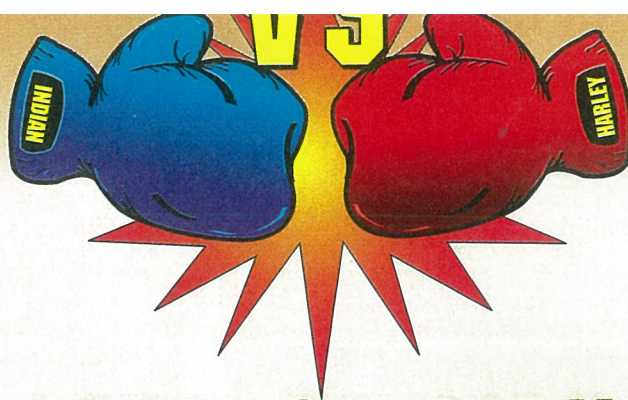


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1948 Chief Takes On 1947 Knucklehead

Fans of vintage American motorcycles have heard more than their share of stories about the fierce rivalry between Harley and Indian owners.

Lost in all of the hyperbole, however, are the bare facts of the bikes themselves. We asked the owners of two comparable rival bikes to evaluate their motorcycles as objectively as possible.

SPEED

Dave Monahan, owner of the '47 Harley Knucklehead (and owner of over 20 Indians in the last decade): "I was on my Knuckle on the interstate between Rapid City and Sturgis (South Dakota) last year, chugging along at 65.



'48 Indian Chief

Pete Bollenbach was on his '35 Chief, and we were getting passed by all the (Evolution-powered Harleys). We got into the twists and hills Spearfish Canyon, and the only motorcycle that passed me was Pete on that '35.

"The two bikes compare pretty well. The Indian probably has a little more torque on the low end, if it's set up right. But I can shift faster on the Harley because the throw is shorter, and there's a detent on the shift gate, so you know exactly which gear you're going for. And with

*Photos by Bill Randol and Jeff Hackett
Story by Bob Tedeschi*

a full-skirted Indian, you're going to have a heavier machine, so the performance has to be different with that extra weight. Its speed depends on how you've got the gearing set up; but with standard gearing, top speed is probably around 70."

Frank Spencer, owner of the '48 Chief: "This bike cruises comfortably between 55 and 60, no problem. And it has very good acceleration, especially at high altitudes. And I've run against a lot of other bikes, with hot cams and Bonneville, and I beat those. I actually walked away from them on hills. Why, I'm not sure. It's a stock 74. And I've ridden with a '48 Harley (74 c.i.) and we chuffed along well together."

HANDLING

Spencer: "Not to speak ill of the Indian name, but I was riding alongside a BMW down a road with an uneven surface, and the BMW was nice and straight, and I was pogo-sticking all the way down. It does tend to do that a bit."

Monahan: "My Harley is stripped, with a skinny front tire, so it's more agile, and again, lighter than an Indian. If it was a stock Knucklehead, it'd be much more Indian-like. And on irregular surfaces, the Indian is better, because you have a little suspension on back. On the Harley, you tend to bounce a little more, because you run the rear tire with low pressure, to absorb the bumps. The rigid back end gives you a much more stable feel in the turns, right up to the point where it washes out. But with any bike of that era, the dynamics are pretty scary when you think about it."

BRAKING

Spencer: "When I got my Chief, my friend Mike Breeding told me to go out and practice panic stopping. I did, with a little help from a large Cadillac at an intersection, with loose gravel. I went from 60-to-zero in a few seconds. I fishtailed minutely, but I came to a nice stop, 6 inches away from it."

Monahan: "It's easy to lock up the rear wheel on my Harley. And the front brake works OK, but it's a joke by today's standards."

OVERALL

Spencer says he hasn't ridden Harleys from the late-'40s era, so he can't



'47 Harley Knucklehead

compare. But he rides with them often, he says, and pays little attention to the Harley-Indian rivalry, "except when they kept talking about having to stop every half hour to let the flathead cool down. It was nice to prove pretty quickly that that wasn't the case."

So which is better? "When it comes to performance, it all comes down to the rider," Monahan says. "The better rider wins the race, regardless." □