

"It's Probably The Thing In Life That I'm Best At"

By Michael Gougis

Ed Key is one of the riders who may have had the talent to make it all the way to the top of the road racing game. He once beat Kevin Schwantz—yeah, that Kevin Schwantz—in a head-to-head contest at the WERA GNF.

But like a lot of other very, very talented racers, Key never got the break that would have put him on the road to a factory ride. It became clear in the late 1980s to Key that he never would become a paid professional road racer.

That was more than 20 years ago.

Key is not only still racing, but winning races and Championships.

motto is, every gram is sacred."

Key started racing motocross in 1970, then started road racing five years later. He did pretty well on the National level, racing Honda RS250 GP bikes. But a promised sponsorship deal never came to fruition, and Key was back to racing at the club and regional level, with the occasional AMA Supersport race on a Honda Hurricane 600 thrown into the mix.

Then, early in the 1990s, Key was racing a Ducati at Road America, back in the days before widespread deployment of soft barriers, back before the bridge at Thunder Alley was reconfigured.

"The left side of the tire wasn't completely up to temperature yet, and I lost it," Key recalls. "The bike got to the haybales before I did and moved them all out of the way—and



Ed Key (34) has spent a lot of time thinking about how to make a Suzuki SV650 lighter and quicker, and his racebikes weigh less than the 296-pound minimum weight of a Moto2 GP bike. Photo by Gron4 Photography.

And because of his constant tinkering, development and refinement skills, he's become a legend of sorts in SV racing circles, campaigning an insanely light machine that drips magnesium and carbon-fiber and puts out 100 horsepower.

"There's a lot of innovation in the bikes. You have to look long and hard to find any steel on them," says Key, 55, of Marshall, Wisconsin. "I have a fairly good collection of titanium items from an SV—because we've taken them off and replaced them with something lighter. Our

then I hit the bridge."

The biggest damage was to Key's right hand. Unable to brake a motorcycle properly, Key resorted to racing cars, then raced both cars and bikes as he worked his way back toward two-wheel road racing.

"It was a lot of fun. But frankly it wasn't nearly as much fun winning a car race as winning a motorcycle race. The rider is a much bigger part of the package on a bike than the driver is in a car," Key says. "My biggest fear back then was showing up at a track with

the wrong vehicle."

Key persevered, working his way back to fitness. He sprint-raced a Honda CB-1—the naked, four-cylinder 400—while trying to rebuild his ability to run longer races. But the effort required to brake a single-disc machine was too much for his damaged right hand over a long race. And Key's local tracks—Road America and Blackhawk Farms—require heavy braking.

Then Suzuki introduced the SV650. Twin front discs solved Key's problem.

"As soon as I started riding it, I knew this was a 10-year bike. I fell in love with the bike—it was just so much fun to ride," Key says.

On the SV, Key progressed merrily toward his goal of 25 National titles. Not only has he reached that milestone, he has amassed 88 regional titles and



17 track Championships. At the CCS Race of Champions event in 2004, he took five wins and finished second in the Pro race—the one with the Benjamins on the line—on his Superstock bike after his Superbike blew up. The next year, he won the professional race and took home even more money, he says.

"The next year, I had the injury—and I don't think I'll ever ride at that level again," Key says. "But when CCS was offering money, I made hay."

"The injury" was head trauma Key suffered at the end of 2006 at Daytona. Key says he was hit from behind while leading and woke up in the hospital. He is brutally hon-

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est about his abilities today.

"I'm not sure I ever did fully recover. There were some memory issues, my vocabulary suffered for some time—thank God for spell check," Key says. "It did affect my racing. The one thing I used to be really good at was using lappers, doing all those real-time calculations to optimize those situations. That suffered. But I'm at that point where it's hard to say what's from the injury and what's just getting old."

But as any racer knows, the race starts long before the track's gate opens on race weekend. Key works for a medical equipment manufacturing company, and he works with some incredibly talented fabricators. Sometimes, they get bored working on medical stuff—and they turn that talent toward motorcycles.

Key still races his original SV. When he first raced it, it weighed 365 pounds. It's still stock displacement, puts out about 85 horsepower, and weighs 287 pounds, ready to race but with the fuel tank empty. He's also got a 700cc Superbike that puts out 100 horsepower and weighs 288 pounds.

"One of the things that has kept me interested...is modifying and designing things," Key says. "Me and one of my friends here at work—Guy Bartz, he's a fantastic fabricator—we have come up with some incredible ideas. Over the course of the decade, we've been working on the bikes. We make a lot of our own parts. And my main sponsor—Motorcycle Performance in Madison, Bill Whisenant—we work well together. He's first and foremost an engine guy, and I'm first and foremost a chassis guy."

Key jumped back on the track at the first race of 2007. He didn't know how much his head injury would affect his racing. But he knew quickly that he could keep racing. He knew that by how quickly he raced.

"The speed came back pretty quickly. The race craft took a bit to come back. But when I saw the speed was still there, I kept on going," Key says. "I'm still having fun—still having a ball. And it's probably the thing in life that I'm best at. Why stop?"

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