

# Biker Of The Month

## Positive Attitude Axel Buhck the Kawasaki Z Connection

By Mike Brown

"It all starts with everybody's first bike, doesn't it?" Biker of the Month Axel Buhck said in reflecting on the road that brought him into the motorcycle business. Specializing now in vintage Kawasaki Z motorcycles, a big favorite of speed demons in the 70s, Axel's first mount was a much more humble Zundapp moped. Still, the speed signs were already emerging.

"I started out at 15 on a moped, but I altered it so it would go faster," he said. At 19 Axel stepped up to his first real motorcycle, an XT 500 Yamaha, a bike he still owns.

"Looking at it now these days," he said of the motorcycle, "it's almost embarrassing. I altered it 80's style. It's a really loud disco styled enduro now, but it's part of my history."

The U.S. became part of Axel's history in 1987. On a visit from his native Germany he was repeatedly offered employment as his skills as a factory trained Mercedes mechanic were in high demand. After turning wrenches for about a year in the U.S., Axel decided to open his own European car repair shop, but this turned out a short-term venture. Axel said the nature of the



*Axel takes a break to enjoy the scenery during one of his favorite rides, a tour of the Alps.*

business and the knowledge gap many customers had with respect to what it really took to do first-rate repairs soon had him searching for an alternative.

By the early 90s Axel earned a living exporting classic American cars and parts to Europe and in so doing became aware of another opportunity, also from a distant country, this time Japan.

"The U.S. in the 90s was chock full of these bikes (Kawasaki Zs). Nobody wanted them and nobody really appreciated them. At that time just about any Japanese motorcycle was a throwaway, like a disposable lighter," Axel said.

However, across the opposite ocean many European bikers were more than mildly interested in Pacific imports, something partially the result of differences in the motorcycle culture there.

"Riding motorcycles in Europe is a little bit different from here because the living conditions are much tighter," Axel explained. "Not having all those big empty spaces there is a tendency for smaller vehicles that are more practical." Axel said less room also creates a very active motorcycle scene because the much shorter distances from city to city make motorcycle connections easier. In good weather, for example, Axel need only drive a maximum of 200 kilometers to find a good motorcycle event on any given weekend.



*Axel customized this 79 XT, his first real motorcycle. "Disco" style he's a little embarrassed by it today but won't part with it because it's, "part of my history."*



*When he isn't climbing the Alps with his motorcycle, Axel climbs, and digs through, mountains of motorcycle parts. He's shown here atop a mass of old bikes on one of his "junkyard tours" searching for good parts deals.*

stock points arrangement as there is nothing wrong with the system and it is one that can be fixed on the side of the road. For those who do want to make the switch from points, Axel said it's a very good idea to also replace the stock regulator/rectifier unit as a faulty stock system can damage electronic ignition systems.

Axel also facilitates paint and body restoration to stock colors, but jobs this out to a concern in Europe that offers high quality work and better pricing than what he could find locally. He does not restore motorcycles or bodywork commercially and instead concentrates solely on parts sales.

### The Business

Axel now has two active enterprises, both of them web based. On [americianclassix.com](http://americianclassix.com) Kawasaki Z enthusiasts can find a wide range of NOS, reproduction, and used parts to keep their Kawasaki Z running strong and hard. Axel's company stocks quality performance parts, many manufactured in Germany, as well as stock items. With respect to options, Axel has a number of recommendations for Z owners looking for improved reliability and performance, information that comes from first-hand experience.

"Most of the stuff I put on the net was first based on my own need to get something done," Axel said. Axel has numerous Zs himself in the U.S. and in Germany and these include three first year 900 Z1s. Axel recommended first-year Z1s as good prospects to look for if resale value is part of the equation.

As for specific upgrades, Axel suggested swapping the original head ball bearings for roller ones with the same type modification recommendation for the bushing style swing arm bearings. He also encourages riders to switch to modern tires if serious riding is expected and show points aren't the object. Newer shocks, even those made in replica, are good improvements too as the inner workings are superior to the original parts. Further up the performance scale, one can opt for replacing the entire swing arm with a German manufactured high-performance version. But even stone stock, Axel said Z bikes "are very rideable" and a prime reason he owns and rides so many.

Other Z options include a switch from points ignition to fully electronic, but Axel said the mechanically inclined might want to stick to the

### Buying a Z

"It's a buyer's market right now," Axel asserts, saying that there are many really good deals to be had. For himself, however, Axel only intends buying "the ridiculously good deals."

In description of a ridiculously good deal, Axel said if you think, "I can't believe this. The guy doesn't know what he has" and you begin to tremble, this denotes the category. Axel is also partial to bikes that don't need a lot of work. "Don't fill your life with too many projects. That's the way I look at it," he said.

"I found out, in general, that restoring something is more expensive than buying a good original," he said. "If you're going to start out on a bike from scratch, you've got to crunch the numbers. It doesn't make sense to blow 15 grand



*Like a lot of European kids, Axel got his two-wheeled start on a moped. Of course, he tinkered with it to make it go faster.*



*Axel is shown with daughter Shelby on a 1964 Heinkel scooter, another two-wheeled interest.*

on a bike that's essentially worth 10."

Also recommended buys in the current market are the smaller Z2s. However, Axel noted that few Z2s ever made it to the states so it's unlikely one will be found here. The Z2 is the 750 version of the Z1 primarily limited to home markets owing to the displacement restrictions in Japan. Once the restrictions were lifted, many Japanese began re-importing Z1s. However, Japanese nostalgia has boosted the market for Z2s and now the Z2 is a good choice today as well. Axel also recommends the H2 two-stroke 750 triples and does carry some parts for them.

As for condition, Axel said a low mileage original is a top pick as well as any Z model that only needs basic maintenance to make it road-worthy.

### Treasure Hunting

"We liked junk," Axel said of his early days in the business and the beginnings of his parts inventory. The interest continues today. "I've literally bought bikes for a six-pack."

"We'd go on junkyard tours," Axel explained, saying that these often started out at an airport where he'd meet several friends from Europe in a rented U-Haul. Axel and a few friends would then go on a multi-state road trip from junkyard to junkyard, often taking in many cities and several weeks, like one trip he made from Chicago to Texas.

"We'd use the yellow pages and give them a call the day before arriving," Axel said of methodology that has since been enhanced by Internet searches. If initial inquiries yielded positive information, the yard merited a visit.

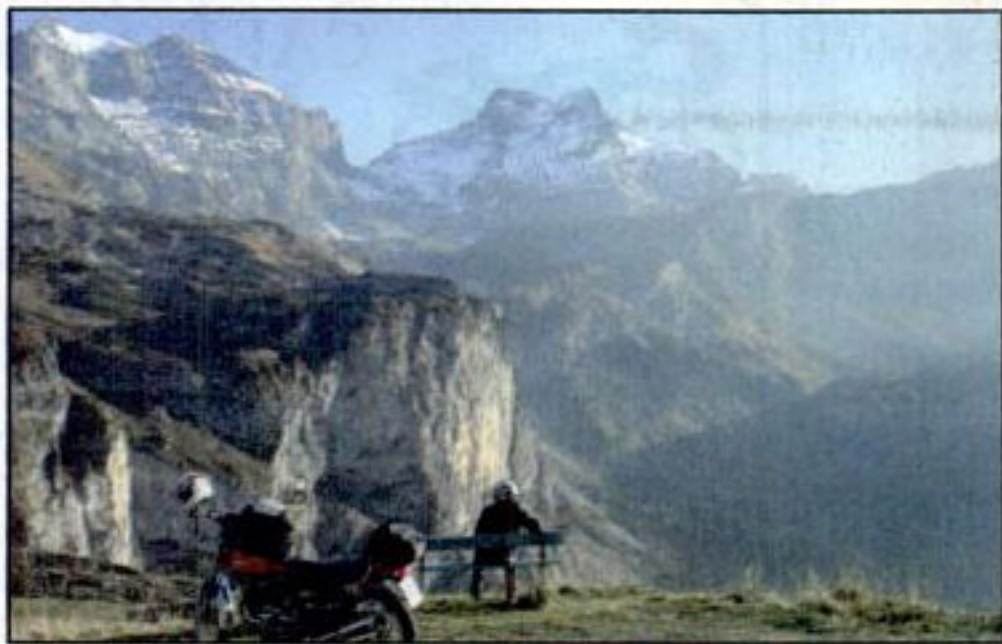
Commonly Axel and his associates would show up tools in hand and then spend the entire day stripping parts, amassing a large collection and then negotiating a final price for the entire lot. Curiously enough, Axel found that messy, disorganized junkyards offered the worst deals because the owners had a tendency to try to make a big profit in one quick sale while the junkyards that really had their act together offered the best bargains.

Sometimes attitude played a big part. Axel recounted one trip where he encountered a junkyard owner that held Japanese bikes in contempt and wouldn't give them the time of day, instead delegating the yard tour "to a hired goon" who appeared, let's just say, less than the epitome of someone who had made wise lifestyle choices. The prejudice turned to Axel's favor when the "tour guide" hit him up for a \$50 advance just before lunch.

Axel laughed in recalling the employee



*Axel is shown here with part of his extensive motorcycle collection.*



*This shot clearly shows why Axel is partial to Alpine scenery. Spectacular.*

themselves immune to injury, he could have been a casualty himself back in the days when he'd pull long wheelies in Hamburg, just lucky no one pulled out of a side street when he did.

As for places to ride today, Axel has an easy favorite and strong recommendation, the Alps, a ride he says he reserves time to do on a regular basis. "There's nothing like it," he said. "There's so much beauty in it and well built, curvy roads; it's just amazing."

### **Axel the Person**

returned from his break in seemingly much better spirits and ready to make a deal. Axel and his friends estimated they stripped \$5,000 worth of good used parts and offered \$950, taking into account the \$50 advance. The employee, feeling especially benevolent, took into account the courtesy of the loan and said he'd take \$750 as a token of his gratitude, and so another "ridiculously good deal" went into Axel's ledger as did another good parts story.

### **Axel the Rider**

At 48 today, Axel has a long history on two-wheels and an attitude formed by deep experience. Aside from two accidents, both caused by other people driving cars, Axel said he's never laid a bike down on the road, crediting this to caution and a conservative approach to riding. Going into corners, for example, Axel said he always uses only 70 percent of what he and the bike can safely manage, leaving the remaining 30 percent to allow for change should emergency call for quick maneuvering. "If you're at 100 percent, you have nothing left," he cautions. As for dirt riding, something else Axel still enjoys in his desert environment, he concedes he's had a few spills.

"I can only recommend to everybody to be the most passive rider out there, but actively observing what's around you," he said. "If you're in extreme territory, there's no room for error."

Axel said he finds himself fortunate that he was able to acquire this wisdom over time, because, like a lot of younger people who think

"I'm just a guy who likes the mechanical aspect of things," Axel said, saying he never wanted to become so burdened with business pressures that he no longer had time to work on his own bikes and ride them. He said he might even sell the business someday, but until then he'll keep everything in manageable proportions to allow time for riding, friends and family.

"In a perfect world I would be globetrotting all over but, unfortunately, you have responsibilities," he said.

Originally Axel said he never had the intention of staying long in the U.S., but plans are different now.

"My life changed coming to the United States," he said. "I didn't think I'd grow old here, but that's changed too."

Axel said he's put deep roots in the United States with friends and family but he also grew to appreciate what he finds is a common American attitude.

"People are way more optimistic here, even when things look grim, and that makes it a much more positive environment to live in," he said.



*Taken this past July, this photo captures another outstanding feature Axel enjoys as part of his motorcycle tours through the Alps. Great roads like this are full of twists and turns and also feature excellent pavement.*