

Interview:

Indian Motorcycle Vice President Gary Gray

Why Indian Races Baggers



By David Swarts

Some companies look at road racing as only being suitable to promote sportbike sales, and some complain if a motorcycle they define as being for street use is even taken to a racetrack. So why is Indian running a serious, factory racing team in the MotoAmerica King Of The Baggers series? We talked to Gary Gray, Indian Vice President of Racing, Technology & Service to find out.

►**Roadracing World:** Why is Indian involved in racing?

►**Gary Gray:** It's part of our history. The company was founded in 1901 by two gentlemen, George Hendee and Oscar Hedstrom. They actually met at a racetrack. Hendee was a bicycle racer, and in bicycle racing what they would do is they would attach a motor to something that kind of looked like a bicycle. It was called a pacer. It would set the pace for the bicycles to follow behind, kind of like drafting. They would come up behind it.

Hendee was a bicycle manufacturer and a bicycle racer, and Hedstrom was an engineer, and their pacers worked better than anyone else's. They started talking and they got together and built America's first motorcycle.

Then came all the board track racing they did, and all the flat track. They went to the Isle of Man in 1911 and took first, second, and third. All the way up to when the company went out of business for the first time at

the end of World War II. In 1951, 1952, and 1953, we won the flat track Grand National Championships three years in a row.

The company started in racing. All throughout it's been an important part of the company.

When we started back up, we bought the brand in 2011, I was responsible for all the new products that came out. Even from the start, I was like, 'We've got to get back into racing.' I'm passionate about racing.

Our president at the time said, 'Well, we should probably get distribution and manufacturing all set up, and then we can talk about going racing.'

A few years in, I think 2015, we had been back for three or four years, established production, had distribution growing rapidly. I was like, 'Hey, is it time now?' And they greenlighted our flat track program to bring us back.

I was responsible for that program, too. Honestly, it was a lot of weight on my shoulders because racing is so important to this company. If we come out and we don't do well we could be an embarrassment. So, we took it extremely seriously. Every FTR750 decision we made was to win.

Long story short: Five years later, five [American Flat Track] Championships. We did a great job. Then this [King Of The Baggers] came up as an extension.

We've done some other things. We dabbled in [the Pikes Peak] Hill Climb. We did a land speed bike honoring Burt Munro on his 50th anniversary. So, we've dabbled a bit, but flat track was



(Above) Mission Foods/S&S Cycle/Indian Challenger Team riders Tyler O'Hara (29) and Jeremy McWilliams (99) lead a MotoAmerica KOTB race at Daytona. (Left) Indian Motorcycle Vice President Gary Gray signals #1 as O'Hara's bike is pushed into victory lane. Photos by Brian J. Nelson.

really the first serious entry.

Then this came around in 2020, and I kind of laughed at it honestly. 'This is crazy. We can't race baggers. But it sounds like some of the guys from Milwaukee are going to go, so maybe we should go. Let's go have some fun.'

At the first [King Of The Baggers] event we went so unbelievably fast, and the bikes, to me they're just beautiful going around the track, the way the guys are backing them in and everything. We decided to continue what we've done in flat track with our great partner at S&S Cycle and move it over here (into road racing).

It's a really long way of saying it's [racing] always been part of the company. It always will be part of the company. It was really important for us to connect to that heritage when we came back. We just had to get a bit grounded first and make some money and then we could expand and reconnect to our heritage.

►**RW:** How does Indian connect the racing program to its commercial activity?

►**GG:** It's a lot easier in baggers because that's where we make a lot of our money, selling Chieftains and Challengers. So, we work pretty hard on connecting the stories. Through video work, through social media, we're keeping our existing fans engaged.

I just got a text this morning from a dealer that said a guy just came in. He had been watching King Of The Baggers. He wasn't currently riding our brand, but he's just like, 'I can't believe what you guys are doing on the track. I've got to ride one of these bikes to see it to believe it.' And he rented an Indian Challenger, just to see what we're doing.

All the way through, social media work, video work that we do, connections with our dealers. We've done sales events where, for example, the top-selling dealer in the southeast got free VIP passes to Daytona to see us race.

All through the business we try to connect what we're doing here at the track, and in the future hopefully some of the race-inspired stuff we're doing here will make its way into the Challenger. We've already done that with the FTR 1200. Originally, that bike was styled around the flat track bike. Then just at Daytona we launched the Champ Edition [FTR 1200] commemorating those five Championships with color scheme matches and bringing that through the brand.

Kind of so far it's been on the social media and the brand marketing side, but now we're starting to show it more in the product, which is good. We haven't done anything yet. Obviously, we don't talk about future product, but hopefully we'll do something there, as well.

►**RW:** Is a fun aspect of it reviving the oldest rivalry in motorcycle racing—Indian vs. Harley-Davidson?

►**GG:** For sure. It's great for both brands. It's great for them to have us out here, and it's great for us to have them out here. I think they were founded in 1903, and I'm sure that was the first thing they did when somebody rolled a bike out of a showroom back then was 'Let's race these two things!'

It keeps us competitive. It keeps us on our toes. It keeps our fans engaged. We win some. They win some. I think it's been a great battle for both brands. I love it!

RW