BIG ADVENTURE!

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get a lot of emails in this job, but when the sender's address ends with @nasa.gov, one takes notice.

The sender was Dr. Ray Hixon, a 47-year-old CW reader and former WERA F Clubman national champion with a garage full of bikes, including two '90s Ducati 900 Super Sports, as well as some quirkier stuff.

Among the strange was a 2002 Aprilia R50 two-stroke he bought from a NASA coworker. While Hixon spends much of his time doing jet-engine research, he was writing to me regarding his other job as an associate professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Toledo.

Hixon is a faculty advisor for the school's Formula SAE team. "It's a senior design class, the capstone for the mechanical engineering undergrad program," Hixon said. "Normally they get something from the car as their design project. This group wanted to do something different."

Hixon had the answer. After doing well on the Aprilia in a charity endurance run called the Lake Erie Loop, Hixon found that the Loopers had joined with Motor-Scooter International Land-Speed Federation (yes, really) to run a "mini" re-creation of the famed '70s-era cross-country Cannonball Run. Hixon's response was, "How can you not, right?"

Hixon would do the riding, while his seven seniors split into two groups. The aero group—Benjamin Vittore, Steven Giveins, and Burton Johnson—worked on making the Aprilia more slippery to increase speed and efficiency. The engine group—Lucas Kizer, Nick Eschhofen, Mark Rottinger, and Aaron Heitbrink—worked toward similar goals on the powerplant.

Added benefit of getting the school involved, even though Hixon was funding the effort himself? "I finally found a way to go tax-deductible racing!"

The carbureted R50 became a fuel-injected R70 then got switched back to a carb when they found too late that the bike's charging system couldn't keep up with the EFI. (A valuable engineering lesson," Hixon said.) Meanwhile the fairing was modded, with the lower half removable in seconds, which would come in handy.

Hixon wondered if they might stop by the CW office if they made it to California. Of course!

Engine guys Kizer and Eschhofen drove chase in the two-seater van full of spares. Good thing.

"We lost our first engine in St. Louis," Hixon said. "We had a total of two engines and lost the second one just outside of Needles [California]. We only had one more piston. We picked the best of the two cylinders and did the top end in the van headlights at 11 p.m."

He also mentioned to me from the road that they kept running leaner and leaner but couldn't figure out why. I gave them Kevin Cameron's phone number.

"Call me Mr. Checkdist," Kevin said.

"We were on pins and needles because it was our last piston," Hixon said. Kevin got to "exhaust leak" on his list, and that's what the team found. "We'd never have made it without his help," Hixon recalled.

"We were only 90 minutes ahead of the next team at the finish."

Their 2,796-mile Manhattan-to-Redondo Beach run took 84 hours, 52 minutes. Next day, Hixon rode the bike to our office, and we ran it on the dyno.

A new group of seniors has fixed the EFI problem and, because the mini Cannonball looks like it was a one-off, Hixon's going back to the Lake Erie Loop in search of a record, this time with two bikes. "Rules say you can't draft your chase vehicle but don't say you can't draft your teammate," Hixon said. "Too many years of club racing..."

Now that's a proper education.

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