

## 1974 Norton John Player Special



by Moshe Levy

Capitalizing on the success of its Formula 750 win at the 1973 Isle of Man TT, Norton introduced the John Player Special in 1974. Basically a faired Commando 850, its swoopy bodywork and graphics replicated the Team Norton racers of the day.

IT WAS 1973, at the Isle of Man, where Mr. Peter Williams achieved the fastest lap ever recorded by a 750 around the infamous 37-mile circuit. Williams, arguably the last great British roadracer of British machinery, handily took the Formula 750 race aboard a monocoque-framed Team Norton "John Player Special," and left Norton scrambling to leverage the stunning victory into something marketable. The result was the Norton John Player Special café racer you see here, an aesthetic replica of the Williams F750 machine applied to an otherwise standard 850 Commando.

Named after the English John Player Tobacco Company that backed Team Norton's racing efforts, the production prototype debuted at the Anaheim Motorcycle Show in January 1974, making quite a splash. The dramatic white three-quarter Avon fiberglass fairing is faithful to the racer, save for the two bug-eyed 6" headlamps that dominate its face, a nod to the 24-hour endurance racers used in Europe. Red and black accent stripes made from pre-cut pressure-sensitive tape sweep rearward toward the high-backed monoposto seat. Climb aboard,

and the view from the cockpit is classically stylish. The matte-black instrument cluster is complete with a tachometer, speedometer and idiot lights for ignition, turn signals and high beam—though there is no tripmeter. Your hands come to rest on the factory clip-ons with controls featuring wing-shaped toggle switches, while your feet are poised on the rearsets to assume the customary café riding position. The large compartment behind the seat is accessible via two snaps at the top of the tail section, allowing the rider a degree of weatherproof storage. The stretched "gas tank" you see is only a canopy, beneath which a modified 3.2-gal. Commando Roadster's conventional steel tank resides, complete with foam rubber strips stuck all over it for isolation from the surrounding shroud.

Functional changes from the stock Commando are few but worth mentioning. A higher output alternator (borrowed from the Norton Interpol Police model) produces 192 watts at 7000 rpm, better to feed the two enormous headlamps in the fairing. Serious efforts were also made by Norton to reduce the

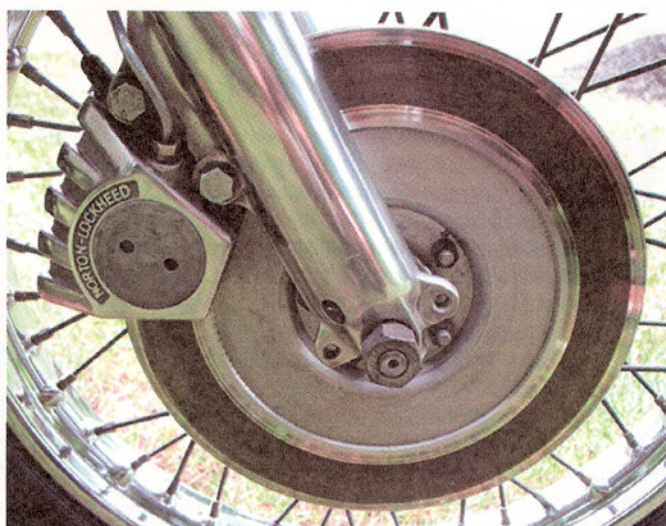
bike's noise output, resulting in the so-called "Mark-2A" sound control system. The induction system consists of a motocross style plastic airbox, complete with wet foam filtration, specifically designed to cut down on intake roar. Likewise, the exhaust system features a "reverse flow" scheme whereby spent gases travel conventionally from the exhaust ports through the headers, and onward through the system. However, before exiting, they are redirected back through special baffle tunnels, and then out again through the blacked-out upswept mufflers' undersized openings. Norton claimed less than 83dB exhaust noise, which is relatively silent for an English bike of this era.

Besides these relatively minor details, the tried and true Norton Commando 850 remains. A pair of 77mm pistons travel through the same 89mm stroke, fed by dual 32mm Amal concentric "carburetors"—tickle to start! There is no electric starter motor, so owners must learn the uniquely Norton kickstart sequence which, if mastered, brings the engine to life in short order. The engine, transmission and swingarm are isolated





**Classically elegant Smiths gauges dominate the JPS' instrument panel. Idiot lights are for ignition, t/s and high-beam.**



**Strange-looking by modern standards, the JPS' single, solid-rotor 272mm Lockheed front disc brake provides decent stopping power.**

from the frame, forks, and rider via Bob Trigg's ingenious "Isolastic" rubber mounting system, but at idle and low rpm, "mild quaking" would be an accurate description of the twin's behavior. Brit bike fans call this "character" and wouldn't have it any other way. Vibration miraculously disappears around 2500 rpm, however, and on the open road the John Player Special's gentlemanly manners and refined brand of performance competed directly with BMW's famed R90S.

The four-speed transmission was geared a little shorter than Norton's earlier 850 Commandos—20-tooth output sprockets vs. the older 21- or 22-tooth setups—and transmits power to the rear wheel via a beefy 5/8" x 3/8" Renolds chain. Lever effort on the diaphragm spring clutch is light, and takeup is clean. The Norton's transmission is quintessentially British, with a more mechanical feel than its contemporary

Japanese counterparts, though nowhere near as agricultural as American-made machinery from the same era.

A rake of 28° and trail of 4.26", coupled with sticky 4.10" Dunlop TT100 tires mounted on handsome 19" spoked front and rear rims conspired to produce a stable yet flickable motorcycle with excellent handling characteristics. A 272mm Lockheed front disc brake coupled with the 180mm rear disc scrubbed off speed with authority in their day. With a wet weight of around 475 lbs. and 50 hp from the 828cc vertical twin as it wailed toward its 6000 rpm redline, the Player Special could rip through the quarter mile in 14 seconds flat, on its way to topping out at 115 mph.

Essentially, the Norton John Player Special was just your average Commando dressed up to play track star. As was popular at that time, many standard Commandos were already being given the café treatment by their owners, using a plenti-

ful supply of aftermarket accessories from Dunstall, Dick's Cycle West, ICS, and other vendors. However, by keeping differences between the Player Special and stock Commando limited mainly to appearances, Norton was able to offer its factory café complete for only \$2995 in 1974. Putting it into perspective, this was only \$500 more than a standard 850 Commando, or \$500 less than the aforementioned BMW R90S (or Ducati Super Sport for that matter). Although unconfirmed, it is commonly believed that only 110–120 Players were imported into the US, making them quite rare today. When new, the Player Special was a relative bargain from a famed English marque. Today, in well preserved condition, one can typically fetch between \$10,000–15,000.

*Author's note: Special thanks to Klaus Huenecke of EPM Performance Imports in Manalapan, New Jersey, for supplying the 1975 Norton John Player Special photographed for this feature.*



**Left: The John Player Special's large bug-eye headlights were a distinctive feature of its fairing design. Center: Dual 32mm Amal "carburetors," a British standard, feed the Norton twin. While it may have more in common with a Commando than a Norton factory racer, the John Player Special is an esteemed British classic, with examples selling for as much as \$15,000 today.**