

Hard Day At the Office

BY
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There are people who can kick back after a long week at work by just popping open a few cold beers and watching a motorcycle race on TV. Extreme sports, as comedian D.L. Hugley says, don't make much sense when just making a living and raising kids is about as "extreme" as life gets.

And then there's people like Lou Thomas. Thomas is an overachiever from the old school, operating his

own business during the week, and then during his rare days off, the Baltimore, Maryland resident somehow finds time to teach inner-city kids how to race dirtbikes when he's not competing in supersport races himself.

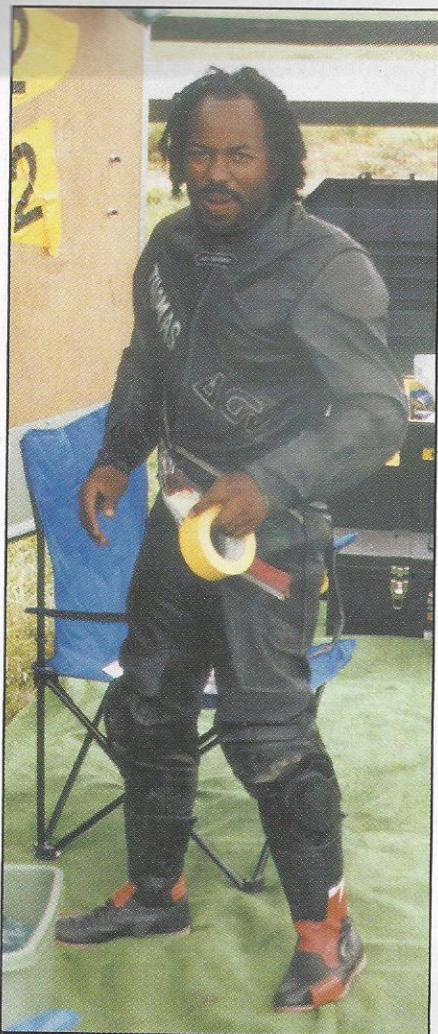
I caught up with the hard-driving Thomas at West Virginia's Summit Point Raceway where he was competing in several races in the Formula USA/Championship Cup Series. As

Lou Thomas



he spent the morning preparing his Yamaha R-6 supersport bike for the coming laps, Thomas was smiling and chatting like a man relaxing at the beach. "Believe it or not, this relaxes me more than just about anything else," he said while fiddling with his Yamaha's rear suspension unit.

I don't know about the rest of you, but I doubt if I'd describe the moments just before heading out onto a crowded racetrack with 30 other speed freaks as relaxing. There's more danger and thrills waiting in the curves of a roadrace circuit than you'd find working next to a smoker in a fireworks factory. But Thomas says that compared to his earlier days as a street rider, his weekends at the



track are absolutely serene.

Like thousands of other roadracers both professional and amateur, Thomas got his start on the track after he "got sick and tired of getting tickets and scaring myself half to death on the streets."

"I'd done just about all I could do on a streetbike and even lost about six good friends to accidents on the streets," he said. For fast sportbike riders throughout the Washington, DC and Baltimore areas, Interstate 83 near Baltimore is considered something of an unofficial racetrack. On weekends, hundreds and sometimes thousands of riders gather in nearby Druid Hill Park, a place where Thomas said fast guys from as far away as South Carolina would challenge each other to races along I83.

Thomas regretfully admits that he was among the better-known faces at these clandestine contests. "For a while, Interstate 83 was our own local Daytona International Speedway. It's even curved and banked like a roadracing track and after a while, I got to know it pretty good and could hit some amazing speeds on it. I was becoming known as The King of 83 and we'd race out there every weekend for money.

After a while it was becoming some big-time serious money with people racing all kinds of hopped-up bikes," he said.

Lucky for Lou Thomas, one of the older street riders he'd met was actually a professional motorcycle roadracer named Edward Addison. Addison, who himself ended up being killed in 1997 in a streetbike accident, frequently badgered Thomas about getting his need for speed off the streets and onto a closed circuit.

Addison, who raced in Formula USA's middleweight supersport class for years, eventually convinced Thomas that roadracing, with its lack of car traffic, padded guard rails and strictly enforced safety rules, was a safer alternative than the interstate. Thomas attended a few open track sessions with his mentor and admits to being hooked right away.

Since then, Thomas, working under the Black Sheep Racing banner, has competed at Virginia International Raceway, Summit Point and several other roadracing venues in the Mid-Atlantic region. His places in the standings have improved with each passing year and as Addison had promised, he's no longer worried about being ticketed or jailed for riding fast. "The biggest problems are making it to all the races and staying healthy," he joked.

As a means of giving something back to the community he grew up in, Thomas has launched Genesis Motorsports, a free dirt bike instructional school for inner-city kids from the greater Baltimore area. Genesis provides small-displacement bikes for kids ages 4 to 11, who Thomas says are given both an opportunity to explore motorsports in a safe environment and a chance to see whether they'd like to compete in junior dirt track races held at the Timonium Fairgrounds outside Baltimore.

"Most of the kids are what we call at-risk kids, from broken homes or having a certain amount of trouble in their lives. I take kids one on one and





teach them how to do flat tracking and basic motorcycle skills. It's a great break in their routines, and it gets them outside their neighborhoods to experience something different," he said.

To date, a few of the Genesis students have gone on to race competitively, and Thomas hopes the lessons they learn at the race track will teach them responsibility should they ever catch the streetbike bug.

When we caught up with Thomas at Summit Point, he was a little weary after working all week at Wax on Wheels, his self-owned mobile car detailing service. Having driven most of the night to get to the track on time, he was apprehensive about racing on only a few hours sleep. Thomas, however, decided to go for it anyway and ended up leading the race during the first three laps.

A few moments later, the dreaded yellow flag came out from the corner workers and Thomas ended up back in the pits with a broken pinkie finger and severely sprained wrist. His Yamaha R-6 looked like it had been dragged through a cornfield, but Thomas was able to drive himself home later that day.

"I ended up missing most of the rest of the season recovering, but just think what would have happened if I had been going that fast and crashed on the street. I can't wait to get back out there and relax this year." he said.

