

# THE TALE OF A VIRGIN RACER

Well how did it all start? I think it was about 1982 when I bought a few very tired ex-hire Honda FL250s from the local Honda Dealer in Tassie. Apparently they had been re-possessed, and judging by their condition, the Dealer lost a couple of bucks on the deal. There were supposed to be five machines in total, but to me it looked like there were two that showed signs of once being Odysseys, and a pile of buckled bits in boxes. He mumbled some figure of \$2500 for the lot and I returned with a mumble of "I'll get them out of your way for \$1500." Don't know why but he asked to see the colour of my money. Anyway, I threw all the bits in a trailer and took them home.

By the end of the weekend I had two very tatty looking Odysseys up and running, and took one for a spin. The two policemen that stopped me were very kind, and told me the school oval was *NOT* a race track, and if they ever saw me on the street in this thing again they would book me .I paid a big price though, they made me push the Odyssey home!

The wheels of industry eventually started to rumble over in my mind and the thought of hiring these things out kept ringing up dollar signs in my head. By this time I had four machines in running order and decided to check with the East Coast Council in Tassy to see if they would let me run a business from the recreational area in the sand dunes." Yeah no worries as long as you've got fifty zillion dollars worth of public liability and you don't get in anyone's way-- go for it." Well that's the simplified version, and I was soon up and running with East Coast Off Road Hire. What a bloody can of worms that was. Any stock Odyssey owner would know how difficult it is to keep their machine running, but imagine trying to keep it running from dawn till dusk. Many a time they were still being hired out after dark, scooting around on the dunes with their lights on. After a fortnight of this I bought two more 'stockies' in crates, braced them to hell, slammed a length of solid bar through the front end of each of them, and set them to work. I was about 19 at the time and had never seen so much money in my life. If only I could remember what on earth I did with it all. The business went on happily every summer holiday until I bought the last five stockies in Australia, got a season out of them and shut up shop. The FL350, even at \$2800 each new (soon to rise out of all proportion) certainly wasn't a practical vehicle to hire out to Jim and Jenny Dufus. They would have killed themselves.

The 'buzz' of screaming around in an Odyssey soon wore off and I constantly thought there must be a better way to build one of these things. They needed suspension, and with a very narrow mind at the time I tried and tried to hang some floppy bits off the back of an Odyssey, but nothing worked very well. I saw a very typical Taswegian (anyone seen Deliverance?) with a stockie he had modified by cutting the chassis behind the seat, and slapping a couple of gate hinges in it. With an old 750 air cooled motor, the thing went quite well until it completely broke in two while airborne off the top of a sand dune.

Everyone seemed to want the Odysseys to go faster, and they would bolt a million bucks worth of goodies on them to make them go like bullets, but I just wanted one that wouldn't break my back. I got very frustrated with the whole deal, shelved it and went out and bought a boat instead. Actually I bought five boats. Thank God that phase is over.

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Nearly four years ago I decided to make the big move to sunny Victoria and find out what it was like to live amongst single headed folk. It took a while to adjust, and it's only recently that I've been able to use my 'flanny' shirts as rags. It took a lot of counseling though. There are still a lot of deep rooted issues I have to deal with, as far as being away from my family--all 470,000 of them!

Basically Melbourne was "The Big Smoke" to me and there was something happening all the time. A friend came across a couple of tickets to a monster truck show at the Tennis Centre, and asked if I wanted to go. All I could envisage for a monster truck show was a heap of old F100's with big wheels and no mufflers, driving over old Mazdas. It sounded like it would be a pretty crappy night, but there was nothing else on offer, so it was off to the Tennis Centre we went.

I was right about the trucks, out they came, and off I went to get a nutritional pie and coke. Sitting there trying to assess what was actually in the pie; some classical music fired up and on came a support act. Bloody dancing Bobcats! I've never seen anything like it. It was an amazing display of machine control, with the Bobcats up on their front wheels, dancing to Vivaldi's Four Seasons. Then up popped some lunatic on a motorbike who thought riding round and round inside a big bird cage was a great way to spend the evening. Under hypnosis, it seems he was a frustrated budgie in a past life.

Anyway, after a while, and a few other support acts (which all beat the big scary trucks hands down), out came some scaled down buggies. The days of frustration all came back to me as I stumbled down the steps to get a closer look. That's it! That's what I had been trying to build. It was so clear I wasn't in the running, trying to modify an Odyssey. Those were the types of machines I had always wanted, something built from the ground up. I had to find out more. After trying to swindle my way past the security guard to get inside and get a closer look (by telling him I was a member of the Club), I collared one of the buggy drivers going in, and got a peek at those purpose built machines. Everyone was very helpful, and told me they were racing at Kyneton the following weekend so off to Kyneton I went.

While looking over the machines at Kyneton, I saw some guys having all sorts of problems with a gear change rod on their buggy. Out came the cordless drill and after pulling their perfectly good BBQ's legs off to make up a new shift rod, Hayden was back out on the track. Afterwards he thanked me and said "for pulling us out of the crap, you've earned yourself a drive". He didn't have to tell me twice. Racing was over and I was strapped in to his machine. I sat there and waited till Trevor finished the presentation, then he pointed me toward the track. The next five minutes or so sealed my fate. After that drive, I was destined to spend countless hours and dollars building one of those things.

I raced out and got a credit card and within a fortnight I had bought a motor. Not having the bucks for a sporty, racy, wiz bang engine, a low kilometer CBR1000 with "MOTA MINT" painted on it, was bundled into the ute. What the hell now? Best I get some more information on the next steps, so off to an intellectual night of the pros and cons of trailing arm suspension verses 'A' arm suspension at the club president's house. I just wanted to know where to bung the new seat I had ordered. They told me where to put it, but I told them it wouldn't fit there. So, armed with all the info, I plonked the engine on the garage

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floor, placed the new seat in front of it, and sat in it making brrmmm brrmmm noises for an hour or so. Basically (and very naively) I marked a line where my feet ended, one down each side of the seat and proudly stood back and declared "that's how big my buggy's going to be". If only I knew then what I know now.

The next few months were pretty much spent stumbling in the dark. Not knowing exactly what the end result would be, meant I couldn't put anything on paper. They say you learn from your mistakes, but unfortunately making mistakes in building machines like these can cost enormous amounts of time and money, and could quite easily leave you with a machine that simply doesn't work. I never realised how critical it was to make the machine work on paper before even buying a length of tube. Paper is cheap and there's never much on the TV anyway.

I started off with trailing arm rear suspension, then five-link rear suspension, and then 'A' arm rear suspension. Did I miss any? Each time of course a mad rush was made to get the parts to do the job, and most of the bits now sit in my carport, a dull oxidised red colour. I went through a virtual car yard of automotive components, from drive shafts (that now help strengthen the slab at my new house) to nuts and bolts trying to save a few bucks. It doesn't work. The answer was and is, ask the guys who know. Sometimes you've got to spend a few dollars extra to get someone to do the things you can't. In the long run it saves huge amounts of time and bundles of money.

I got to the "chassis almost finished" stage, with the engine in, when I asked Big Bob to come and have a look. He wandered around the freshly bent chassis, being ever so polite, and trying not to offend me. After half an hour or so, we agreed that some of the work already done was salvageable. The first thing was to set about cutting out the tube work at the back of the chassis that was preventing me from getting the engine out. Doh! Didn't I feel like a genius!

Big Bob must have taken a liking to the way things were going with the machine because he dedicated a huge amount of time into its progress from then on. Much to the despair of our partners, who had become Buggy Widows. Within a couple of months, a very sleek buggy was sitting on shiny new alloy wheels with chunky new tyres. Bob and I looked at each other and uttered something about it only being a couple of weeks off being finished. That was about eight months ago. We slogged away under my carport in rain hail and shine, wondering why it was so hard to mig weld in forty-knot winds, and why things weren't looking square on a sloping driveway. Bob finally said "stuff this, drag the piece of junk over to my place and we'll finish it there". Done deal.

After dragging the now very rusty and sad looking buggy into Bob's garage, we once again agreed that there was only some finishing touches to do and a couple of weeks would see it done! About four months later, and two trips to the sandblasters, the chassis was ready for some paint and final assembly. Assembly should only take a couple of days, because everything had already been checked for fit way before painting.

I don't know where we went wrong there, but I'll just blame Bob (he's got broad shoulders and with a gammy leg he can't catch me anyway.) It still took us about three

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weeks of pretty solid work to get the thing to a state of drivability. It seemed anything that possibly could go wrong was going wrong, and slowing us down enormously. We were planning on the machine being finished, tested and ready for the Bagshot Enduro, but nothing ever goes to plan when it comes to deadlines. We made the mistake of declaring it would be ready, based on the fact that the enduro was still a couple of weeks off. Time was running out. I had to take a few days off work if I was to be anywhere near ready. The plan was to run the machine the weekend before Bagshot, but the shocks I ordered didn't arrive on time. We reset the shakedown for the Thursday before Bagshot, and the shocks finally turned up at 7pm on the Wednesday evening. They didn't fit! Who's fault was it? Theirs, or ours? We checked over the measurements and with some relief found it was their problem. We were on their doorstep at 8am the next morning, and returned with four shocks that fitted! Hooray!

Still, at this stage we were behind, so it looked like it would be another day off work to get it finished. At about 8pm on Friday night, we threw in the towel. What little wasn't finished, could just stay unfinished. It had been a big few weeks; we were pretty much knackered, and needed some sleep.

6am Saturday morning and the alarm screamed at me until I stumbled out of bed in the doom and gloom of that insane hour, to switch it off. Dragging myself out to the ute, I wondered what the hell I was doing awake in the middle of the night. After at least 30 attempts at backing the trailer down Bob's driveway, I rattled his door expecting him to come bouncing out (well hobbling out) to help load up. No way. Something resembling Bob, but looking more like the Grim Reaper, was standing at the door in the greenest shade of white I've ever seen. He tried to say something along the lines of "I don't feel so good", when he had to make a dash for the steering wheel of that porcelain bus. He looked like he'd driven that bus to Brisbane and back. Finally his colour cleared to pure white, and we loaded up, and headed for Bagshot with the two machines. What a super fast trip. Not! I'm sure my ute is three inches longer from towing that load!

We hit Bendigo after what seemed an eternity, even contemplating stopping at the Kyneton track just to be able to get my buggy into second gear. About three kilometers past Bendigo, we were looking for a place to get fuel for the machines. We called into a take-away and asked if there was a service station further up ahead. The answer was a little Irish. "Yeah there's a servo a few kilometers up, but I don't know if they've got petrol". Well what can you say? We decided to turn around and go back to Bendigo for fuel, on the way meeting just about everyone else on their way to the track. We passed ol Murray shoving something inedible in his mouth in his mad dash to get to the track. Finally we fuelled up and headed in the right direction again.

The pits area was already pretty active by the time we got there. It's a totally different feeling being there as a competitor than a spectator. You've got things to do; it's not a casual stroll around the place to see what people are doing, and looking at the machines anymore. I remember starting to unload the buggies, and through the trees I could see someone tearing around the track. That's when I felt nervous. This was a whole new perspective. I thought to myself "there's no way I could possibly drive that fast around there, I'll die or something". It

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seemed so fast. Bombing up Bob's driveway in 1st gear leaving bits of rubber on the concrete was one thing, but now after nearly two years of working on this thing, I was here to race it, and that fact had only just sunk in with a serious thud.

A quick check over and the machine fired up after a bit of a cough. Tuning the carbies was something that would have to wait. Trevor screamed from the pit gate "You want to get a couple of laps in Pete?" What was I to say? "No Trev, I've just washed the buggy and I don't want to get it dirty"? Not likely! On with some safety gear, and then up for scrutineering. The Chief Scrutineer (Big Bob) tried his hardest to find something wrong, but if he had, I would have blamed him for it anyway.

Sitting at the pit gate ready to go out on the track, I was thinking, all this work has come to fruition now. To have got this far was a major effort, and a lot of sacrifices had to be made to get here. It was a good feeling sitting in something you built yourself. Trevor was yelling at me "*go when the Quads come in*".

The minutes felt like hours, I just wanted to get the thing into second gear. He waved at me, and pointed down the track. Woohoo! I'm out there! There's first and there goes second, third, fourth, fifth and Jesus, the steering is heavy! After two laps I came in, and Big Bob told me I was a dimwit (or words to that effect) for being so mean to the new machine. "You were going way too hard, you don't need to drive it that hard" My reply was "There's no way I can drive this thing for three hours, it's too heavy in the steering" The problem didn't rear its ugly head till the next day. There were no great expectations for the Enduro the next day. I had my worries about the things that might let us down and Bob had his. We were both wrong.

There was certainly a lot of wind around the campfire that night; the problems of the world were sorted out in just a few hours. Fuelled by amber fluid, for some it dragged on nearly till the sun came up.

On the morning of the Enduro, everything was checked and tightened, and I got geared up. Feeling a little less stressed by the whole deal now, and quite happy the machine even got through Saturday's practice, we gridded up. This was the first time on the track with other vehicles, and I was staying right out of their way. The steering was still a real handful, and I had great doubts as to whether I could physically keep driving for three hours.

I don't know how, but at the end of the first stage, I was apparently one lap behind the leader! During lunch, I rechecked and tightened everything. One of the front suspension ball joints looked a bit dodgy, but with no spares, we just did what we could. I was literally worn out. The half seized ball joint was making the steering so heavy, that my arms were like jelly, and there wasn't enough strength in my hands to hold a spanner. That test day would have been so handy.

The second session started in the reverse direction, and the same problems were there, but apart from that, things were going very smoothly. I had an annoying little vibration somewhere near the dash, which sounded just like a Quad behind me, so I spent a considerable amount of time pulling over to let phantom riders past.

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Finally the ball joint let go and speared me into some very pretty flora. I clambered out, and looked at the damage. I thought about picking some flowers for the woman I obey, when the marshals came up screaming, "Are you out? Are you out?" "Yeah, it's not worth fixing" I said, "I'll bring the trailer around and pick it up later". "That's a shame." they said, "You were leading the Open Class".

There were only minutes left before the chequered flag, and there were murmurings that second place was there if I could just get the machine across the finish line. The only way would be on three wheels because of the damage, so I removed the wheel and limped around the track at snails pace to the finish straight. I must say that was a sight I'll remember for a long time. It looked like everybody had made it out to the edge of the track just beyond the finish line. I looked toward Big Bob who was pointing frantically at his watch, so I picked up the pace just a little and made it across the line for second place with literally seconds to spare.

It's the longest adrenalin rush I've ever had. Jumping out of a plane at 14000ft came close, but it didn't last three hours. The whole experience was worth every second and every dollar spent, and I'm looking forward to Kyneton for my first sprint meeting.

The view of what goes on during a race from a spectator's point of view is like looking into a goldfish bowl. I have had the opportunity now to look from the inside out, and it's quite an amazing place to be. It leaves you in admiration of all the people it takes to run one of these events, people who would love to be out there racing, but can't, so instead, give their support in the organisation and running of such events. As a "virgin" racer my day would not have been possible without them and I take my hat off to them all.

The machine went on the trailer, looking quite sad on three wheels. We also chucked in a handful of bent bits, but they are all fairly minor things and very fixable. It was a good feeling to turn up at my first race ever, and finish. It was much more than was expected. To anyone building a machine out there "EXTRACT A DIGIT." It's bloody hard work but if you get your machine on the track, you'll find it was worth every second. If you need advise about anything, the answers are there. The club is full of knowledge. It's a very difficult thing to do on your own and you sometimes need another point of view to work around a problem. A problem to you may be something so simple to someone who has done it before. The building stage seems like a bottomless pit to throw money into, but that does drop off to maintenance and modification costs. Each thing you modify you do better.

Peter Litherland