

PS IN THE
USA

ALPHA GAMMA MAN

Rick Lance bought one of the first Suzuki RG500s, setting him off on a 30-year journey to become an international Gamma authority

WORDS CHRIS NEWBIGGING
PHOTOGRAPHY MARK MANNING

THERE'S A BEAUTIFUL SERENITY to the hills of North Carolina. It's a peaceful, idyllic part of rural southern-state USA where life is relaxed and quiet. Or it was, until Rick Lance showed up. Now it's home to the world's longest-standing RG500 enthusiast, backwoods tranquility has been replaced by modified two-stroke fours shrieking through expansion chambers. Fortunately, Rick's immediate neighbours to the cavernous barn conversion he recently moved in to are used to noise.

"I rent the property from Jamie James (former AMA Superbike champion), who used this workshop to build his Nascar here. When he lived here, he'd wheelie his R1 most of the way up the road here."

Rick's workshop, crammed full of his collection and three decades of accumulated parts, wasn't always this impressive. He started out as just another rider who bought one of the first RG500s expecting a Grand Prix bike with lights. The reality fell short.

"My original Gamma was one of the first in 1985. I hated it because it wasn't what I thought it would be. I didn't sell it, but spent nine months working on a solution, which was to get rid of the air intakes, which I found very restrictive. I asked Uni Filter to make me something, which they then put on general sale. It all started from there really."

The same attitude that saw Rick spend nine months getting the motor on-song with the air-filter kit led him to seek experts to help develop his bike further, weeding out the problems holding his original bike back. Big-bore kits, exhausts, fork and suspension upgrades and more were all investigated. Many of his mods set the course for others to follow.

There's more than a bit of guesswork behind Rick's mods, too. A lot of research, consideration and then testing. In the quest for RG perfection, Rick has covered 300,000 miles on various Gammas belonging to him, and friends too. Rick's never had even a bench dyno, let alone a rolling road, so all the set-up work he's done has been carried out on the road, where the only diagnostic tool to be found is between Rick's ears.

"One year, I didn't get to ride any of my own Gammas for one reason or another, but I did 10,000 miles on friends' bikes setting them up and trying them. When I was based in California, there was a rich guy who



"No, I'm afraid I can't spare even one, Chris"

bought a Skoal Bandit replica RG500, and I helped him find some expansions and a filter kit. But he couldn't get it to run right, so he left it with me because he knew I'd got my own bikes running sweet. He ran the bike on a more viscous race fuel, which flows less than pump gas on the same jet size, so it took some work to get right. I got it with 1200 miles on, and added another 1000 getting it right. Over 70 hours went into fine-tuning that bike. He freaked out I'd ridden his new bike so far – until he rode it the first time. It really ripped, and it saved my bacon."

In the process of development, delving deeper in to the specialist world of Gammas and working on other peoples' bikes Rick's accumulated a lot of parts. Anyone who tells you Gamma parts are rare hasn't looked around Rick's place.

Everywhere you look, there are Gamma parts. A dozen or more engines are littered about the workshop, awaiting their turn to be rebuilt, fettled and inserted in another project bike. One corner has dozens more barrels, all rebored to 555cc, and ready to go on Rick's engines. Every shelf space or container is stuffed with parts – there's a crate of crank webs, a bucket of anti-dive pots (Rick designed his own bypass plates, so he's barely left any on for years) and bins full of rads. ☺



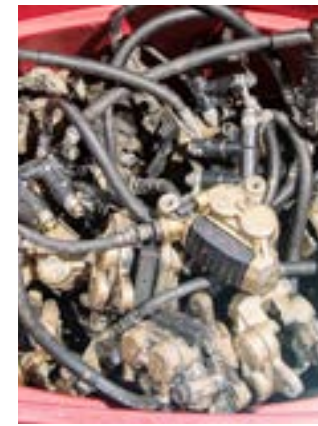
Chris gets a feel for Rick's Gamma mods



Bare RG frames await a return to the road



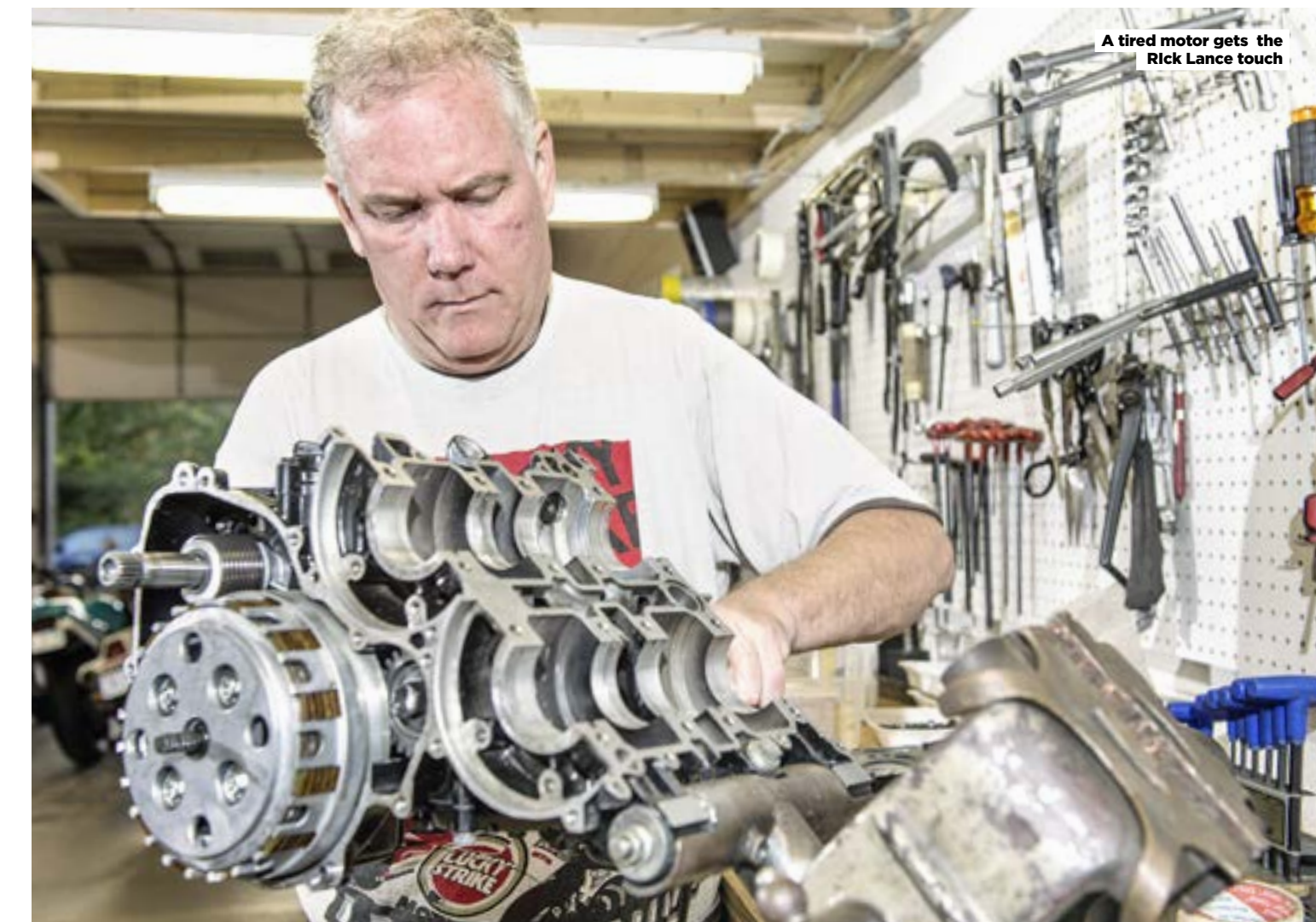
This is what 30 year of RG500 fanaticism looks like



Rick's own air-filter mod unleashes stock engines



Chris covets the contents of Rick's plastics store



A tired motor gets the Rick Lance touch

There are stacks of wheels in Rick's loft – stock rims, plus a selection of 17in wheels and lightweight replacements destined for future builds, or just picked up because they became available. Like most collectors, Rick has little ability to say no, or throw anything away. "I chucked some of the worst radiators. But I still have around 25 up there. I'll never use them and I'm not sure they're worth anything either."

Panels are a problem for Gamma owners – American bikes' plastics are embrittled in the sun, while the rest of the world had to contend with dribbling carburettors ruining bellypans. Not that you'd know looking around here – every RG500 panel can be found several times over in Rick's stash. There's also a shelving unit with a stack of boxes with Suzuki parts numbers on. "That's a brand new bodykit. I'm saving that for something special."

It's not just about horsepower for Rick, even though he's more than capable of building a strong motor. It's about making sure it's all gain and no loss when he builds up yet another Gamma.

Take big-bore kits: most '570' kits for Gammas use Suzuki pistons intended for the Far-Eastern market RG150. They fit and work OK with some modification, but aside from the fact that using these pistons actually gives a capacity a shade under 555cc, not 570 as advertised, that wasn't enough for Rick.

"I wanted to be sure that the extra capacity and power wouldn't cause problems with engine life, or change its characteristics. If you just fit heavier pistons, you're going to reduce crank life and maximum revs. The pistons I've sourced weigh the same as stock. I machine the crowns for an even squish band and trim the skirts to clear the crankcases and maintain the right piston length for the 500. They last as well as regular pistons, don't stress the crank any more and my engines will happily rev out, but with the extra power and drivability of a big-bore engine."

It's not unusual for me to hear big claims from anyone who's built an engine, but Rick is more than claiming – the next sentence is an offer to ride his bikes – plural. In fact, a few friends who've built bikes with Rick's help have turned up too, and we're off for a ride on the near-deserted roads of the North Carolina hills.

Riding Rick's Gammas

FOR THE FIRST few miles I reason a standard bike is the place to begin from, as it's been a while since I rode one so some familiarisation seems wise. This one wasn't intended as a keeper, just a good deal Rick thought would earn him a few dollars to put back in to his hobby, but the lovely original condition convinced him to keep hold of it.

Just a set of filters and correct jetting in place of original air intakes and filter deviate from standard spec, but it's my first indication of how Rick's bikes work. His 'stocker' feels like I'd always thought Gammas should. Of course, peak power is still modest by latter day standards, but the way it rushes into the red is thrilling in such a lightweight bike. Rick recommends Avon Roadriders for stock wheels (as fitted here),

"I wanted to be sure that the extra capacity and power wouldn't cause problems"

and although they help, the extra power exposes the shortcomings of the chassis. Average brakes and pattering forks temper hard riding.

Rick's friend Allan Gross volunteers his gorgeous black/red/orange Gamma next, built with more than a little of Rick's input. In fact, the unique yet familiar twist on stock colours was originally destined for Rick's own bike. "These were actually my panels," Rick explains. "But Allan was collecting both mine and his blue/white parts from the painter, and he really wanted these when he saw them."

Three decades of experience mean most of Rick's builds (or those he's helped with/inspired) now follow a similar pattern. The frame is left stock, but the fork internals get RaceTech emulators and trimmed standard fork springs to increase the spring rate. Allan's bike has a stock swingarm with a welded-on underbrace, and five-spoke magnesium Marchesini wheels in understated gunmetal grey. Four-piston Nissin calipers on simple adaptors grab 290mm EBC discs. ➔

Rick's built a wolf in Wolf clothing



Phillip Imms, Allan Gross, our Chris, Sean Freeman, Rick Lance and Travis Walker in a line-up of Rick-fettled Gammas



RICK'S RGs

RGs fettled, modified and inspired by the great man

The Walter Wolf (inset)
Rick's familiar 555cc engine features under the navy/red iteration of the Walter Wolf race replica paint. This one has FZR600 3HE fork lowers on stock stanchions. Yamaha 'gold-spot' calipers fit straight on. Both wheels are GSX600F.

The standard RG500
Although this one is a recent acquisition, it represents where Rick started with his first modifications. A filter conversion and jetting changes transform an unmodified bike into the bike the RG500 always wanted to be.

Allan Gross's Gamma
Built with Rick's help. The twist on standard paint was intended for Rick's bike, but Allan begged Rick for the panels. 555cc engine, Marchesini wheels, braced swingarm and Nissin four-piston brakes all feature.

Phillip Imms' RG555
Ex-pat Brit Phillip took advantage of Rick's knowledge to build his own bike. Blanked anti-dive, fork cartridge emulators, six-piston brakes, braced swingarm and Teapot wheels manage 555cc of Gamma power.

Flouro Skoal
Picked up by Rick in this state, the last owner augmented motor modding wisdom from Rick with his own chassis upgrades. CNC-machined yokes and rearsets, plus a braced swingarm and light wheels make it a seriously good RG500.

The Pepsi rep
Another 555cc bike on 17in wheels and uprated suspension, this one has a British twist under the cola-brand paint. Dymag wheels and a rare set of EBC brake calipers. "They never sold them, and only a few sets exist. They do work well!"

Rick's 'beater'
"It's been ridden by 400 people. it's a beater - crashed three times, and it's done 85,000 miles. But it rides great, and I don't have to be nervous about it." All of Rick's favourite engine modifications are found under the tatty panels.

The 555cc motor has had some port work, bored-out carburettors and the familiar air filter modification. Fitting the Tommy Crawford expansions takes up the space usually allocated to the battery, so Rick designed a battery relocation kit to fit it in the vacant air filter space. Standard disc valves are used. "Every bike I ever rode with cut disc valves sucked," reckons Rick. "We looked at the port timing some years ago and didn't see any benefit in changing it."

A modified clutch actuator is fitted to alleviate some of the poor gearchange issues Gamma suffer too - a simple fix Rick devised some years back. It also has the glassfibre panels Rick originally commissioned from a supplier some years ago, who has sadly retired and no longer offers the panels. When they were available, they shaved weight and circumvented problems with brittle or fuel-damaged original fairings.

Instantly, there's a noticeable difference. Just rocking it off the stand with my left thigh tells me a significant weight reduction has occurred. The already-warm motor crackles with intent, and throttle response is even sharper than Rick's 'stock' bike.

Usually, tuned two-strokes sacrifice bottom end for high-rpm power. But Rick's preferred course of engine mods actually make the Gamma more useable. There's no need to abuse the clutch to get rolling, and from around 3500rpm you've got proper torque to punt you along. It doesn't take much to punch the front wheel in the air, and the fat torque curve makes holding it up as easy as lifting it in the first place - not usually a two-stroke trait. The gear selection is much slicker too, thanks to the rearsets and clutch mod. No doubt it provides some relief to the weaker areas of the Gamma gearbox too.

The diet and improved chassis transform the handling too. No longer is it a saggy-shocked, chattering, wobbling mess. It's taut, precise and makes full use of the grip the wider radial tyres offer. These roads are

"Rick's life-long dedication to the RG is telling - they really are great bikes to ride"

great fun, but with blind bends, crests, surprise gravel patches and the odd school bus lumbering along slowly. But the bike proves about perfect - forget the podgy adventure bikes beardy types would have you believe unbeatable on these roads. When I can see far enough ahead, there's more than enough speed and handling to attack them, but there's enough in reserve to avoid the unexpected, which conversely can be expected at almost every corner.

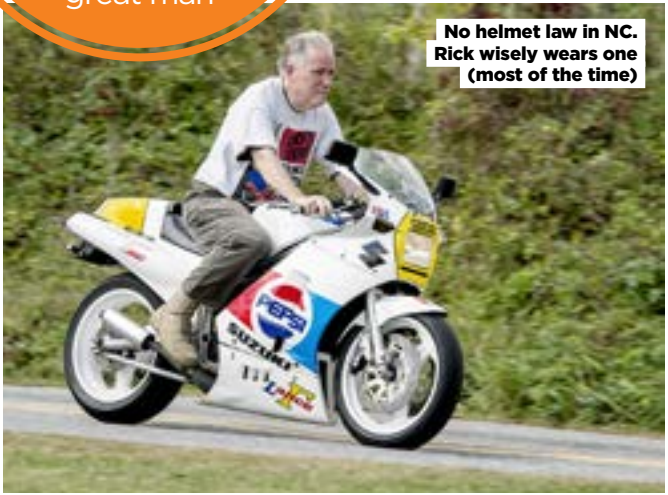
Next up is Rick's own Skoal Bandit replica, bought from a friend he'd made through the world of the RG owners. It's largely the same, but the previous owner chose Tokico four-pots and replicated Paul Lewis' Skoal Bandit RG racer with his own hand-cut graphics. Most crucially, he also had a friend with a CNC machine make his own yokes and footrest hangers. Sounds fairly minor, but the different in feel and steering precision over the flimsy standard cast yokes is marked, even with identical forks and shock. The engine has an identical spec but the nature of two-strokes means they're all slightly different in feel, and some will be better in certain conditions. Today, the Skoal is on song. I didn't notice Allan's bike being woolly, but next to the Skoal you can tell the set-up is tailored to a lower altitude than we're riding at today.

This is my favourite. It's a properly fast, intense two-stroke special. My eyes bulge out on stalks, and the lining of my leathers is soon drenched in sweat as I do my best to hang with rapid club racer Travis Walker giving another of Rick's bikes what-for on roads he knows well.

It's hard to believe such a flimsy-looking, early aluminium frame is still capable of such feedback and response, but Rick's life-long dedication to the RG is telling - they really are great bikes to ride.

It's honestly been one of the best rides of my life by the time we arrive at the Smoky Mountain Diner in Hot Springs, and time constraints mean I couldn't sample the full mountain road loop Rick and his gang usually take, which I'm assured is even better. It'd be a treat on a moped - but on some of the world's best RG500s with a top bunch of blokes, it really is an afternoon to remember. 🍷

No helmet law in NC. Rick wisely wears one (most of the time)



A complete set of new bodywork awaits a bike

Wish you were here? You bloody well should

