

Take to the streets

The 2015 GP de Tours took place at the end of June.

Words and photography: MIKE DAVIS

Tours is a wonderfully cosmopolitan event even if, in the parc fermé, you could detect a little nationalism. On one side, the Brits – Triumph, Norton, BSA and Matchless – and on the other, the Europeans – Ducati and BMW. Remind you of anything? But no, it's just how the organiser, Christian Hervet, decided to arrange things for the numerous classic motorcycle fans who thronged the enclosure; closely examining the vehicles, engaging their owners in discussion over the marques' pros and cons, helping push start recalcitrant machines and generally enjoying the relaxed, enthusiast-centric environment.

While the participants at Tours are on two, three and four wheels, motorcycles are best suited to the tight, narrow circuit over the city centre streets that, for the other 364 days in the year, are crowded with cars, buses and trams. But on this day, classic motorcycles had the freedom of those streets and nearly 40 exercised that with relish.

The morning saw an interesting battle of the Desmos – and kept in the family! Father and son Christian and Thomas Hervet pitched against each other, one on his 1971 450 and the other on a 350 of the same year. Although a demonstration event, with no 'winners' as such, most informed spectators agreed that Thomas emerged the victor of the Ducati duel. Both riders knew their machines well and handled them skilfully, not least at speed through the 180° bend linking the outbound and home straights. These race-prepared lightweight speedsters were in their element on this circuit, even if their throttles couldn't be opened fully to show their true potential.

The Hervets' Desmos weren't the only Ducatis on the track. Boric Kessler, on his 350cc Desmo, joined them later, creating a triumvirate of 1971 Desmos. Keeping

them company was Michel Delagarde's 1976 500 GTL. Gregory Benoist's 1975 860 GT and Olivier Vinot's 1982 900 Darmah created a Ducati sextet. But these machines are kings of the open road, rather than a short street circuit. They purred while the Desmos snarled and fought like wildcats on the track.

Jean Hougron's 1971 BSA B50SS attracted considerable interest, being a motorcycle little seen in France and really looking the 'street scrambler' part. Sadly it stayed in the paddock, denying the crowd the opportunity to see if, on the track, it performed as well as it looked. Such criticism couldn't be levelled at Richard Leroy's Triumph twin. He enjoyed himself so much that the difficulty was getting him off the track! Maybe this was because Triumphs were most numerous of the British bikes at Tours; 1966, 1968 and 1970 Bonneville, ridden by Thierry Conré, Yves Delamarre and Patrick Lucas; the 1967 Trophy of Eric Innocenti; and Thierry Girard's 1970 TR6R. As usual, Marc Juillet's 1957 Matchless G11 was the doyenne in this category. And finally Jean-Yves Lemel's 1967 Norton P11, the sole representative of the marque, acquitted itself creditably on the circuit.

At the day's end Christian Hervet expressed himself well satisfied with the moto element of the Tours GP. 'Yes,' he said, 'it was a lot of work organising the event, both beforehand and on the day. I spent more time at a desk than on my Ducati and BMW. But the riders and the spectators seem to have enjoyed themselves and that's most important to me.' When asked if he perceived any way the event might be improved, he reflected and then replied: 'we had British bikes on the circuit and British spectators in the crowd – but where were the British riders, wanting that rare opportunity to compete on a street circuit?' The hesitant response – 'l'année prochaine, peut-être?' So, will British classic motorcyclists take up his challenge at the 2016 Tours GP?

End

1 1971 450cc
Ducati Desmo of
Christian Hervet.

2 Jean Yves Lemel,
1967 Norton P11,
preparing to leave
parc fermé.

3 The Triumphs of
Richard Leroy and
Yves Delamarre
sandwich Jean
Hougron's BSA
B50SS.

