

My Friend Kemp Hanes

Back in 1971 while working at Atlanta M/C Sales, I had this strobe-timing lamp that required you to hook the sense line directly onto the plug wire. A spring connected to the spark plug top, and then the spring went up into the plug cap. Then you clipped a lead from the strobe lamp onto the spring. It was a poorly designed system and I was always getting zapped with the exposed high voltage. I hated using it, but it was all I had.

Well, I worked with this 50-something master Triumph mechanic named Kemp Hanes. Now Kemp kept pretty much to himself and probably never said more than 25 words a day. One day as I tuned a TR6, the spring fell off the spark plug and Kemp was amused that I stopped the bike to reconnect the lead. When it happened again and he quietly walked over and reconnected the plug wire without a perceptible sign of being shocked. He absolutely showed no sign of discomfort at having spark plug voltage run through his hands.

Having been shocked several times by coils and magnetos, I was amazed that anyone could stand the feel of high voltage and said so. Several of the other mechanics came over to see. That was all it took; Kemp knew just how to play up to an audience. He grabbed the plug wire from the running bike in his left hand, and then touched the top of the spark plug with his right. The bike idled along smoothly. One of the other mechanics complained that it wasn't really running though his arms, so he touched his finger to the cylinder head, and it stopped running on that cylinder.

We were all awe-struck as we watched him disconnect and reconnect his right hand to the spark plug with the same result. The crowd of mechanics all bent in close to get a better view. We could not believe what we were seeing. Kemp then pulled his finger away from the spark plug about 1/4 inch and let the bright yellow arc visibly jump from his finger tip to the top of the plug. You could hear the arc; it made an unmistakable crisp snapping sound to emphasize its power. I know my eyes were as big as saucers at the sight and sound of this. I was ready to rank this guy right up there with Superman!

That's when one of the youngest guys, an uppity Suzuki mechanic, who was eyeballing the arc in close, made a remark about how the power of the spark was being diminished some how. Some doubting Thomas comment about how the electricity wasn't full voltage because Kemp's torso was in the circuit. Kemp never missed a beat. He simply reached over and grabbed the boy's ear lobe. I never in my life saw someone take to dancing so fast. The young man looked like one of those marionettes on the end of wooden sticks you see at the craft shows. Hands, arms and legs all headed in 14 different directions at once. And such howling and whooping as you never heard before! Kemp let him dance for a good while to allow a full measure of time in which to gauge the level of that diminished voltage. Finally the bike refused to idle on 1 cylinder any longer and quit. Not one second too soon for the young mechanic, but enough for the smiling Kemp Hanes to have made his point.

Kemp quietly walked back over to his corner and resumed his work. No more comments about diminished voltage were ever heard from the Suzuki corner. And on that day I first realized Kemp and I were going to be great friends.

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