

Life at 194: The Hayabusa Years

There's a kind of freedom that only comes on two wheels, and for years, I chased it hard.

I bought the bike new in 2002, long after I'd settled down; a Suzuki Hayabusa, named for the peregrine falcon that dives on its prey at speeds topping 200 miles an hour. Part of it was a whim. But underneath the whim was something more honest: by then the music life was mostly behind me, the road and the clubs and the nights all packed away into memory, and I missed that feeling of adventure more than I let on.

I think some part of me hoped a machine that fast could put a little of that excitement back into my life and maybe bring some new, like-minded friends along with it, the way the band once had. Silver and chrome, low to the ground, built like nothing else on the road, I called her my silver and chrome baby, and she more than delivered. It was a fitting name for the bike itself, too.

The Hayabusa was, at the time, one of the fastest production motorcycles ever built, capable of running well past 190 miles an hour in the right hands, and my hands were plenty capable. I got it up to 150 more than once. On a straightaway with the right friend daring me on, I pushed past that with the machine and the moment carrying me faster than most people ever go on purpose.

The bike itself had a reputation to live up to. When Suzuki launched the Hayabusa in 1999, it wasn't just fast. It was, for a moment, the fastest production motorcycle ever built, clocked by testers at 194 miles an hour. That number rattled the entire industry. Within a year, Japanese and European manufacturers quietly agreed among themselves to cap all future production bikes at 186 miles an hour, worried that anything faster would invite government regulators to do the capping for them.

The Hayabusa, in other words, was fast enough to change motorcycling history; the one bike that got the whole industry to agree to slow down. Even its shape told that story: designers had chased a drag coefficient sleeker than most sports cars of the era, sculpting every panel to survive the brutal air pressure of triple-digit speeds. And the name fit the machine. Suzuki called it Hayabusa after the peregrine falcon, a bird that folds its wings and dives on prey at over 200 miles an hour, fast enough, as it happens, to catch a blackbird. That wasn't an accident either. Honda's own hyperbike at the time was called the Super Blackbird, and Suzuki's engineers liked the idea of naming their falcon after the very bird it was built to hunt. Riders just called it the 'Busa, and among the crew I rode with, showing up on one meant something.

It wasn't a bike for beginners; it was a bike you earned the nerve for, one mile an hour at a time.



My real riding grounds were the Catoctin Mountains, that ribbon of federal land running from just outside Baltimore up into Pennsylvania, and the hills of Virginia beyond; the Shenandoah Valley, the Blue Ridge Parkway, roads that rose and dropped like roller coasters. I remember one stretch in particular: a back road that dove down into a valley so steep you didn't need to touch the throttle to keep your speed. Gravity did the work for you. I gave it gas anyway, because why waste a hill like that? Then the road would spit you out into open farmland, old wooden fences, the kind of countryside that looks like it hasn't changed in a hundred years.

I rode with a crew of four or five other guys, all on Suzukis, all faster and more seasoned than I was when I started. They were the ones who pulled me along. "Come on, man, keep up," until keeping up wasn't a stretch anymore. Together we rode up to Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, parking the bikes by the old water-powered mill to get something to eat before heading back out. One trip took us all the way down to Daytona Beach; an overnight haul, the rest of the group camping out while I stayed with my father-in-law, who lived in Vero Beach, before meeting back up with the pack the next day. In Daytona we watched dirt bike jumps that I never much cared for, and quarter-mile drag races on an abandoned airstrip outside of town that I cared for a great deal.

One rider in that group stood out. A man with more nerve than anyone I'd ever met. He ran a quarter mile in about 9.3 seconds. Once, cruising down the highway in a pack of five or six bikes, a group of strangers pulled up looking for a race. We ignored them, waved them off, until one finally challenged him directly. It wasn't close. He hit 180 miles an hour and left them behind in seconds. I never forgot it, and I still wonder, all these years later, where that rider ended up.

There was something almost meditative in it, too. A car puts a windshield between you and the world, and you watch the scenery go by like it's on a screen. A motorcycle doesn't allow that distance. The wind, the engine's pitch as it climbed through the gears, the smell of the mountain air turning to farmland air, the exact lean of the bike through a curve; all of it came at me directly, with nothing in between. There wasn't room left over to think about anything else. Bills, work, whatever else was on my mind back in Odenton; none of it could survive out on those roads. The bike demanded my full attention and gave me, in return, a kind of quiet I didn't find anywhere else: mind and machine and mountain moving as one thing.

For all the speed, I never thought of myself as reckless. Freedom wasn't really about going fast. It was about noticing the world moving past me: the mountains, the valleys, the old farms, the particular quiet of a road with nobody else on it. The speed was part of the pleasure, but not the point of it. I knew exactly how much throttle a moment called for, and I knew when to just let the hill do the work instead.

By the time I moved down to Vero Beach and brought the bike with me, something in my body had already started to shift, though I didn't know it yet; the earliest, unnoticed effects of declining eyesight. The Florida roads were flat, and flat roads, I found, just weren't the same. The mountains had been the whole point.

I sold the bike two or three years ago, closing out a chapter that ran from the switchbacks of the Catoctins to the flatlands of the Treasure Coast. What's left are the stories; the falcon-fast machine, the friends who dared me faster, and the particular, specific joy of coming down out of a blind curve into a valley full of old fences and green fields, going just fast enough to feel like flying.