

**THE
CRASH
PAGE**

**DARK NIGHTS, FAST BIKES:
How The Daytona 200 Was Won (And Lost)**

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(Above) Gregg Spears and wife Lisa in front of their well-traveled trailer with the shop-owned first-generation Suzuki SV650 Superbike. (Below, Left) Gregg Spears in his shop, tending to a fleet of sporting Twins. Photos by Bob Dragich.



Spears Enterprises

By Michael Gougis

Gregg Spears remembers clearly his first experience with tools and internal combustion devices. It did not end well.

"When I was seven, mom and dad worked, grandpa lived with us," says Spears, 50, of Manteca in Northern California. "I remember going out into the metal shed and there

was the lawnmower and right next to it was a toolbox. I started finding tools and started tearing the lawnmower apart. The recoil starter came apart like a watch—stuff was flying all over the place. I was seven. You know how you react when you're seven. I panicked. I didn't even put the tools away—I just left. When my father went to use the lawnmower that weekend, he saw everything, and I got into a lot of trouble."

Spears has gotten better at turning wrenches since then. Spears Enterprises has established itself as a go-to place for sporting Japanese Twins—Suzuki SV650s, Kawasaki Ninja EX500s and 650Rs, even the little Ninja 250s.

with my business," Spears says.

Having learned to change oil and perform minor maintenance chores on his parents' cars, Spears enrolled in vocational education classes in high school.

"When I graduated in 1977, the girl I was dating worked for the City of San Jose, and she told me that there was a job opening working in the motor pool,"



Spears ran a division that was responsible for keeping 55 motorcycles in the field.

"It prepared me for a lot of things," Spears says. "I had to deal with customers, I ran all the parts myself, I kept my own inventory, and I started designing things because officers were saying, if we had this, it would be really cool. I designed a shotgun rack for motorcycles, I had them mass-produced and sold a lot of them.

"I put on all the emergency equipment, wired everything, and I became very anal-retentive. You do the work right on the front end, it makes your life easier later."

Being "anal-retentive" at work led to a lucrative side business, Spears says.

"All the police officers had their own motorcycles, and they'd say, 'Hey Gregg, can you do this on my bike?' and I'd say OK. I'd work on anything they had—I wasn't picky. I worked in an apartment carport. Over 10 years, I had saved enough money that in 1986, when I was 27, I bought my first house. I was working on motorcycles in the garage every day after work."

All this working on motorcycles was interfering with his other passion. Spears was attracted to the discipline of the police lifestyle. He had attended and graduated from the police academy, and eventually rose to the level of lieutenant as a San Jose police department reserve officer.

"I'd get up in the morning, go to work at 6:00, come back home at 2:00, then back to work as a reserve officer at 4:00 p.m. and work until 2:00 a.m. Every weekend," Spears says. "And during the week, every time I went outside into my garage, I was looking at work. I had no peace and quiet for my own. I finally had to let the reserve go—I couldn't ride both bikes full time."

In 1986, Spears made a move toward separating his home and work lives. He

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(Above) Gregg Spears has been working on the SV650 since it first hit North America; here he works on the Spears Superbike. (Above, Right) Spears-built engines have won around the world.

Spears-backed riders have won Championships at racetracks from Loudon to Australia, with the Loudon Road Racing Series (LRRS), the Willow Springs Motorcycle Club (WSMC), the Great Lakes Road Racing Association (GLRRA), American Federation of Motorcyclists (AFM) in Northern California, the Washington Motorcycle Road Racing Association (WMRRA), WERA, CCS, even the Calgary Motorcycle Roadracing Association in Canada. Spears has customers in Australia, New Zealand, even Ireland.

And he's very clear as to why he gets that business. It is because of his reputation and the performance of his parts on the track. "I'm only as good as the last motor I built—and I understand that. I turned 50 last weekend, and I took a long look at my life, and while there's a few things I regret, none of them have anything to do

Spears says. "I took the exam. There were something like 1500 people who applied for the job, and I finished second. I got the full-time city job at 18 years old. I was working on cars—I was a car guy.

"One day, the motorcycle mechanic—the guy who handled 47 motorcycles—just quit. Walked out," Spears says. "Our supervisor came in and said, 'Whoever wants to be a motorcycle mechanic, take one step forward,' and the other 22 mechanics took one step backward."

So Spears started working on police motorcycles. The city sent him to the factory Kawasaki school in 1981, and when the city switched to Harley-Davidsons in 1983, sent him back to school to learn how to work on Harleys ("I swear, I was the only guy there without a chain attached to my wallet," Spears says). Eventually,

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found a 600-square-foot shop in Campbell, California and devoted himself to working on motorcycles. He would work in the motor pool at San Jose from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., then go to his shop at 3:00 p.m. and work until midnight. On the weekends, he'd just go to the shop and put in 12- to 14-hour days.

The schedule wore on Spears, and in 1990, after 14 years with the city, he struck out on his own.

"I had so many people I was doing work for, and I was comfortable working on police bikes, so I went after police work," Spears says. "I had 12 or 13 police departments as clients. I was doing \$30,000 to \$35,000 a month in police business alone. And I was doing regular bikes as well. I finally hired people, I opened up my second location, I had 12 employees, and I got out of what was making me happy."

Spears made a stack of cash. But that came with a price. He was overworked, not getting to spend as much time in the shop as he liked. The police department business paid well, but Spears found himself waiting for payment from cities. And he often found himself putting his police work ahead of clients with cash in hand.

So in the late 1990s, Spears started downsizing. He cut back to one location and four employees. And Spears had found a new area of interest—racing.

"I had started working with a guy who had just the worst equipment—Brian Long, he was trying to race an EX500," Spears says. "And I had a Dynojet dyno that I'd purchased. Dynojet had called; they were starting out with their Power Commander Tuning Center program, and they wanted to train people who were owner-mechanics. They brought me down there for the course, paid for everything. I became one of the first five Power Commander tuning centers in the world.

"And I started seeing that this racing stuff was really cool. Brian started doing really well. He won races at Willow Springs, he did really well at AFM. In 1997, he decided that he wanted to run a new Twin—a Suzuki TL1000S."

It was Spears' first crack at building a

racebike, and he brought his experience in fabrication and development to the table.

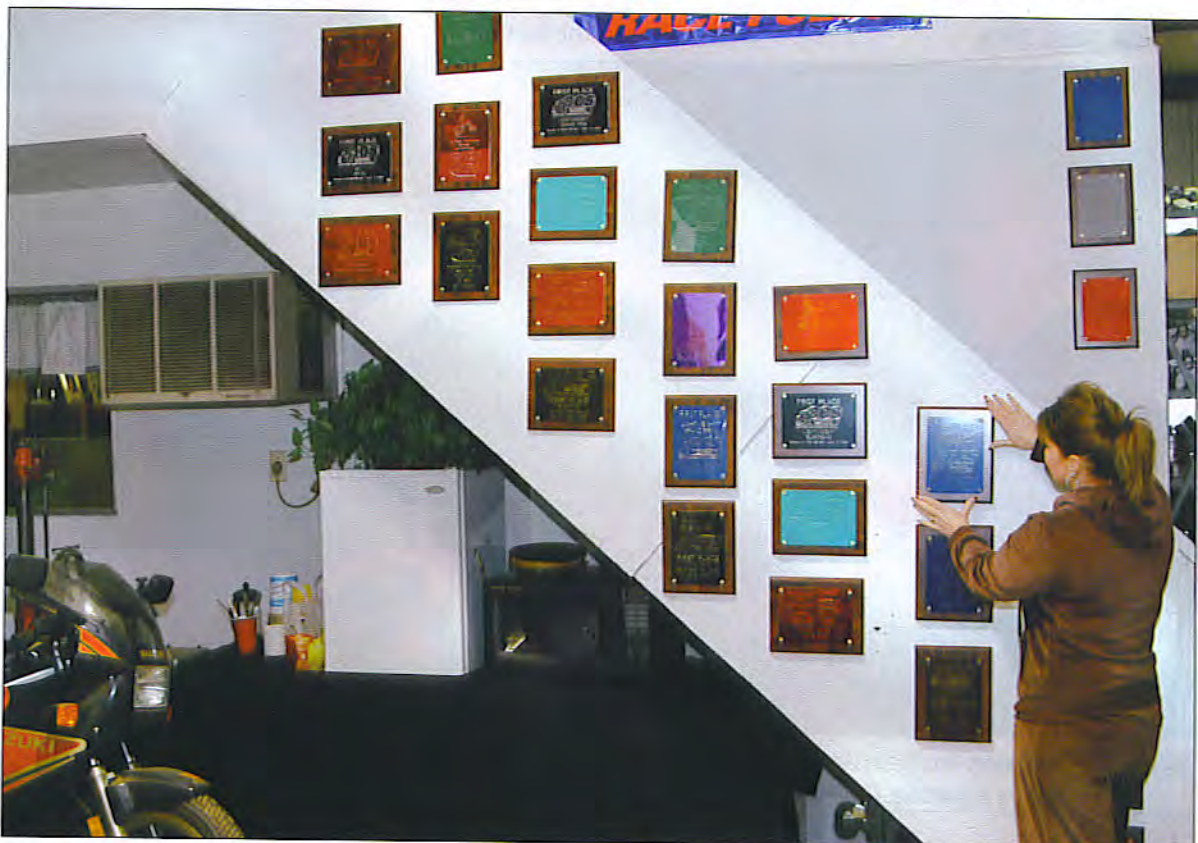
"We did what we thought was a racebike at the time—looking back, it's funny. I was trying to buy parts from Yoshimura, but a lot of their products are what I call domino products—you can buy their pistons, but then you've got to buy their this, this, this to get the power they're claiming," Spears says. "I looked at the pistons and said, I can work with this. I can make this happen.

"I started building my own pistons on paper in 1997. I started working with JE

Spears worked with Webcam on that front. At this point, Spears had experience with designing his own pistons, his own cams training straight from Dynojet, an obsessive work ethic and his own shop to put all those pieces together.

And it paid dividends at the track.

"Brian was flying," Spears says. "I have a trophy that represents one of my proudest moments ever. In 1998, we won a 750 Superbike race on a TL1000S at Willow Springs. We had 126 horsepower at the rear wheel, and between that, the bike set-up and Brian's ability, we got it done."



Lisa Spears adjusts a plaque that represents one of the stack of titles Spears Enterprises has earned on the racetrack.

Pistons—I remember I had to buy four at a time, and I was thinking, how can I afford four of these?"

Spears credits a friend of his, Bud Martin, with helping him through the impossible-to-solve problems that every beginning developer faces.

"Bud and I had a relationship for years—he worked at a parts counter, and we chit-chatted for years. When I started doing this, I didn't have a red phone line to Yoshimura. And Bud's credentials go way back. He was my go-to guy. He never gave me the answers. He gave me the way to look for the answers. If you have to work for it, you keep it," Spears says.

Next came designing his own cams, and

Spears started making piston kits for the TL, then started working with the TL-R. He sold a lot of parts for the TL series bikes to racers. In 1999, Suzuki introduced the SV650, and Spears started working with that bike, developing pistons, then cams, then jetting, then heads.

"It took a few months to get the prototype ready," Spears says. "The first one we put together put out 81 horsepower. That wasn't bad for a bike that made 61, 62 horsepower stock. But if you become complacent, life passes you by. You need to continue to drive forward to make it better than it was yesterday."

Spears started designing oversize pistons himself. And his cams did well—his

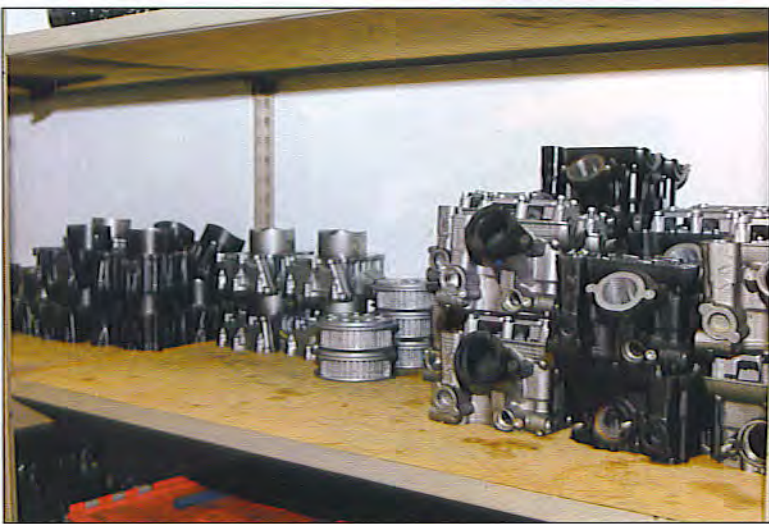
SP17 cam took the further-developed prototype bike from 83 horsepower to 87.

As the bikes got better, Spears started spending more and more time on the road with the racing program. It was a common theme in much of Spears' life; if some is good, more is better.

"There were times when we'd run CCS at Thunderhill Park Raceway, practice Saturday, race Sunday. I would pull the trailer back to Campbell, work my business all week while doing a complete maintenance on the racebikes, and we'd be racing in Arizona the next weekend.

"There were a couple of times when we saw the schedule and we'd drop the trailer at Willow because we'd be coming through there and we'd be back there the next weekend. I'd drive up to the shop without a trailer, come back down early and do the maintenance at the track."

It all paid off in terms of trophies and



Spears Enterprises keeps ready-to-install cylinder heads, barrels and other parts on the shelf for racers who need replacement parts in a hurry.

titles. But it extracted a toll on Spears' health and his personal life.

"There were times when I wouldn't see my wife or my daughter for two weeks. I made sacrifices. I've lived my life out of a suitcase, out of an apartment away from my family. I would get up Monday morning and drive 76 miles and stay there and come home Friday—I did that for eight years," Spears says.

"I would leave this custom, beautiful

home behind me on Monday mornings and have tears in my eyes. It didn't make sense. And when I was traveling, I'd say to my wife, 'I'll see you in a couple of weeks.' But I needed to do that, because I thought it would be the best for us in the long-term."

In 2006, Spears started having health issues. He wound up hospitalized with his gall bladder embedded in his liver, which doctors mistook for cancer. A planned simple surgery turned into a six-hour ordeal.

"There's nothing worse than being in the hospital, not knowing whether you were going to live, and not having your wife or daughter there with you," Spears says.

Fearing that he was missing his daughter's life, Spears moved his shop to a location near his home in February 2008. It's much larger than his first shop—2500 square feet, a dyno room, a parts room, and a parking lot behind a locked gate for his 20-foot race trailer. And there's no signage to give away to the casual observer what's inside.

"If you don't know where we're at, you'll never find it. I don't want signage," Spears says. "I've got hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of stuff in here, and it's a rural part of town. I don't want to let everyone know what's here. Out of sight, out of mind."

Spears doesn't travel as much anymore, but he still spends his time developing race

parts. He estimates that 95% of his business is race-related. And he keeps honed cylinders and prepped heads on the shelf, so he can ship parts to racers with broken engines before the racer can get the broken parts to Spears for repair. It's an exchange program where Spears can move quickly to help keep a racer's bike on the grid.

In 2007, Spears was named Motor Sportsman Of The Year by the northern California-based Motor Sports Press Association. Beyond the borders of California, Spears gets a kick out of the success his engines are having overseas. In 2008, a Spears-built engine powered the Victorian Hartwell Thunderbike Series Champion in Australia. And Spears-equipped motors are becoming popular in Ireland.

"It's the same thing—we did well in Ireland with one team, and then other people started ordering parts from us," Spears says. "It's the same as it's always been. What wins on Sunday, sells on Monday." **RW**



Gregg and Lisa Spears in the headquarters of their operation. While he doesn't travel as much anymore, Spears' engineering know-how is still well-represented on tracks in the U.S. and overseas from Australia to Ireland.