

It's Raining Parts On
The Crash Page

2012 Kawasaki ZX-14R: 1441cc + 207bhp =
Smokey Burnouts In Las Vegas

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The Adventures Of
Two 50-Somethings
On The High Banking:
**Living The
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Then came the infamous lap 27. Out came the red flags. The next thing I knew, AMA Pro had stopped the race due to numerous front tires overheating. I returned to my pit. We waited...and waited. The order finally came down—a mandatory tire change to more durable rubber. During the down time, Danny Eslick told me that he'd completely lost the front end in NASCAR Turn Four and crashed his Suzuki at 160+ mph. I told him how close I'd come to doing the same thing at the same place.

Two hours later, we got the news. The Daytona 200 had just turned into a 15-lap sprint race. All my preparation for a 200-mile endurance race was for naught. There were no more pit stops for my crew to speed through. There were no more long sessions of hard racing to test my stamina. There were no more chances for me to prove I was up to a 200-mile endurance race. I was deflated.

We were told to take two warm up laps and then re-grid for the restart. We lined up and then took off row by row. I returned to the starting grid after two laps like I was told. I then watched as the front two or three rows took a third warm-up lap! Three quarters of the field then sat on the starting grid for another two minutes. I watched my coolant temperature go up to 225 degrees Fahrenheit.

The flag finally dropped again and I got a great start. The 1125R wheeled away from the line into Turn One. I then heard a horrible scraping noise—a bike sliding along the ground. Jason Farrell had lost the front end, his bike took out Russ Wickle and now it was coming after me! I stood the Buell up and ran off the outside of Turn One trying to avoid it. It missed me by a few inches. Whew!

I got back on the race line and accelerated into Turn Two just in time to see Barrett Long's Ducati pouring smoke and cart-wheeling 10 feet in the air. Riders, myself included, scampered out of the way to avoid the carnage. Another red flag.

Re-grid at the starting line. And then another green flag. Start number three was clean with no crashes through the infield, and I caught up to the very same pack from my earlier laps, and we battled for 18th place. The weather had become much cooler since the earlier racing, and after about 10 laps my hard-compound Daytona rear tire was struggling for grip off the corners and I had to work hard to stay in the draft. Ultimately I ended up at the back of our group and finished 22nd. I was just glad to end the race on two wheels and get back to the garage to see my crew and my grandson.

I have to thank my team, including Kirkpatrick, for doing such a fantastic job. I never could have completed this race without their help. I feel a bit cheated by the circumstances, but that's Daytona. It's unpredictable. I'd signed up for a 200-mile endurance race, and got a 15-lap sprint.

In all, the 2011 Daytona 200 turned out to be the most bizarre race I've ever been in. I still feel the need to prove that I can finish well in the longest, most uncompromising race in the AMA Pro series. So if you're in Daytona in 2012 and you see a white Buell 1125R on the high banks, it will very likely be this 52-year-old Grandpa taking care of a little unfinished business. **RW**

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BLACK + GRAY

By David Swarts



For many people, motorcycle road racing is a hobby used to escape from the nine-to-five, Monday-through-Friday grind of everyday life and to recharge internal batteries. That's exactly what it was for industrial designer André Grasso when he discovered racing at age 40. But along the way Grasso couldn't help but notice that some of the motorcycle products on the market were poorly designed and better alternatives were sorely needed. So instead of keeping his two lives separate from one another, Grasso decided to form BLACK+GRAY and use the tools from his professional life to design and manufacture innovative new products to improve the lives of motorcyclists. The results included more fuel for his passion and his profession than he bargained for.

Grasso, a native of New Jersey, is an industrial designer by profession and owns the award-winning design firm Index Industrial Design and Development. And although you may not have heard of Index, chances are good that you have seen something Grasso's group has designed. The company's work ranges from firefighter breathing



(Opposite Page) Former club racer André Grasso has used his skill as an industrial designer to produce products for motorcycle racing under the name BLACK+GRAY. (Above) This 6000-square-foot building in Garrison, New York, is the home of André Grasso's BLACK+GRAY and his industrial design firm Index Industrial Design and Development. Grasso personally designed the building's renovation and expansion. (Left) Just off the lobby at BLACK+GRAY headquarters is a product showroom, even though most visitors are there to do business with Index Industrial Design and Development. Photos by David Swarts.

apparatus frames to lighting equipment to speaker systems to house arrest GPS anklets to devices used to peel back the layers of shielding on fiber-optic telecommunications cables to tools used in brain surgery.

One of Index's oldest and largest clients is the Hertz Corporation, for which Grasso and his staff of designers (Index and BLACK+GRAY have a current total of six employees plus several subcontracted manufacturing partners located in the northeast U.S.) have spent the last 28 years designing and developing counters, work stations, operational equipment, kiosks, electric customer-shuttle vehicles and signage products. Index's most recent project is a huge back wall sign for rental

car counters at major airports that includes six 46-inch LCD monitors and its own air-conditioning system.

Despite all of this going on, Grasso got lured into the sport of motorcycle road racing in 1993 when friend Doug Sholty asked him to help his endurance racing effort.

"At the time I'm 40 years old, I've never been on a motorcycle in my life, never," said Grasso. "I'm a car, off-road kind of guy. Doug's a road racer. But he knows me and knows I'm always building stuff. He says, 'Hey, we're putting this team together. We're going to go do the WERA (National Endurance) stuff up around our neighborhood and in Michigan. Why don't you come out and wrench for us?'"

Grasso signed on, and after working with the team for a while he got the itch to ride. So Grasso bought a used Honda CBR600F2, signed up for a Penguin Roadracing School and essentially learned how to ride a motorcycle on track at what is now known as New Hampshire Motor Speedway. He soon went racing.

During his years racing in the Loudon Road Racing Series (LRRS), Grasso started with the CBR600F2 in the 600cc classes. He later switched to the Lightweight classes on a 400cc Honda CB-1 and then moved on to the Twins classes on a

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a tricked-out, 750cc Superbike with only the stock frame and fuel tank remaining stock.

"Part of the attraction of racing was the building of the bike and doing all this stuff," said Grasso, who used his mechanical skills together with the capabilities of Index's manufacturing and fabricating partners to create his "Frankenstein" race-bike. "In hindsight when I stopped racing that thing, I realized that this was not the way to go racing. I had a total-loss (ignition), the gas-powered starter cart, typical Superbike overheating stuff, which is always challenging and which was always kind of fun for me. We built so much stuff on that bike from the radiators to the fairings. I designed all the stuff, which was fun. I really liked it, but when you threw it on the ground it was a big pain in the ass."

Early in his racing career, Grasso started paying attention to the motorcycle-related products he was buying and using. In fact, every time he tied his bike into his van or trailer he said he found himself thinking there had to be a better way.

"Most industrial designers are manufacturer wannabes. Everybody wants to make their own product. I'm a product designer. I want to be a manufacturer. As I often tell Index clients, ideas come from need, usually," said Grasso. "So I'm out there using products and thinking, 'You know what, these wheel chocks suck. I'm on my way to the track, I'm stuffing rags next to the metal tube chock because it's rubbing on my (brake) rotors. I can do better than this.' So that was really the inspiration. There it goes. It starts."

"My first thought was to design (a chock) more adjustable so you could adapt it relative to the rotors and where they sit on the bike. Then it went to how we mount the things in your truck or trailer. Then it dawned on me: 'Why not just do a classic plastic chock and that will be the end of it. It's not going to rust, and it's not going to get crappy, keep it simple.'"

But Grasso didn't just find the cheapest overseas sweat shop he could, start pumping the things out and place an advertisement in a magazine. He used skilled local labor to create prototypes and then did extensive testing, the kind of abusive endurance testing you see in the car commercials on TV, to make sure the product would hold up to his personal standards and the motorcycle racing lifestyle.

In the process he realized that people use their race trailers for many different purposes other than just hauling motorcycles, so he came



The lobby of BLACK+GRAY headquarters displays Grasso's Honda Hawk Superbike, its front wheel in a BLACK+GRAY wheel chock, with some of the smaller products designed by Index Industrial Design and Development seen on shelves.

up with a system to mount and dismount the chocks in a matter of seconds using quarter-turn D-ring fasteners. Problem solved. He followed up with a chock to prevent the rear wheel from hopping side-to-side. Another problem solved.

After developing the chocks it was only logical that Grasso turned his attention to the next part of the equation—the tie-down anchors.

"There's a web and sling industry out there that regulates the straps quite heavily," said Grasso. "All the straps cargo haulers carry have to be the right straps. They're regulated—the straps, the manufacturing, the box-hex pattern sewing."

"I remember going to the DOT (Department of Transportation) and

asking if they had any kind of regulation or standard for the anchor, and the answer was, 'No.' 'You're telling me on any given truck that's out on our roads you're regulating the straps but not what the straps are attached to?' And the answer was, 'Correct.' What sense does that make?"

So Grasso set about making tie-down anchors to his own standards, and he started by employing some of the engineers he worked with on projects for Index to do Finite Element Analysis (FEA) studies of his various designs. After the FEA studies showed the designs were feasible, prototypes were built and subjected to "destructive testing to find the limits," said Grasso. "This was nutty stuff. We had rams and load testers and a fixture

we built to bolt all this stuff to. I designed it so we could drive the forklift on it, and we were using the weight of the forklift to hold the thing down from all our pulling. This was dangerous. We were ducking all the time. There was some serious stress on these. In the end what we were doing was to get to a reasonable specification that we can put on our website to say that this product is going to fit within this range, so we weren't guessing."

Along the way Grasso also remembered back to his days signaling endurance team riders from pit wall and being signaled and all of the difficulties associated with that. He came up with BLACK+GRAY's popular Pit Boards, one version that uses interchangeable number, letter and word cards and another that utilizes laser-cut digital segments that are attached to the board with elastic bands and manipulated to create different letters and numerals. BLACK+GRAY Pit Boards are currently used by many professional teams in the AMA Pro Superbike series.

"The pit board, that was a total result of being out there (riding) and wearing glasses and, what did that say? They were just horrible, a horrible thing," said Grasso. "Then it came back to my work with graphics and signage for Hertz and readability and all that stuff. Then it was a matter of developing a system."

More recently, Grasso put his skills to work designing something that was practical yet strong enough to hang up heavy, rain-or-sweat-soaked leather suits and riding gear.



The second floor of the expanded headquarters building is where the two companies' designers do their thing. Six people work for the two companies, but extra office space allows for expansion if demanded by a large project.



(Above and Below) André Grasso's education as a designer included time as an apprentice at woodworking and fabrication shops back before the time of computer-aided drafting and rapid prototyping machines. He used the skills and tools he acquired then to personally fabricate many of his early prototypes.



"The hangers, another need," said Grasso, who owns and rides several of his 32 Hondas (mostly sport-bikes) on a regular basis. "I can't tell you how many times I have come home from a ride, hung up my leathers, walked 10 feet and heard Flomp! and turned to see the leathers on the ground. I used to use the best suit hangers or tape two hangers together, but nothing worked very well.

"So I did some seat-of-the-pants marketing. I'm thinking about this: Hanger, marketing, helmets and garments top the sales chart in our industry, then comes tires (and) all that crap, then the hanger is tied to the top sellers. (claps hands) 'I think this is a good idea. Let's do it.'"

After a period of brainstorming and extreme load testing and refining the hanger and a clip system for hanging up leathers, gloves and other riding gear, the Hi-Per hanger was born and became a success.

"So we get the hanger out there and get a couple of nice reviews," said Grasso, "then we start getting calls

from the scuba guys and ladies with furs and guys with ballistic stuff and heavy garments. I'm thinking, 'That's how you do it! You design this product for this industry that you're interested in, but then it spills over.' That was the cool thing about the hangers."

Grasso's latest project, which is still in the design and prototyping phase, is the final piece to the BLACK+GRAY motorcycle transportation self-insurance policy—tie-down straps. But just as he has done with his previous products Grasso is putting his experience and innovation into making his tie-downs the most bulletproof straps ever. He wouldn't allow photos of this project because his design hasn't been patented yet, but Grasso is banking on this one being a winner even if the straps will cost a little more than no-name, foreign-made straps.

"I often tell clients there's tractor-trailer loads of good ideas sitting in people's backyards," said Grasso, "because they all think their product is unique and my father wants

one and my cousin wants one, so therefore the world wants that. I'm mortgaging the house, I'm going to Asia, I'm going high production (manufacturing).

"Then I tell them the design and engineering part is the easy part. The sales and marketing part, that's the hard part and the expensive part.

"And I also tell them my favorite thing, I'm in books for this, is that this product design and development business, all it is, is sophisticated gambling. You'd be better off going down to Atlantic City (and) putting your \$1000 on red (on the roulette wheel) because you will know whether you won or lost within seconds. This (product development business) bleeds you."

Grasso knows this because not every motorcycle product project he has taken on has been a winner. His version of clip-ons, which he designed about 10 years ago, had some innovative ideas to make them more interchangeable between different fork tube sizes, which would come in handy for racers searching the paddock for parts to make repairs after a crash, but the clip-ons could not be produced at a competitive price and never went beyond the prototyping stage. And Grasso's attempt to improve on the popular self-supporting wheel chock/stand did not go into production because he felt it was no better than what was already on the market.

"I don't want to do what so many other companies are doing," said Grasso. "I'm not going to make another rearset. I'm not going to make another exhaust pipe. Innovation is really our thing. I don't want to do anything everybody else is doing. The things that we make I think are unique, and really that's the goal, to bring something new

to the party, or something better.

"BLACK+GRAY isn't just about making money. BLACK+GRAY exists, it goes on behind Index, Index feeds BLACK+GRAY and allows us to do all of this development. And it's (Index) definitely about money. BLACK+GRAY has always been positioned to do whatever I want, turn it into whatever I want when I want it. If I want to make it bigger or smaller, I will, and I kind of like managing it. But it was also a thrill, for me especially being a Honda guy, to see the Honda factory team guys (before American Honda quit road racing) use my stuff, to have the guys from the team say whenever you're in California come by the race shop in Torrance. That's cool. It's that kind of stuff that keeps me doing it."

Many motorcycle racers lead double lives, for example working as an accountant during the week and entering club races on the weekends, or working as a baker and restaurateur most days and racing with AMA Pro on the weekends. For most, those two worlds are kept separate so that motorcycle racing can remain an oasis of revitalization.

Those two worlds became intertwined for industrial designer Grasso when he began designing, manufacturing and selling motorcycle products through his company BLACK+GRAY. But instead of losing the oasis of a separate motorcycling world, Grasso's creative freedom at BLACK+GRAY strengthened his passion for motorcycling and re-invigorated his love of design work to the benefit of Index Industrial Design and Development. Along the way, it also provided the two-wheel world with a host of innovative new products to make weekend escapes a little easier.

RW



BLACK+GRAY is relatively small compared to Index Industrial Design and Development, which has designed and built pretty much everything you have seen at Hertz rental car locations for the past 28 years.