



## The anatomy of a hill-climber

**HILL-CLIMB BIKES** look like they've been put together from the rescued pieces of a head-on smash between a motocross bike, a late 1980s sportsbike, a drag bike and a climbing frame.

The bizarrely extended wheelbase helps prevent the bike flipping backwards on the severe incline. At times you can see the home-built swing-arms flexing as soon as the rider sits on the bike. Like most of the frames, they're usually heavily modified versions of the original.

All bikes have to be fitted with a speedway-style automatic cut-out switch (the likelihood of rider and bike parting company is high and you wouldn't want to be anywhere near one of these bikes if its throttle stuck open), a rear grab rail (to allow marshals to man-handle the bike and attach ropes to lower it back down the hill), lever ball-ends must be intact (so they don't skewer riders) and a substantial rear mudguard to cover the spiked back wheels.

In spite of being so pared down, they have few weight saving devices, especially from the gearbox backwards. Most rear wheels are taken from a car or 4x4 vehicle. All have either scoops or bolts protruding from the tyre. Too much speed over the bumps throws the bike into the air which, with this much weight, means you've lost all momentum before the wheel lands again.

There are GSX-R1100 engines everywhere, but expect to see big motocross engines, at least one twin-engined Husky, a couple of CB1000s, a 900SS, a TL1000 and, naturally, one with a FireBlade engine.

(above): The Harley hill-climber that carried Jonathan to 127.98 metres and eighth place. See this monster on the *Bike* stand at the NEC International Motorcycle Show, November 9-19. NEC preview p24

GSX-R. The suspension absorbs the bumps and the power is much more controllable. I have a confidence-inspired rush of blood to my head and make a split decision to take the more difficult line up the hill. When I'd walked the course between runs and noted where the top riders had ridden, I reckoned it was possible but wasn't sure I had the guts. It's a risky line but I couldn't have lived with myself if I hadn't given it a shot.

So I do. And it works. I have the right amount of speed and with a little bit of leg work I move across and into a rut up the left-hand side. From there it's a matter of a constant throttle and some hard pushing. When I grind to a halt I haven't broken any records but I'm past the middle section, which is a barrier to so many other riders.

Standing three-quarters of the way up the mountain, looking down on the 1000 or so sunburnt faces in the crowd, the sense of achievement is powerful. I'm 127.98 metres high and soaking up their applause, which I can just make out. I turn to see a grinning lobster among the ferns at the side of the course. It's Chip, and this time I give him a cocky smile back. Once the Harley's resting place is clocked I get to join an elite bunch of riders when, rather than being lowered back down, I'm winched up to the top of the hill by a tractor.

Back at the bottom I wait like a skier watching the rest of the field complete their runs. The course was harder this time and I buzz with excitement as one after another fail to beat 127.98 metres.

Only two other pilotes beat that height on their final run. I can't believe Jean-France and Petit Louis are behind me this time. Better news still comes when I'm told I've finished eighth overall.

Eighth is good enough for a trophy, which I later collect with the rest of the top 10. As I walk off stage, the commentator slaps me on the back and asks, "It's good, no? You'll come back next year to win?" I give him a big French shrug and say, "We'll see, Montée Impossible."