

*VICTORY MOTORCYCLE 2006*

# Big wheels turning

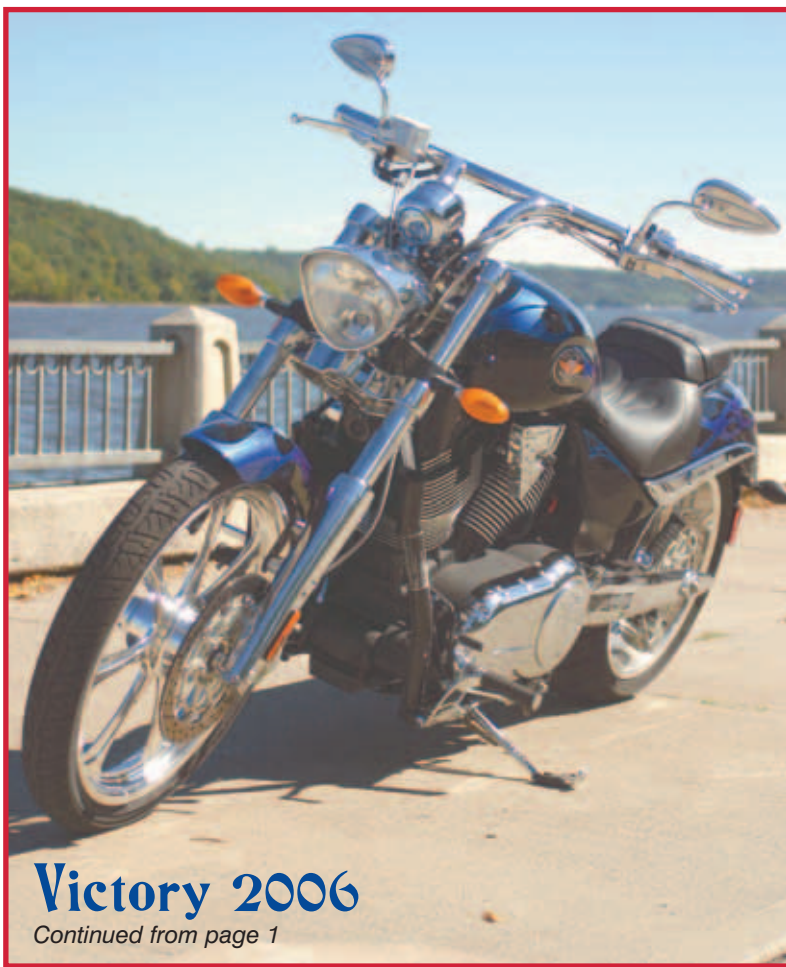
Fat tires and sci-fi technology



by Terry Roorda

MEDINA, MINN., SEPT. 22—My objective was clear-cut: to fly out to Minnesota, exchange pleasantries with my pals on the Victory Motorcycle staff, get my hands on their new Jackpot and ride the snot out of it.

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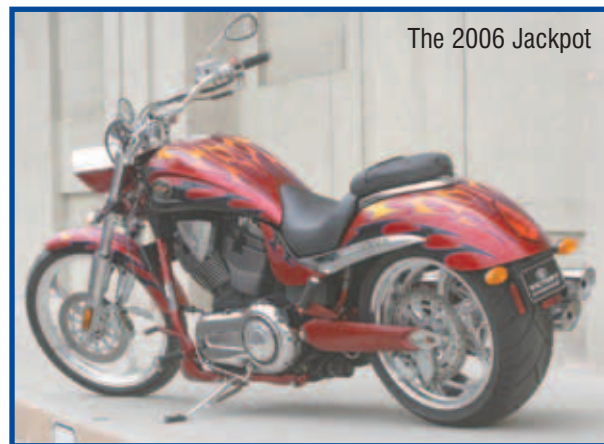
## Victory 2006

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And if the opportunity presented itself, to also log a little saddle time on the Hammer, renew my acquaintance with that model, and form some impressions on how the two 250mm-shod models contrast. That's all I really had in mind, since I'd already attended the company's 2006 model year press introduction, or "static launch," in West Hollywood back in May and reported on it in these pages. You'll recall that the big stories at that time were the unveiling of the Jackpot in both

of the Vegas model, and how it morphed into the Kingpin. This was all, of course, old news, but was being trotted out now to give us some appreciation of the intricate design process that was even now being utilized on other projects they couldn't discuss with motojournalists because they're secret, and we're sieves. The slogan "The New American Motorcycle" was in frequent use as were the words "enthusiasm" and "passion." The expression "Victory DNA" was also uttered, causing my eyebrow to arch.

The reward for fidgeting through this portion of the program was a tasty gourmet supper catered in the corporate cafeteria, and then a bus transported the lot of us to a remote hotel, dropping us off at 10:00 p.m. with strict instructions to assemble in the lobby at 7:00 a.m. to shuttle back to HQ. That's 7:00 a.m. Central time, which equates to 5:00 a.m. Pacific time, which was the zone most of the press had arrived from. Jet lag insomnia coupled with an inhuman wake-up time would assure a good dose of sleep deprivation.



The 2006 Jackpot

field and forest, utterly isolated from the distractions of civilization. It is billed as a "top secret" installation, and looks every bit of that, and the very scale of the facility is a blunt reminder of the fact that while Victory is a relatively small operator in the motorcycle industry at large, it is a division of power-sports behemoth Polaris Industries and draws heavily on the extensive engineering

and manufacturing resources of the parent. Cameras and cell phones are checked at the reception desk, and we're directed to a large conference room for our next briefing, which consists in large part of an overview of the current state of

Polaris Industries, and Victory's place in the grand scheme of things. It's an eye-opening presentation, particularly when it comes to Victory's growth projections for the next five years. Polaris, it seems, is a company in transition, having discontinued their watercraft division a year ago, and currently experiencing a steady decline in snowmobile sales as snowfall in their key market areas has been persistently disappointing in recent years. It's the company's ATV products that now account for the overwhelming bulk of their

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stock and Ness Signature trim, and the announcement that the 2006 models, with the exception of the 8-Ball and V92TC, would be upgraded from the 92/5 (92 c.i.d./5 speed) drivetrain to the 100/6 introduced on the Hammer last year. The 8-Ball would get a hybrid 100/5, and the V92TC would retain the 92/5.

Now the time had surely come to go and actually ride the handsome new "extreme custom cruiser" Jackpot. That was the order of things as I understood them. That was, after all, how things were conducted last year when some months after a similar static launch at the same West Hollywood hotel, we had traveled to Austin, Texas, and spent a long day spanking the new Hammer around the Hill Country. So I quite naturally assumed that this year's program would be essentially the same and I planned on spending the visit getting intimate with the Jackpot on the back roads of Minnesota.

Victory, however, had other plans. Diabolical plans. A schedule of tours and briefings that would appropriate my every waking hour—even some that I'd sort of counted on for sleep and routine maintenance. I realized early in the going that this was no ordinary press launch; this was playing out more like a Victory indoctrination. There would be disruption of my personal routine, sleep deprivation, limited contact with the outside world, close shepherding by Victory personnel (the Men in Black; the Victorians), the repetition of doctrinal words and phrases, and a system of behavioral rewards. All the key elements of a sound brainwashing. And while I'll be the first to admit that my brain could probably stand a good laundering, I had no notion that the Victory guys felt the same way.

It started virtually from the moment I landed in Minneapolis, where I was met by a black Lincoln Towncar and whisked away to Polaris/Victory corporate headquarters in Medina. There I was cocktailed and shmoozed by my Victory buddies before being herded upstairs with the rest of the attending moto-flock to a conference room and subjected to a slide show depicting the various development stages

### Training day

In the early morning darkness, I was out of bed, had gathered every bit of gear and apparel I would need for the day, since we would not be returning to the hotel until 10:00 that night, and back on the bus to HQ. A quick breakfast and briefing in a conference room followed, and then it was out to the bikes. We would ride the machines for all of about an hour, heading straight up the superslab to Wyoming, Minnesota, the site of the new Polaris Technology Center. We would not necessarily be riding a Jackpot. There were only a few specimens of the new model, and a scramble ensued, since I was clearly not the only reporter who'd come here with my sights set on some serious Jackpot saddle time. With some undignified shoving and growling I was able to secure a stunning Ness Signature Jackpot—the Cory version—for the ride.

The grand new Polaris Technology Center—built at a cost of \$35.5 million—sits like a mothership in the midst of 700 acres of

business, and their recently consummated strategic partnership with KTM—a deal in which they purchased 25 percent of the European motorsport heavyweight outright—should further strengthen their position in that market.

And then there's the slim slice of pie chart represented by Victory. Last year, Vic-

tory Motorcycle's \$72 million in sales represented a meager 4 percent of Polaris revenue. Projected sales for 2005 are \$95 million, and projected share of Polaris revenue is expected to rise to 6 percent, and

what this means is that Victory is a growing concern, both in its market presence and in its importance to the Polaris bottom line, and that's a role they accept eagerly. Victory General Manager Mark Blackwell isn't bashful about it, and asserts that his division, which currently holds 2 percent of the domestic big bike market, will garner a



The Jackpot in Cory Ness Signature treatment

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Matching rubber; the Jackpot and Hammer

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whopping 12 percent by 2010, on its way to becoming a “billion dollar company.” And if that sounds like blue sky boasting, the tour of the Technology Center that follows the briefing makes it seem significantly less so.

### The belly of the borg

The Polaris Technology Center is single-mindedly designed to optimize the interface between design, execution and testing. (Did I just say that?) And it’s also a pretty creepy place where the notion of “top secret” is carried to extremes that include a “white noise generator”—a pervasive dynamo hum emitting from somewhere—to thwart eavesdropping. There are a number of conference rooms that separate the intangible from the tangible ends of the design process and allow engineers from either pole to convene in a sort of demilitarized zone (you know how those engineers are) beneath an array of microphones and closed circuit cameras that enable remote conferencing like you’ve never seen it before.

The technological marvels Polaris/Victory employ in the Center are truly sci-fi, and they can design, build and road-test a motorcycle using just electrons, discovering its strengths and weaknesses in elaborate detail before ever turning a bolt. And after they’ve computer-modeled a design and put it through its paces on-screen with their MSC .Adams Virtual Product Development program, they build it out of real molecules and pound the hell out of it on their Vehicle Durability Simulator—a system of hydraulic torture devices mounted on a foot-thick steel platform the size of a dance floor that inflict hundreds of thousands of miles of abuse on test vehicles and their luckless dummy riders. Reliability issues get identified in a hurry on this device, and those issues get hashed over in a hurry in the demilitarized zone.



Lunch is served in the conference room. Chicken Kiev. And now it’s time to get in some serious riding on, hopefully, the stock Jackpot. We scurry out to the scoots, and, sumbitch, I get aced out of the stock ’pots again but do manage to reclaim the Ness Signature. But we now have several hours to ride on roads suitable for evaluating the abilities of the bikes, and I’m assured that sometime during the afternoon I’ll get my shot at the bike I came here to ride. And I did. Briefly. And I got to get on a Hammer for a respectable spell, and thus get some understanding of what differentiates a “power cruiser” from an “extreme custom cruiser.”

### All in the family

The “DNA” of the Jackpot comes in equal parts from the Vegas and Hammer. The distinctive ridged bodywork and the 21-inch front wheel are signature Vegas elements, while the chassis and 250/40-18 come over from the Hammer (as does, strictly speaking, the 100/6, but the standard Vegas has that now as well). In practice, this bike owes virtually all of its personality to the latter. And, like the Hammer, it has oodles of personality, and the only functional difference between the two models derives from their differing front end configurations, which result in different steering rakes, ground clearance, contact patches, and braking responses. Where the Hammer runs inverted forks with 33.5 degrees of rake, dual discs, and a 130/70-18, the Jackpot’s forks are conventional telescopics with a single disc and a skinny 80/90-21 for that chop-peresque élan.

Cosmetically, the gulf widens between the sibs, and the Jackpot gets the best of it with fuller fenders, powder coating on frame and controls, the aforementioned creased sheet metal, and a deep-drawn faceted headlamp shell. And, as you might expect, the gulf widens even more on the Ness Signature model I was riding. The bike sports gobs of exclusive Ness bolt-ons, including pullback bars and billet grips which, while making it a real stunner visually, degrade the rideability of the machine, at least for riders with my long reach and soft desk-jockey hands.

Out on the highway, differences between the Jackpot and Hammer are subtle ones. That’s unavoidable for the most part since the riding experience of both models is largely dictated by their identical 100/6 powertrains. That fuel-injected, overhead cam, counterbalanced motor and overdrive tranny give the bikes remarkably quick, assured and satisfying performance. Gone are the sketchy gearshifts and whipsaw throttle lash of yesteryear. The riding posture and seat composition provide all-day comfort on these models, again in contrast to earlier Victory offerings, and quite frankly, if you haven’t ridden a Victory lately, you haven’t ridden a Victory.



There are some functional differences between the two. The Hammer stops better owing to its dual discs and wider, shorter front rubber. The Hammer has a tachometer, which is a nice feature and includes on its face an overdrive idiot light that glows when you’re in sixth. That’s more functional than you might expect since the fact of the matter is that the 100/6 produces so much quietly confident power, it’s easy to cruise along at high speeds oblivious to the fact that you still have another gear to go.

That’s about the extent of immediately noticeable differences between the models and that’s because the single most defining characteristic of the ride on either is that burly Dunlop 250 on the back. As fat tires go, the Dunlop is extremely manageable, but it’s still a 250 and demands some determined effort on the part of the operator to behave compliantly. Handling subtleties beyond that tend to get lost in the equation. When you get right down to it, the deciding factor between the “power cruiser” and “extreme custom cruiser” come down to cosmetic curb appeal. That verdict could, mind you, change with more extensive testing of the bikes, and hopefully we’ll

be able to provide more thorough evaluations in the coming months.

### Back to camp

Long about 6:00 p.m., the riders straggle back to HQ in Medina, and the schedule has become considerably more relaxed. A convivial cocktail hour is the reward for the day’s indoctrination, and supper is once again served in the cafeteria. And it’s then that I’m joined at the table by Mark Blackwell, who I fully expect to keep the conversation focused on Victory Motorcycle for the duration. And I’m so wrong. He talks instead about wine. And fine dining. And geopolitics and foreign policy and his concerns for his offspring in an increasingly uncertain future. And I realize then that I’m just paranoid and nobody here’s been out to brainwash us at all. It’s just that while they’ve had us here and had our attention, they’ve wanted to impart, in that limited window, as much information as possible about who they are and what they’re doing and where they’re going. And as it turns out, Blackwell and his entire crew of Victorians honestly do have a whole lot of enthusiasm and passion for The New American Motorcycle. (Heh. Brainwashing, of all things.) ♦

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