

# Riding in **STYLE**

**Billy Aldrich turned his love for vintage Honda motorcycles into a lifelong passion.**

Story and Photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY





**B**illy Aldrich got his first motorcycle when he was 20 years old while stationed in Japan and serving in the United States Air Force. To others, it was just a three-year-old used motorcycle, a 1958 Honda Dream. But to him, it was everything.

He road it all over Japan and Okinawa. He took it up Mount Fuji, a 12,388-foot active volcano near Tokyo, not once, but twice. He learned to ride while climbing the sacred mountain, and when it came time to go back to the states two years later, he couldn't bear to part with the motorcycle.

The Air Force brought it back to the states for him, and 56 years later, the Honda Dream sits on a pedestal in the center of Aldrich's airplane hangar in Lake City, gleaming factory restored.

Aldrich's prized possession didn't always look so perfect. After leaving it in the care of his father, he came back 15 years later to find hardly anything left of the Honda Dream. It took him 10 years to get the bike returned to pristine condition and running like new.

"I'm kind of a frustrated, uneducated engineer,"

Aldrich said. "I do a lot of engineering and design work and figuring out how to make things work. I love to build engines and I just love to build motorcycles. Anything on a motorcycle I can build."

Fifteen motorcycles later, Aldrich has gone from self-taught mechanic to motorcycle restoration expert. He turned his early love for motorcycles into a lifelong hobby, one that resulted in one of the largest motorcycle events in the country.

## Why Hondas?

Of the 15 motorcycles that Aldrich, 76, has modified and restored, 13 of them are Hondas. In the 1950s, Aldrich was fascinated by Hondas after reading about them in *Popular Mechanics*, but he was never allowed to have one growing up. So, when a man offered to sell him his three-year-old Honda while he was stationed in Japan, he was ecstatic.

The memories that he made while riding his 1958 Honda Dream are what solidified his love for Honda motorcycles.

"Whatever you're exposed to as a kid, that's generally the one that's going to stay in your heart, unless it was just junk or you got hurt on it," Aldrich said. "But if you had good times on it like I did on this? I road it all over Japan and Okinawa. I road it up Mount Fuji twice. Not once, but twice. I had some spectacular crashes on it. It's just part of me."



Billy Aldrich and his wife, Jackie Aldrich, pose next to Billy's 1958 Honda Dream, the first motorcycle Billy ever owned. When Jackie was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1997, Billy decided to organize a bike show to raise money for breast cancer research. Since then Riding Into History has raised nearly \$500,000 for various charities.

The 1958 Honda Dream was the first of its type. Created just a year before Honda distribution began in the United States, only 1,143 of these domestic models were made in Japan. Designs began to change on the Honda bikes in 1959, and according to Aldrich, the 1958 Honda Dream is exceedingly rare.

"Of course I didn't know any of this at the time," Aldrich added. "When I bought it it was just a three-year-old used motorcycle."

After he restored his first motorcycle, Aldrich was hooked and has been working on bikes continuously ever since.

"That was the initial spark," Aldrich said. "After I recovered the bike from my father and started looking for ways to rebuild it and restore it, that's when all the other stuff started coming at me. All the other Hondas and learning more about the factory and the racing program, which really fascinated me. And one thing leads to another and the next thing you know you've built a dozen recreations of these early, high-performance motorcycles."

Aldrich can repair nearly anything on a motorcycle. Welding, painting, building engines, electrical work, he does it all in his shop. A self-taught mechanic, he has learned how to restore vintage bikes after years and years of practice.

"It's like teaching yourself how to swim," Aldrich said. "You start in shallow water. You make mistakes and you break things. You screw up a project and you start all over. It's a learning curve. There's no school to go to or anything like that. But it got to eventually where I do everything here."

"Here" is Aldrich's airplane hangar attached to his Lake City home. It's a grown man's clubhouse, filled with motorcycles, tools, awards, guitars and even his airplane. There, he spends his time tinkering with scraps and pieces of metal, which he uses to create his restorations.

It's nearly impossible to rebuild a vintage motorcycle from scratch and have all the original parts. So, Aldrich works with what he's got, and like putting together a puzzle he takes parts from other bikes and modifies them to make them work for his Hondas.



“Basically what I do is I take a bunch of junk and I cobble it together to make a motorcycle that the factory would have made in say 1961,” Aldrich said. “If I had been in charge this is how they would’ve built it. So it’s always custom-built my way, but I keep everything period-correct so it looks like it was built 50 years ago. It doesn’t have a bunch of chrome or modern junk all over it. It looks like it came out of the factory 50 years ago but it’s better, it’s faster, it’s safer, it’s more reliable so you can take it out and ride it today.”



The World Golf Village is where Riding Into History is held every year. Billy founded Riding Into history 18 years ago as an effort to raise money for breast cancer research after his wife was diagnosed. The event has turned into the top-rated concours d’elegance for motorcycles in the nation.

## Riding Into History

With a deep fascination and love for vintage motorcycles, Aldrich started the Atlantic Beach Vintage Motorcycle Club in 1996. During that time, he had been fighting throat cancer for five years and was winning that fight. The next year, in 1997, his wife Jackie was diagnosed with breast cancer.

“As it progressed, I decided we had to do something,” Aldrich said.

What he decided to do was put together a big bike show and use the proceeds to fund an organization dedicated to fighting breast cancer. Thus Riding Into History was born. What started out as a way to help the fight against cancer turned into the top-rated Concours d’Elegance for motorcycles in the nation. Aldrich had no idea that a simple bike show would turn into such a major production.

“We had high hopes, but you’re so busy with it from year to year that the feeling is, ‘If I just get through this event then we’ll worry about later on, but we’ve just got to get through this one,’” Aldrich said. “Even after 18 years every one is a major undertaking.”

Since the inaugural Riding Into History event 18 years ago, the Concours d’Elegance, which means elegant display, has raised money for charities including the Susan G. Komen Foundation, Buddy Check 12, Wounded Warriors and currently K9s For Warriors, a Jacksonville-based charity that provides service canines for veterans.

During the most recent Riding Into History event in May, the organization was able to donate \$35,000 to K9s For Warriors. Since Aldrich started the event, it has contributed almost \$500,000 to charities.

“There wouldn’t be a Riding Into History if it weren’t for Billy,” said former Riding Into History chairman

Marina Alley. “We really treasure what he started and we will continue to do it justice.”

Riding Into History is held annually at the World Golf Village near St. Augustine. The bike show and competition attracts more than 300 antique and vintage motorcycles each year, with collectors from all over America bringing their motorcycles to the show. The entire event is put on by volunteers, including Aldrich, who after founding the event and serving as the Chairman of Riding Into History for three years, sits on the advisory board along with some of the biggest

names in the motorcycle business, including Dave Despain, Peter Egan and Dennis Gage to name a few.

“It is the best motorcycle concours in the United States,” Alley said.

## Best In Show

While Aldrich does showcase his Honda collection at Riding Into History, he doesn’t enter his bikes into competitions anymore. His motorcycles have won countless awards after he was repeatedly invited to show his bikes in showcases.

“That can become very habit-forming,” Aldrich said. “You go and the judges think your bike is really cool and they give you an award and they take your picture. It’s like drugs.”

After he would showcase a bike and win, Aldrich would go back to work creating another restoration, ready to enter that one in the next show. Although he doesn’t compete for prizes anymore, he still travels to about a half dozen shows a year to showcase his collection.

“I don’t have them judged anymore,” Aldrich said. “It makes it easier for the judges and gives somebody else a chance.”

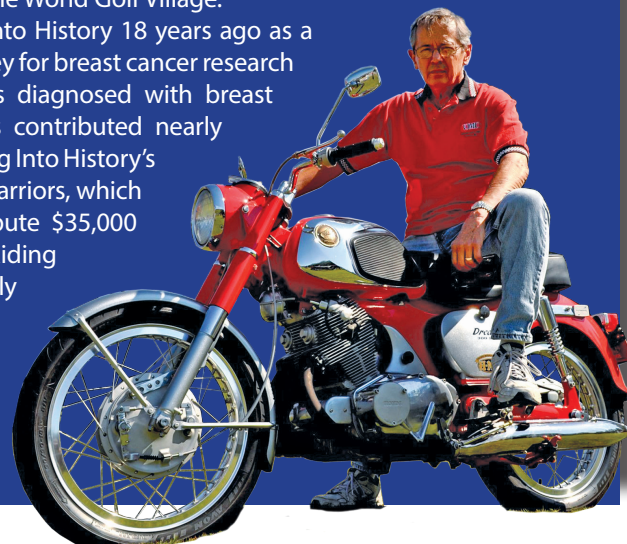
Aldrich’s “resto-mods,” or restora-

## *Riding Into History*

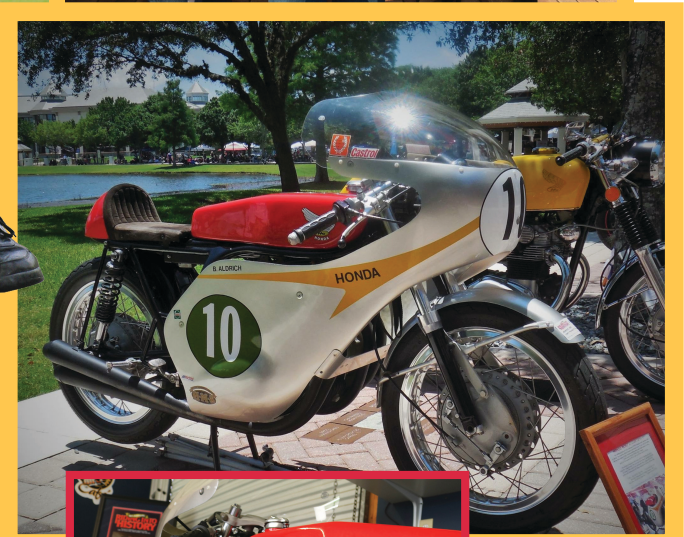
Riding Into History is a world-class vintage motorcycle concours d’elegance. Since its inception 18 years ago, Riding Into History has been held at the World Golf Village near St. Augustine, Fla. The three-day event consists of several main events, including the Grand Marshal’s Dinner, a charity ride and of course the concours d’elegance. The competition attracts over 300 antique and vintage motorcycles each year. Collectors from all over America bring their motorcycles to the show, and they are displayed around the lake which forms the centerpiece of the World Golf Village.

Aldrich started Riding Into History 18 years ago as a charity event to raise money for breast cancer research after his wife, Jackie, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Since then, it has contributed nearly \$500,000 to charities. Riding Into History’s current charity is K9s for Warriors, which they were able to contribute \$35,000 to after the 2017 event. Riding Into History is run entirely by volunteers.

For more information on Riding Into History, visit [www.ridinginto-history.org](http://www.ridinginto-history.org).







One of Billy's greatest restoration projects is this replica of a Honda RC 162, the first Honda to win in the World Grand Prix.

tion modifications, have better breaks and electrics, less oil leaks and are more reliable than their original versions. His bikes aren't trailer queens that move from one show to the next without oil in the engines or gas in the tanks. Everything he builds he can ride.

That includes one of his biggest achievements, his replica of a 1961 Honda RC162, the first Honda to win in the World Grand Prix. Although his replica looks exactly like the original, Aldrich says there isn't an original RC162 part on it, except maybe the front fender, which he found at an online junk sale at 4 a.m. 20 years ago. But even that likeness is only 10 percent.

"It's basically junk parts that I pulled together or hammered out of metal," Aldrich said. "It's all fake. There's nothing real about it. And yet, it starts up, it rides, it goes like hell and it makes a lot of noise."

The process to get motorcycle scraps and turn them into a fully-working vintage motorcycle is not

an easy one. In building them from scratch, Aldrich deals with everything from total success to utter failure.

"This runs the gamut from working on a bike is like being in a tub or warm water, you know nice and cozy, to the other extreme," Aldrich said. "Total frustration. You try something for the third time and you can't get the parts to fit or something breaks and you can't find what you're looking for. It goes from hot to cold. It can be very frustrating."

Even though Aldrich has maintenance manuals for nearly every Honda motorcycle going back to 1958, as well as some Yamaha and Suzuki manuals, factors like modifications and translation still makes the process difficult.

"There is information out there as far as the factory design, the way they built it originally, but nothing for later down the road," Aldrich said. "Any changes you might make, you're on your own."

"There's information out there you just have to be bold, dig down deep, find the information



**TOP:** Billy is pictured after winning first place in the Japanese motorcycle category at the 11th Annual Dania Beach Antique Motorcycle Show in January 2017. **BOTTOM:** Billy has won awards for his restored motorcycles at events all over the country, including many first place awards and best in show awards.





and work off of that, then be creative and apply good mechanical sense," he added.

Restoring, modifying and replicating vintage motorcycles is strictly a hobby for Aldrich, and he doesn't sell the bikes unless someone really wants it or he needs funds for another bike he's working on.

"Occasionally someone will want one of these bikes real bad and I'll sell it to them but that's not why I built it," Aldrich said. "I usually sell something because I ran out of space and I've got another project going and I need funds for that project. I can always build another one. If you want it real bad then write me a check. If it's something rare or special it's not going anywhere."

To him, all the bikes are special, and when inspiration for a new modification or an idea for how to fix a problem strikes, he rushes out to his workshop, no matter what time it is.

"I wake up at three in the morning sometimes," Aldrich said. "Bang! I jump out of bed. If you have a dream about something you never think, 'I'll remember that in the morning,' because you never do. So I'll grab a cup of coffee and come out here, turn all the lights on, running around in my underwear trying to take notes and checking if I have the right stuff to do what I need to do."

Hondas have his heart, and Aldrich plans to continue finding them, fixing them up and restoring them to their former glory for as long as he can.

"There's always stuff that I want to build," Aldrich said. "The toughest part is priorities. Which one do I want to do first?"

# We're Ready. Are You?



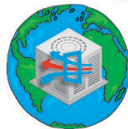
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