frame was seeing cost overruns. Normally, the exchange-rate fluctuations would have been compensated for by the increased value of bike sales in Europe, but because of the early press coverage and the styling, European sales were weaker than anticipated. Instead of another money-maker like the XB, the early 1125R proved to be a drain on Buell.

The good news was that the core of the bike was right, as proved with racetrack successes. One machine was run in the European Twins Championship (finishing third overall) for nearly 5000 miles without ever having the engine apart and with no mechanical problems. The 2009 AMA Pro Daytona SportBike Championship and Pro American Superbike top-10 results speak for themselves.

The almost immediate feedback from customers and dealers that the 1125R wasn’t exactly what the market wanted also caused a change in plans. Instead of a radical street-fighter being the next 1125 derivative following the CR café racer, a full-on supersport model—the previously mentioned B2—was substituted. With the entire distribution chain agreeing that a fully faired bike with more conventional appearance and increased performance focus was going to be better accepted than the 1125R, approval was secured to proceed with the B2.

At the same time, a seismic shift was taking place in the Harley world. The Motor Company had experienced about two decades of steady growth, with demand continually

ahead of motorcycle supply, when things started to stutter a little around the time of its 100th anniversary in 2003. For a brief while, motorcycles occupied dealership floors for longer than it took to process the sales paperwork. That was alleviated for the next year with financial promotions (0 percent down, etc.), but something was clearly happening. The continued growth in production capacity was catching up with American market demand.

But Harley wanted to continue to grow; as one H-D manager mentioned to me, “It was only a few years ago when Jim Ziemer [Harley CEO and chairman at the time] was challenging us to hit 600,000 units a year.” The company had been upsizing to hit those targets, with expensive new production facilities and rapidly increasing headcount, with engineers and marketers hired on the expectation of growth. Suddenly, all that new capacity was beginning to fill dealerships, which by 2007 and 2008 were bursting with motorcycles. Production cutbacks ensued, as well as stepped-up sales efforts using one of the company’s most powerful tools: H-D Financial Services. The only motorcycle company with a captive finance arm, Harley could wield it to increase sales.

Understand for a moment how this worked: HDFFS would underwrite loans to customers, including those with relatively poor credit, and then, because Harley couldn’t afford to carry all those loans, bundle and sell them to investors. This was aided by the virtuous circle that Harley had long operated in: With demand ahead of supply, resale prices of used Harleys were unlike anything else in the motorcycle business. With such high resale, it was actually inexpensive to own a Harley for a few years and trade it on a new one. It also meant that if a customer got behind on his loan, he could likely unbury himself by selling his bike. If that weren’t possible, repossessing it would cover a large part of the loan. So Harleys, despite their high price, were actually relatively inexpensive to own and fairly low-risk to make loans on. Customers, company and investors were all happy.

But as the bikes began stacking up in dealerships, the virtuous circle began to unwind. And when the current recession hit, and with it the almost instantaneous freezing of financial markets when Lehman Brothers collapsed in September of 2008, the doo-doo began to hit the fan for H-D. In this real-estate-led recession, the consumer piggybank of the home-equity line of credit was also being shut off for many potential Harley buyers. Harley itself had just committed to the expensive purchase of MV Agusta, and MV almost instantly turned into a much, much deeper money pit than expected, draining capital when it was most needed.

Now H-D sales were falling, sustained from free-fall only by the ability of HDFFS to make loans for motorcycles that no one else was making. But HDFFS couldn’t sell paper to cover those loans into the frozen financial markets. The severity of the situation was underlined when Warren Buffett loaned Harley \$600 million for HDFFS in early February of 2009—at a 15 percent interest rate. Finance companies are supposed to get money at wholesale and loan it at retail,



Buell's first use of a Harley-Davidson engine, the RR 1000, produced in 1987.



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making a profit in the process—hard to do when you’re paying 15 percent on your money.

With CEO Ziemer having already announced his retirement, Harley’s board had to find someone not to simply run a highly successful business and keep it on track, but rather, someone who could prune and chop the company back to a size that reflected new realities and—hopefully—eventually nurse it back to something like its former profitability.

Enter Keith Wandell. The golf-playing businessman was not a motorcyclist, but he had made a name for himself at Johnson Controls as a strong operations manager who tolerated little in the way of corporate politics. Hired to run Harley, he almost instantly started sending off signals that should have worried Buell employees but didn’t because they trusted in having the leanest, most efficient operation under the Harley-Davidson, Inc., umbrella.

In one of his first speeches to Harley employees, at the Pilgrim Road Big Twin engine plant, Wandell questioned why Harley even owned Buell. When he visited Buell, he talked about how impressed he was with Ford Motor Company’s One Ford Plan, with its emphasis on one team, one plan, one goal. And while Wandell quickly became a Harley rider, he was also heard making questioning remarks about why anyone would even want to ride a sportbike and talking about “Erik’s racing hobby,” when the Buell racing program was mentioned. Indeed, insiders report that he saw no role for racing in a successful company; one insider told me that Wandell, having come from Johnson Controls, a major automotive supplier to Detroit’s Big Three, was very distrustful of the amount of money that the car companies had spent on NASCAR and other racing.

Almost immediately upon Wandell’s arrival, a group was formed to analyze what Harley called “the adrenaline market,” and what the rest of us might call the performance segment. It was headed by former Harley-Davidson Motor COO Jim McCaslin and included Buell CEO Jon Flickinger and others. Studying the available records of publicly traded motorcycle companies (all European) and whatever could be pieced together from other sources, the group concluded that the investments in racing and updating products required to play in this market, as well as the relatively intense competition, limited potential returns; in other words, building cruisers could be far, far more profitable than building sportbikes. The choice seemed simple: Invest in traditional Harley cruisers and touring bikes and make more money, or invest some of the company’s now much-limited capital in Buell and MV Agusta and even Harley performance bikes, and make less. The decision was not emotional, not that Erik Buell would have agreed with its supporting logic.

The next step, in the summer of 2009, was to form another committee, this time to present to Harley’s most senior management the consequences of various possible scenarios for handling Buell. Selling Buell was quickly ruled out, because Harley wanted no potential competitor to have access to its

dealerships, and Buell was thought to have little value without those. Integrating Buell products into Harley-Davidson dealerships under the Harley brand was considered. But as one member of the committee indicated, after focus group studies on this path were commissioned to determine its acceptability, “it was not chosen.” The remaining options were to close Buell either slowly, letting it wind down with essentially no investment in new products, or quickly, in one big bang. The latter was chosen, presented to Harley’s board of directors, and approved in October, 2009. The cost of closing Buell Motorcycles was estimated to be of the same order as the total investment in Buell over its 25-year history.

One aspect of the big-bang plan included selling any Buell strategic assets, which included the design and tooling for the new B2 superbike, and the Griffin dirtbike design, which had been almost finished and partially tooled when that project had been shut down. Another came from the Harley board, and that was to capture the best people and best practices from Buell, including Erik Buell himself.

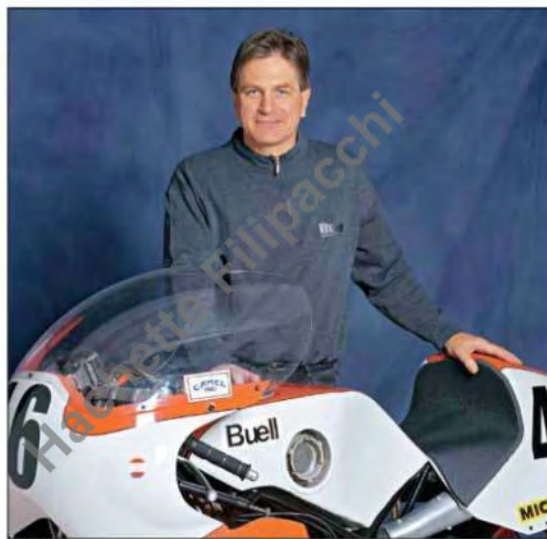
Almost as soon as Erik was told of the decision, he retreated to his telephone and began to look for ways to save as much of the company as he could. Insiders tell me he quickly found the obvious customer for the strategic assets in Bombardier, owner of Rotax that was to supply the engines for both. It was owed an eight-figure sum to escape from the 1125cc engine contract, and it was willing to consider waiving some or all of it in exchange for the projects.

As part of the arrangement, Erik would stay and work at Harley-Davidson, and a core team from Buell would help finish and launch the new designs for Bombardier.

Two high-ranking Bombardier officials, I am told, were scheduled to fly down on a Monday in November to complete due diligence on the projects and to begin the process of formalizing the deal. But on the Friday before, Harley withdrew the projects from sale, with the B2 prototypes to be destroyed. The reason Harley agreed to pay out additional tens of millions of dollars rather than have the B2 see the light of day can only be surmised. Erik packed up his office that day and began working on his departure from Harley-Davidson.

The Buell story doesn’t end there. Erik Buell was able to negotiate a severance package from Harley that included rights to Buell racing projects, parts and designs. In one of the last Buell town halls, the formation of the new Erik Buell Racing company was announced. People who knew they wouldn’t be able to work at the tiny new company applauded loudly and long anyway, because a piece of Buell would live on.

Every Buell employee I interviewed in preparing this story told me that Buell was the single best place they had ever worked. Erik, though, isn’t spending much time looking back. He and his small crew are busy finishing up two 1190RR racebikes for a European team challenging the European Twins championship. And in about a year, his non-compete agreement expires, allowing him to build street motorcycles again if he so chooses. □



Full circle: A racebike start in 1984 and a return in 2010 with Erik Buell Racing.



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BARRACUDA 2

Riding the Buell that might have been, but no longer is

BY DON CANET

A CONFLICTED SENSE OF JOY AND SORROW OVERCAME ME AS I FOUND myself behind the bubble of the Barracuda 2, code name of the concept development example of a second-generation Buell 1125R that was being readied for its planned 2011 new-model release. On one hand, how could I not be enthused to get an exclusive glimpse and riding impression of a bike the Buell product-development team had been working on right up to the fateful moment the axe came down from Milwaukee? Yet there's an aspect of this assignment that's about as blissful as writing a eulogy.

This was to be *the* bike that Buell Motorcycles had wished to build all along, a pure supersport machine executed free of heavy-handed influence by the Milwaukee mothership. Its sharp-edged full-fairing and sleek tailsection finally did visual justice to one of the more innovative chassis ever produced.

Maybe I'm being superficial, but I was amazed how much this new styling treatment affected my general perception of the bike, and I hadn't even thumbed the starter button yet. Viewed from any angle, the B2 finally projects the serious sporting intent that had simply never been fully communicated in past Buells.

I found the view from the saddle equally inspiring, beginning with the CNC-machined billet top triple-clamp. That elegant-looking piece grasps a new Showa Big Piston Fork that showcases in each of its anodized caps compression- and rebound-damping adjusters. Updated controls grace true clip-ons mounted below the top clamp, replacing the integrated clamp/riser bars and Buell "legacy" bits found on the 1125R. All-new, high-quality switchgear and remote-reservoir master cylinders brought both function and appearance well in line with that of the B2's would-have-been competitors. Attention to detail was evident right down to the choice of fasteners, the crown jewel being a trick-looking six-point alloy steering-stem nut. The rear subframe's airy, girder-like casting was another very nice touch.

Even though this concept-development-phase test mule was still in the rough, with only about 90 percent of its production parts in place, the B2 I rode surpassed the 1125R's level of refinement in several areas. First, the front brake was finally up to par with the sportbike competition, offering the kind of feel and immediate bite that had been lacking in earlier 1125R iterations. I also noted a huge reduction in engine heat on my legs, thanks to revised "inside-out" airflow; air now travels through new forward-facing, side-mounted radiators and exits out the fairing sides.

Riding position was much improved, too. It's said that the B2's development team used a late-model Suzuki GSX-R1000 as its ergonomic template. The revised riding position's bar/seat/peg relationship faithfully mimics that of the GSX-R, but the Buell's midsection is narrower, bringing the rider's knees and feet closer together. The bike feels notably more compact than the Suzuki

and offers a less obstructed view of the road ahead. The B2's double-bubble windscreen is nearly 4 inches lower than that of the 1125R.

The 72-degree 1125cc Helicon V-Twin engine was slated for a significant hop-up. New pistons raised the compression ratio a half-point to 12.8:1, while a new intake cam featured increased lift with steeper ramp profiles. Those quicker-opening profiles were made possible by the use of much lighter titanium (rather than the previous steel) intake valves. In addition, cam lobes were offset to open one valve slightly earlier than its neighbor for increased turbulence in the combustion chamber and improved burn. Throttle-body diameter was downsized from the 61mm bores of the 1125R to 56mm for improved response and stronger midrange delivery, in an effort to make the engine more suited to street use. Even with no change to

the under-engine exhaust, there was an expected 11-horse boost in peak output, netting a claimed 157 horsepower at 10,300 rpm. Peak torque was said to remain at 82 foot-pounds but with a notably flatter curve.

Unfortunately, the B2 that I rode had a standard 1125R engine specification, albeit with the smaller throttle bodies in place, so I'm not able to provide a hands-on assessment of where Buell was headed with overall engine tune. I did experience improved cracked-throttle, sub-4000-rpm cruising with smoother delivery than any of our 1125R testbikes had ever provided.

Another inopportune element of my day aboard the B2 was the lack of good sport-riding roads in the vicinity of Buell's East Troy, Wisconsin, plant. Oh, what a handful of laps at Road America might have revealed! As it was, photo passes made through a few select curves offered a hint at the B2's newfound feeling of lightness and agility. On this particular B2, the lighter handling is mainly attributed to a 0.75-pound weight reduction in the front wheel. But there was more to come as the final production machine was to carry an all-new rear wheel (with chain final drive), some 3 pounds lighter despite being 0.5-inch wider (6.0) and shod with a 190-series radial. In fact, nearly every part of the bike had been revised, netting a claimed 20-pound reduction in overall weight for the finished product.

As it was, I got only a hint of what this lighter, sharper, leaner Buell might have provided in finished form, but the company appeared to be hitting its stride with a roadracing national title under its belt in 2009 and its most promising performance bike yet under development.

Is it cruel irony that Buell ran a print ad last year of a Blast crushed into a cube? It was strangely prophetic, in any case, because the last we heard all dozen-plus Barracuda 2s in existence will have been scrapped by the time you read this. Is this the last chapter on innovative sportbikes from a man named Buell? We hope not—the story was just getting good. □

