

## *The 1700's, Vulcan's New Identity*

### *Bob "Joker" Denney*



Setting: medium sized conference room, about 30 people of various genders, colors and ages in folding chairs, podium in front of the room, I'm at the podium. "Hi, my name's Joker and I'm a torque junkie". Applause and "Hi Joker". "I ride a Vulcan 2000 not so much anymore because I want to, although I do, I ride it because I need to. Virtually nothing else does it for me anymore. Between the torque, handling, power, braking, brute force and let's not forget the gut wrenching stump pulling tire burning pure and unadulterated muscle of this thing, I'm just spoiled. I ride lots of 50-100 mile days to and from work and around town, and I also try to get in at least one or two trips a year covering several thousands of miles each and sometimes 6-800 mile days. I clock an average of 15,000 miles each year in a twelve month Florida riding season

and I do most of it one-up, but the typical vacation ride is a two-up activity with my wife on the rear taking it all in while she somewhat silently longs for a more comfortable perch." That should let you know what the new Vulcan 1700 series of cruisers and tourers are up against when I turn the key. If you know what I'm riding now, you'll get a better feel for my comparisons.

I rode all four of the new 1700's through the wine country and along the coastline of northern California this past week enjoying the scenery and perfect weather for something like 250-300 miles. I started out on the most naked of the bunch, the Classic and then progressed to the Classic LT, the Nomad and finally wringing out the Vulcan Voyager last. I did this by design, wanting to add a little at a time and making mental and

sometimes written notes along the way. Before we took off for the day, we were given a presentation on the new line by Croft Long, Manager of cruiser products, and some of the details proved to be pretty interesting fare. For example:

- the Voyager was the starting point for this bunch and the rest derived from that, opposite from what I'd expect.
- the competition for the touring market segment KMC was going after was initially identified as the Gold Wing, Yamaha Venture, Victory Vision, HD Road Glide and Ultra Classic. The Gold Wing was dropped from the competitor's list since it's a six cylinder and KMC had decided not to pursue that platform (besides, no one does Gold Wing like Honda so why try). The Vision was dropped since it represented such a "different" styling agenda (they were being nice). The Yamaha was dropped because it's a four cylinder and that left the two HD's as the remaining competition since focus groups wanted a v-twin.
- with the 1500's and 1600's unable to meet future emission requirements without considerable rework, the decision was to drop them and develop this whole new line
- focus groups identified belt drive, v-twin motor, six speed transmission, sound system, cruise control all as highly desirable features.
- the common frame is at the same time more compact and more

rigid yet lighter than previous frames

- engine develops approximately 15% more torque and 20% more horsepower than the 1600 engine. Consider also the power losses reduced going from the shaft to the belt and the seat-of-the-pants feel is even stronger
- two oil pumps including one to spray the bottoms of the pistons and provide circulation and one just to scavenge oil from the crankcase so the crank doesn't have to work in a bath
- Fly-by-wire throttle

## *Vulcan Classic*



OK, that's enough of the specs for now, time to ride some motorcycles starting with the Vulcan Classic. This is the "base model", no bags, no windshield and no backrest so it's also the closest to my personal normal setup. As I walked around the scooter taking in the lines, I took note of the steel fenders and seamless tank with the new badging, the belt drive with the chrome trimmed rear pulley and the nine-spoke cast rims. The new brake and clutch reservoirs are blacked out with chrome lids and look sharp alongside the blacked out switch housings and mirror mounts. The new instrument bezel houses the speedo, two

LED displays and ignition with the gas cap offset to the right. Chrome's in abundance without tacky "lick-and-stick" fake plates all over the place and the Diablo Black Metallic color is a winner to me especially when the sun catches those metal-flakes. Overall look is pretty beefy without looking obese, flashy but not gaudy.

I swung a leg over and the first impression was one of fit. It did. I'm 5'9" and weigh in around 180 and the ergos seemed pretty decent. I pulled it up off the side stand with ease and sat flat footed while I took stock. Hands in the right place, no need for risers, seat to steering head obviously shorter than previous full-size Vulcans. The seat was scooped nicely and provided a fair amount of low back support, however those of you used to rider's backrests will still want them. I initially thought that this seat felt pretty good out of the box and that impression proved true over the next several hours. I did feel like I was sitting more upright, more on rather than in the bike and I wasn't sure I'd like it but decided to hold judgment until rolling which proved to be a good decision.

Instrument panel is clean and easy to read and provides several new functions. While still indicating speed and fuel status, it also has a clock, selectable trip odometers, two of them, a running fuel efficiency indicator and a "miles to empty" setting, all switched from the right thumb which is a lot handier than the old buttons on the bezel. The gear position indicator is always displayed. Very nice. The ignition switch also adds a couple of functions including an integrated fork lock. Right, no more

starting up the bike only to realize you forgot to unlock the forks and climbing



off to reach around and below the steering stem: another nice touch. There are also onboard diagnostics that display the codes on the instrumentation and can be read by the owner using the accessory manual.

Turned on the key and hit the "Go" button and the motor spun to life for the first time that day. Jumped to a fast idle for less than a minute and then calmed down to a steady cadence and throaty purr. Nice sound for stock pipes, minimal vibration but it was there. I noticed the rubber mount risers adding to vibration isolation. One thing of note was the engine noise which wasn't. Noisy that is, not the top end clatter we've come to know and arguably love from these Vulcan big twins, this one seems mechanically quieter. Let it warm up for a minute in the 50 degree morning air and then pulled out with six other 1700's and the day was on. First mile or so on a side road then onto the 101, a high speed artery with considerable traffic that we caught up to, stayed with and then pulled away from all in the first thirty seconds. Full throttle from the entrance ramp forced first gear to the rev limiter at around 40 and second at around 70, nice spacing and unlike my 2000 that hits the first gear rev limiter

about a second after you twist the grip. These things run strong, respond quickly and shift easily. I was banging gears all day with no misses and thanks again to Mr. Kawasaki for continuing the positive neutral finder. I'm confident even without quarter mile times that these 1700's will readily outrun any of the previous big twin Vulcans except for the 2000. The fly-by-wire is barely noticeable as different from a traditional cable throttle probably because the throttle is still actuating cables unlike the Harley that's truly sending pulses from the grip. The Kawasaki version is kind of a hybrid combining cables off the grip actuating a pulley on the throttle body triggering the Accelerator Position Sensor sending a signal to the ECU which then modulates the throttle valves through a DC motor. Whew. Bottom line here: excellent throttle response and the technology is invisible to the rider.

Began to get a better feel for the seating position and decided I liked it. While I felt a little cramped at first, remember my bike's a VN2000, once we got moving and I acclimated to the bike I felt more comfortable. The boards are forward and tilted up at a comfortable angle and I think that makes the position more flexible, allowing taller riders equal comfort. Three out of the seven of us were over six foot and none looked or claimed to feel cramped. Yes, most of them were Kawasaki employees. We continued north for several miles at highway speeds and maybe a little more and the Classic was solid. Passing trucks had no effect on handling, no wobble, virtually no effect from winds. Since traffic was dropping off and it was open road, I was playing with the gears, having fun testing power at various speed and gear combinations. In top

gear, you can lug it down to about 40 and roll on with barely decent acceleration but no lugging. If you just wanted to pick up some mph, you could do it handily. At that same 40, dropping one gear to fifth gave better response but you'd have to drop to fourth to quickly pass a slower vehicle. If you did the same at 70, top gear is much better but fifth will provide all you need. Plenty of torque available.

We dropped off the highway onto some two-lanes and I'll apologize for not keeping track of what they were, I was having too much fun. Suffice to say, most of the rest of the day was on and off the Pacific Coast Highway and weaving around the Marin County wine country, with some hills and an honest to God mountain in there as well. As we got into the groove of the twisties, the Classic did well. Cornering clearance is good and the handling light and quick for a cruiser. Even on less than perfect surfaces the suspension did a good job eliminating the chops, and in curves it kept the tires on the ground. Brakes did what brakes should do stopping smoothly and quickly even after repeated hard stops.

For the \$12,299 retail and that Diablo Black, this is a nice package at a reasonable price.

### *Vulcan Classic LT*

After an hour or so, I swapped onto an LT to sample that flavor. Differences are few but significant: two-tone paint, height adjustable windshield, leather saddlebags, passenger backrest and lots of chrome plated studs on everything leather. The windshield did its job blocking wind and did it without

buffeting. I thought it was a little tall for me, but it was at the highest setting and I



didn't take the time to lower it. The saddlebags were roomy and easy to get in and out of and they looked good. What more can you ask of a saddlebag?? OK, it didn't rain so I don't know if they'd leak but I'm guessing they'll do as good a job as any other leather bag. Since the backrest, windshield and bags didn't change much in the way of handling, acceleration or ergos for the rider, this one was a lot like the Classic but with less wind and a quieter ride. One difference you don't see is the warranty difference: the Classic comes with one year of unlimited mileage coverage while the LT comes with two years. Cost: the LT package adds \$1500 to the Classic and for that you get the two-tone paint, windshield, bags, backrest, studded everything and additional warranty so provided you like what they give you, it's a bargain.

## *Vulcan Nomad*

Here we get some real change and I'll try and detail the ones I see as most significant as best I can:

- Hard bags
- Windshield with dual-pane adjustable airflow
- Lower wind protection

- Cruise control
- retuned engine: torque peaks at 2750 as opposed to 2250 for the Classic and LT; horsepower peaks at 5000 instead of 4500
- floorboards mounted more rearward and flatter
- passenger boards
- touring seat
- higher springrate suspension

Those are the differences, here's how it translates to the ride: not a lot of difference. Still runs strong, I'm not sure how significant it is to the average rider that the horsepower and torque peaks have been moved. Roll out from stop and roll on from speed is still impressive. Since gearing remained the same, at a given cruising speed you might notice better roll on without a downshift, but I didn't see it as tremendously significant. Maybe a more refined rider would notice more difference but I guess that's not me. I did notice the suspension change, it's noticeably stiffer and I think that's great for two-up touring with a load. I didn't have the benefit of a passenger for any of these bikes, but my guess is a better ride with less bottoming with the settings up high. For a solo rider the lowest settings were fine.



The ergos on the Nomad were different. The handlebars are wider and the seat feels like it sets you back a little compared to the Classic/LT. The repositioning of the floorboards rearward gives the rider a more traditional touring posture with legs underneath rather than splayed out front. I know, the 30 millimeter difference doesn't sound significant but it feels significant. Coupled with the flatter angle it completely changes the ride position. For me it was another learning experience in that my initial reaction was negative, but after an hour I was comfortable, maybe even more than on the others. Like so many things motorcycle, I think this for me was more a matter of "different" but not better or worse, just different.



Handling was much like the previous two bikes, as was the mechanics. The cruise control is controlled from the right switch housing and it's extremely easy to use. Once you engage it at a given speed, you can even index the speed up or down by clicking one of the switches one click for one mile per hour. I wasn't able to validate the "one mph per click", but I did click five times and the indicated speed was just about dead on at five more. As with any other cruise control, it's disengaged with the clutch, brake, switch or rolling the throttle

closed. Most of the time I spent on the tourers were on backroads, so I didn't get a chance to use it very much, but when I did, it functioned perfectly.

The windshield is a two-piece affair with adjustment for clearance around the headlight. This essentially allows more or less air to the rider from an area that doesn't cause buffeting or a direct blast of air. The lowers worked well and prevented a lot of the updraft so common on bikes with large windshields.

The bags.....I know these have been the objects of scorn by those who love their side-opening legacy Nomad bags now that these are the more traditional top-loaders. I see the advantages and disadvantages of either but suffice to say I'd have done them differently from both. The cut line is about halfway down the bag, meaning almost 50% of the volume is in the lid, and I don't see the point. I'm told it's a styling cue, but for my dollar the cue should have been sacrificed for function. I know the bags can be packed above the cut line without any problems, particularly with inserts, but I'd still have preferred a much shallower lid. That said, the bags hold plenty, seal easily and open without a key which was always a sore point for me with the old Nomad bags. A nice touch around the bags are the guards which protect them from damage in a drop.

Accessories will be available before summer to include bag rails, a billet tachometer, gel seats and a trunk kit.....yes a trunk kit. No idea on price yet but be prepared for a significant cost for this one. It'll have complete mounting hardware, replace some of the

existing Nomad hardware and also include the wiring harness since it will include the LED lighting on the rear.

The Nomad is running \$14,399 in Diablo Black (that killer color again) while the two tone red and beige is \$300 more.

## *Vulcan Voyager*



After another hour or so on the Nomad, we switched and I got my shot on the Voyager. Before I even climbed aboard I knew this was the biggest change of the day. As I walked around the bike once again, the fairing alone is enough to set this one apart from the rest, it seems to change everything about the bike, the ride, the look, but that can be deceptive. The trunk also contributed to the major difference in appearance, it made the bike look longer than the others although wheelbase is constant. Beauty is in fact in the eye so I won't spend a lot of time other than to say I found the whole package to be absolutely gorgeous. While the blue/black two-tone is a real head-turner, the black/silver just oozes class. Given a choice, I don't know for sure which I'd take.

Stepped over the seat, careful not to kick the bags, and settled in. The seating

position is the same as the Nomad but the handlebars are narrower. I liked them better. The windshield is narrower above the fairing and seems to be taller, giving it an awkward look in my opinion, but it proved to function well. The instrument cluster was busy but nicely organized. From left: fuel, speedometer, LED display, tach and temperature with all the gauges being analog and easy to pick up. The LED display indicates fuel efficiency, miles to empty, odometer plus two trip od's, clock, gear position and cruise control status. Selections are made from the right side controls and toggling around was easy. Also in the fairing is some storage and this is where I'd have made a change: the storage pockets are auto-locking, meaning you need the key to get in. I'd have preferred access with a button and optional lock, but not to be. Down below in the lower fairing section is a vent that's readily operated from fully closed through several detents to fully opened. I started and finished with it closed on this ride and wished I'd have remembered it later.



The trunk deserves a couple of comments: deceptively large. Had I not seen it, I wouldn't have believed it would hold two full face helmets, it doesn't look deep enough. I liked the side-opening, a passenger wouldn't have

to get off the bike to allow it to open. The LED's on the rear added tremendously to making this bike visible from the rear. You can open it without the key.



Pulling this one off the stand was no more difficult than the others and once up, was well balanced. Fired it up and immediately liked what I heard which was that same exhaust note as the others: deep and throaty, but as stated earlier, it's going to be too loud for some of the more refined touring riders looking for silence or near silence. Our Voyager club rider found it unacceptable, but later agreed he'd be willing to live with it for the sake of the other positives.

As I rolled it out in the parking lot, I decided to try some low-speed maneuvers like small circles and figure 8's and I had no troubles with lock to lock in either direction. As big as it is, it handles very nicely at slow speeds. I also decided to try the anti-lock brakes and was impressed. I'm not big on anti-lock or especially linked braking systems, but I believe I could live with this new K-ACT system which deserves some explanation.

It uses pressure sensors on the output of both brake reservoirs to determine how hard you're applying the brakes. That

input goes to a dedicated ECU which also gets inputs from the dedicated speed sensors on each wheel as well as from the main ECU. Without going into agonizing detail, when you apply the front brake, the applied pressure is sent to a pump and proportional valves and the ECU decides whether to apply any and how much rear brake based on pressures and speeds. Same with the rear and same when you apply both. In short, you grab a brake and the ECU does what it thinks is best. I decided a couple of tests were in order so I first accelerated to about 50 and then stomped on the rear brake. The result was a no skid straight stop, albeit a relatively long one. I then repeated it somewhat hesitatingly with the front. Fifty mph and grabbed it as hard as I could. The result was a no-skid straight stop a lot shorter than the first one. Impressive. I then accelerated again and grabbed both and just about stood on my head. But it was a controlled near headstand. Short version: I liked this system and I'd pay extra for it, particularly since it disengages at speeds below twelve mph where you want complete control for yourself. One other thing, if the entire electronic system was to fail it would revert to a regular old every day brake system. Nothing less.

Back on the road, we were in the valleys and vineyards and running at a quick pace. The Voyager was rock solid at speed including the crosswinds we hit on sections of the Pacific Coast Highway which was blowing pretty good. The frame mount fairing does a good job of isolating the rider from the wind effects on the fairing, unlike the handlebar mounts of some others which translate all that feel directly back to the rider. The fairing also does a good job



blocking the wind and keeping the ride quieter than most. I wear a half helmet and usually the wind roars around the bottom past my ears but on this one I was pretty well protected. The cruise control here is a twin to the Nomad's so there's no difference there.

I'm not a big motorcycle music guy but I did play with the sound system and was surprised by a couple of things. First of all, the controls are a lot easier to use than they are to read about. Confusion turned to clarity when I actually started playing with the controls, handily mounted into the left side switch housing. In stock form it includes AM-FM-WX as well as intercom and is upgradeable for CB, XM or an iPod all of which are controlled from the left side switches. The 40 watt twin front speaker system was plenty powerful for me, I could hear just fine on the road at any speed. Auto-volume adjustment proportional to speed is there and works well. Rear speakers are an option but were not installed on the test bike. I did crank the front speakers up pretty high to check sound quality and I was surprised at the lack of distortion. I've ridden a couple of other tourers with integrated sound and this one is competitive with any of them.



Toward the end of the ride we climbed Mount Tamalpais, the 2571 foot peak just above San Francisco in Marin County. This was significant for a number of reasons not the least of which was me being comfortable on the bike and making it work. The road to the top is alternately tight and open and almost always steeply graded uphill. This was also later in the afternoon when the heat was highest, we were probably in the high seventies. So off we went and I pressed it as best I could. I don't think I ever left third gear and dropped to first several times just for the extra kick out of a corner. This was as aggressive as I'd ridden all day and the Voyager was doing a great job handling it and keeping me out of trouble. More than once I grabbed the binders hard coming into a blind curve only to immediately downshift and twist the wick for the next one. I don't claim to be a canyon carver, but I do like the challenge of a good road and the Voyager was more than up to anything I could push it to. By the time we got to the top I was energized and the bike was ..... hot. OK, pushing hot but not quite there. No, not overheated, just hotter than it'd been all day. I'd been watching the temperature gauge since about the halfway point up the mountain, that's when my right calf felt the heat off the engine/pipes. I wouldn't call it excessive, but it was definitely warming up. Keep in mind we weren't in 100 + degree desert heat, this was reasonably balmy seventies and maybe low eighties. Granted, we'd just finished several miles at high rpm's and heavy loads, but I didn't expect as much heat as I was feeling, and none of the other bikes exhibited the same thing. This is the point at which I realized I should have opened that lower fairing vent, maybe that would have helped, but I'll never

know, I was too busy having a blast running this thing through its paces.

I did have the opportunity to ride as a passenger on the Voyager and got a whole new perspective. While I found the vibration to the rider acceptable and even minimal, the vibration translated to the passenger through the backrest was substantial and probably objectionable. The floorboards were reasonably smooth as was the seat, the only trouble spot was the backrest and my bet is that it will be a problem not easily solved. During neutral throttle cruising, mild acceleration or deceleration there's no problem, however during hard

acceleration under heavy engine loading, such as accelerating up a grade at low rpm's, the trunk transmits all kinds of pulses directly to the passenger's back. Downshifting helps but doesn't eliminate it. Not good. An aftermarket gel seat and backrest is already planned for quick availability and I hope that dampens out the pulses, they will need to do something to calm it down.

I handed the Voyager back to the AVA rider and we finished the ride with me back on the Nomad. All in all, a great motorcycle day with a lot to think about and a lot to get on paper.



## ***Bottom lines.....***

### ***The good:***

- power
- handling
- the K-ACT brakes on the Voyager
- six-speed gearbox was flawless
- belt drive: I hear people extol the virtues of shafts all the time, typically citing “maintenance free”, but I don’t know of any drive that requires less maintenance and consumes less power than a belt. Considering that I have 64 plus thousand trouble free miles on mine, I see this as a real plus.
- cruise standard on the Nomad and Voyager
- additional functions on the LED readout
- comfort
- Warranty: 12 months unlimited miles on the Classic; 24 on the LT and Nomad, 36 on the Voyager. Extended warranty available to cover up to 6 years unlimited miles.



***The bad:***

- vibration to the passenger on the Voyager under heavy engine load
- potential for heat under strenuous conditions on the Voyager
- the shifter is a one-piece affair, not allowing independent adjustment of heel and toe. I know, this one's minor but for those of us that don't heel shift, eliminating it is tougher than on earlier models.

***Bottom bottom line:***

As with any bike or line of bikes, this one's not perfect, it has its warts. Also like any other bike, your job is to compare the good with the bad and decide if it's the right one for you. Since it's a world of compromise you have to decide whether the good outweigh the bad and if so, go get one. If not, stick with what you've got or find something else.



Thanks for reading.....