

The other Italian stallion

One of the oldest European motorcycle manufacturers comes with a legacy of competition racing

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It just so happens that some of the biggest names in motorcycling have had their beginnings in other things – Ducati's founders began with radio components and Suzuki saw its origins in a loom company. MV Agusta was the offshoot of an aviation company, and the man behind KTM first dabbled with metal works.

There are also some that started out as arms producers, such as BSA and Royal Enfield, and companies such as Husqvarna and Aprilia started off as bicycle makers. But then there are names that have always

dived straight into serious motorcycling, and more often than not, these names have achieved cult status around the world.

While Norton and Triumph may be the most recognised British motorcycle brands of the yesteryears (the latter still thrives though) and responsible for shaping modern motorcycling in a big way, Italian manufacturers Ducati, Moto Guzzi and Benelli can be held responsible for making competition motorcycling big in Europe. Benelli was mostly a family affair – 'Benelli Garage,' as it was called in the beginning, was jointly operated by six Benelli brothers from 1911. The Garage mostly worked with repairing and manufacturing motorcycle

parts, but it took just about ten years of garage-work for the brothers to come up with their own motorcycle, 'Velomotore', in 1921. It was a 75cc single cylinder that was made to fit on a bicycle frame.

But the first 'real' motorcycle to roll out of the Benelli Garage was the Benelli 175, the number denoting the engine's capacity in cubic centimetres. Up to the beginning of WWII, Benelli made a lot of motorcycles, from 175cc to 500cc, mostly Turismo and Sport models. Benelli's rich competition history began with one of the 6 Benelli brothers, Antonio, or 'Tonino' (also referred to as 'the Terrible'). Between 1927 and 1969, with a handful of Italian and international riders, Benelli clinched more than 1000 titles in



Italian racer Benelli, like Moto Guzzi and Ducati, invested heavily into competition biking, including MotoGP. SHUTTERSTOCK

different Italian and European championships.

Right after the war, like many European automobile companies, Benelli found success with lightweight, economical and inexpensive machines that the working man could afford to own. Apart from the lightweights, Benelli also produced the Tornado, a 650cc

twin-cylinder bike, known well for its massive power delivery.

But the onslaught of Japanese motorcycle companies in Europe caused many local manufacturers to shut shop, and Benelli was affected by the big-engined Hondas the same way as Triumph or Nortons. Benelli did fight back, and created the Sei, with a massive 6-cylinder, 750cc engine (which later evolved into a 900cc).

The company made motorcycles up to the late 80s, but never really got the numbers

as the other surviving European motorcycle brands. It was only in 2001 that the Benelli brand was truly reincarnated with the Tornado 899cc Limited Edition and subsequently the Tornado Naked Tre (TNT) and Tre-K. The company now offers in-line three or four cylinder motorbikes from 600 to 1131cc, including the 155bhp plus TNT1130R.