

some- thing

It's never too late to make a change. Here we speak to four people who've embraced life-altering decisions in their fifth decade

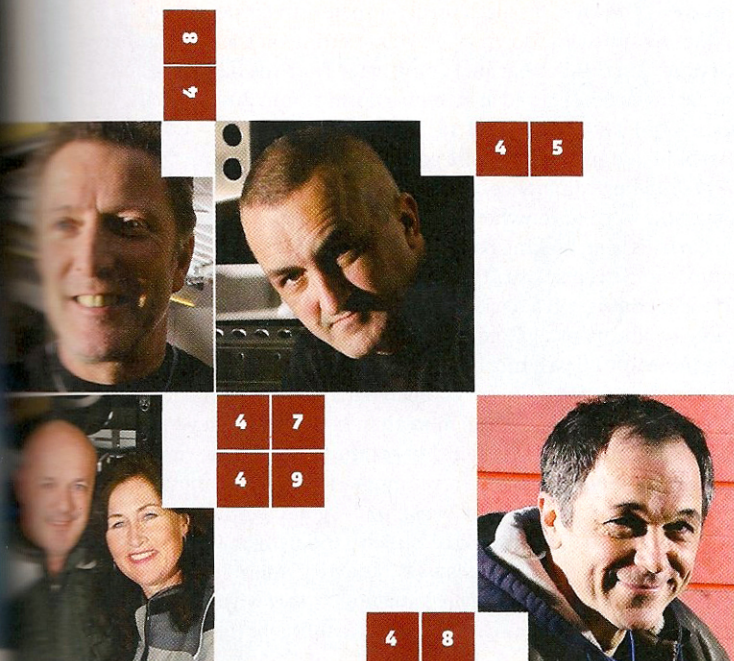
By the time you start your second decade of riding, you're a seasoned professional. By the time you're into your third or fourth, you're a grizzled veteran. Decisions come unconsciously, hazards spotted without effort, lines flung around apexes as easily as breathing.

And with experience comes possibility. Because the older you get, the more bikes can expand in directions you never had the time or means to consider before: that snap decision to try enduros, that riding holiday in India, building a properly equipped workshop.

But even with all that, we can get in a rut. Job, family, stiffening joints and the blank incomprehension of non-biking friends soak up riding time and sap the spirit. God forbid you should wake up one morning and find your claim to being a motorcyclist has shrunk to a one-dimensional Sunday pootle round the same old route.

Because this is the best time of your biking career – a time when you can do anything you set your mind to. You are young enough to find the will to step out of your comfort zone, but old enough to have the wisdom to do it well. All it takes is a decision.

Coulda, woulda, shoulda. There's always a reason why a life-changing choice can be put off. These five riders say otherwise.



'I bought a Blade'

Reformed bad boy and serial crasher Steve Gregory has rolled the clock back by buying a slice of personal history – a 1995 Fireblade

The Fireblade is a throwback for me. I've had this Blade a month. Unbelievably it came up for £500 on a forum I'm a member of. It has Billet-6 brakes, a new shock and a 17in front wheel conversion. It's worth at least two or three times that, but the guy selling it wasn't daft, he was running out of room and after so many years he wanted an enthusiast to buy it. We all get emotionally attached to our motorbikes don't we? They're like little pets.

I bought the 1995 and 1998 models new. I used to race RD350s, when they were the bike we all had on our bedroom wall. Then the Fireblade turned up. It had the same aura as the LC: single-minded, race-developed. It was an extraordinary design at the time – 180kg with phenomenal performance and fantastic looks.

I had to have one, but I couldn't afford £9500. After a lot of hassle I got one from Germany in Urban Tiger colours for six grand. I popped up to Alton Towers midweek and was flying back down the M1, flat out behind the bubble and there was a cop car ahead. So I rolled off and wafted past at 70 or 80 – and of course the lights went on and they pulled me over. Having just gone onto reserve I wasn't going to get very far anyway. They'd got me at 150 or something.

It was in all the papers and on TV. I got a huge fine, a year's ban and a retest. I'd already sold the bike but I don't think it helped.

A couple of years later I got a black and silver 1998 Blade, which I managed to crash with just 0.6 miles on the clock. It started to rain

as I pulled out of the shop, following a mate who'd taken me there. He suddenly stopped in a cobbled street. As soon as I touched the brakes it went down. I picked up the bike and redlined it from that point onwards. I'm not a big believer in running-in as such.

The bike still gave me years of reliable service, as a commuter and as a track toy. It's a great commuter: narrow and well-balanced, the mirrors fit above car mirrors and below van ones.

It survived a few daft crashes. One time I was in a bit of a rush and pulled out of a side road with a little bit too much throttle and it threw me off in a spectacular low-speed highside.

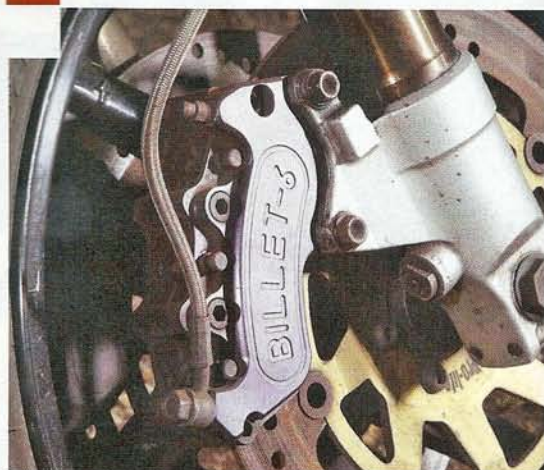
By this time the poor old Blade was starting to feel a little tired. And, eventually, its luck ran out on a spring day a couple of miles from home during an argument with a U-turning car.

When I first rode the Fireblade, I realised that it was going to be enough for me. I'm confident in my ability and once you get to a certain level it's not about the bike. Riding my 1995 Blade down the Route Napoleon in the south of France, I thought, 'Yeah, the scenery is passing just about as fast as I can cope with.' I don't think I'd be any quicker on a faster bike. And I like the idea that I can ride with people who've just spent a fortune on a 1098, GSX-R or ZX-10R – and unless they happen to be BSB contenders, they simply can't explore the advantages of these newer machines in the real world.

Riding bikes flat out goes beyond conscious control. You're relying on skills and experience generated over years to deal with whatever comes up. When everything kind of flows, when you get on to the straight and hear that extraordinary noise, when you're in a bubble – you're in a little universe where everything depends on you. I spend most of my life creating stuff that allows me to get into that zone.

I've not had time to do much with this new addition to the family yet but I can't wait to try the Blade out in anger. I hope this time it won't get crashed more often than is strictly necessary.

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STEVE GREGORY, 48

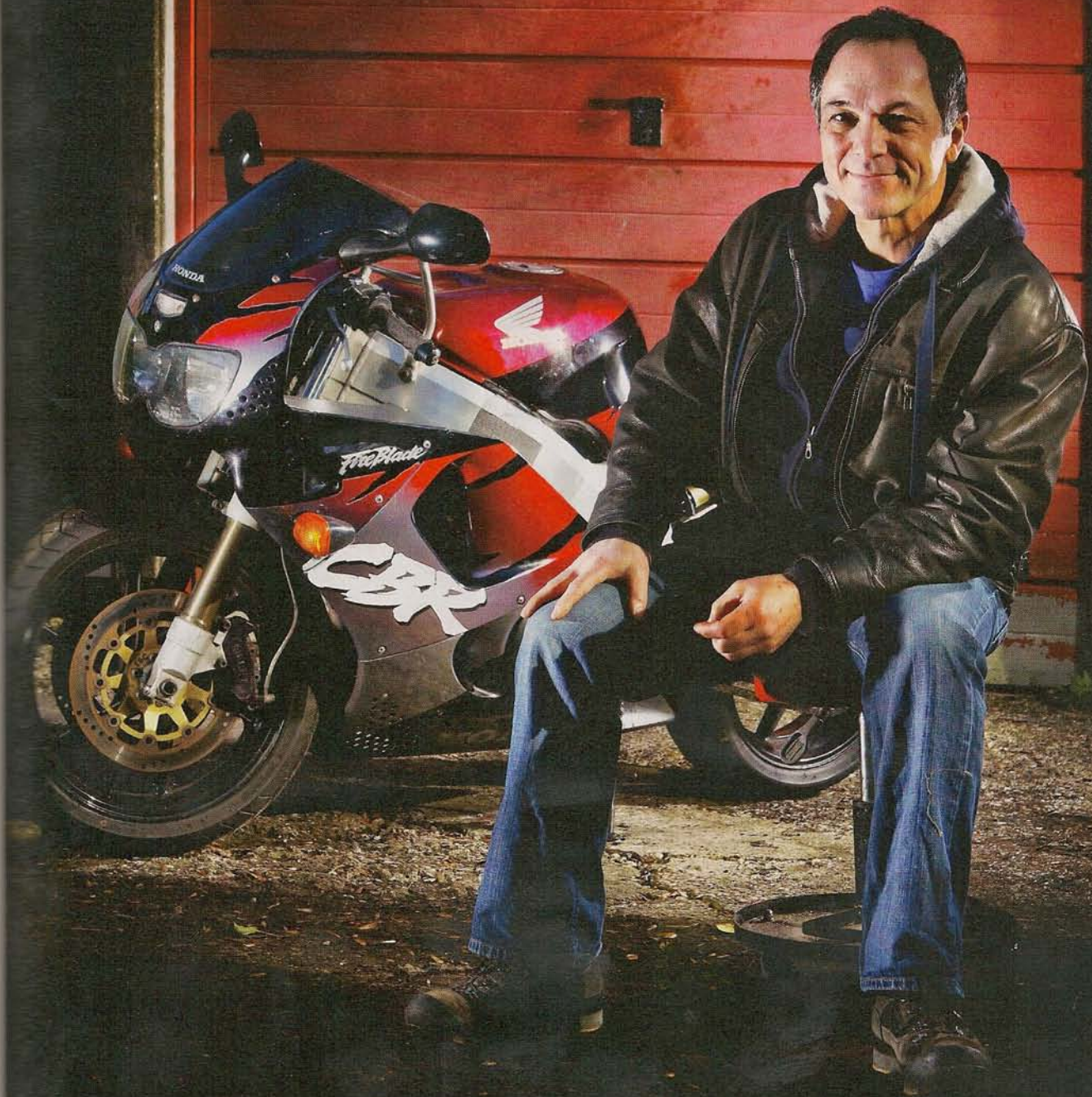
BIKE 1995 Honda Fireblade

JOB NOW Self-employed entrepreneur and tech guru

OTHER BIKES RG500 in MV Agusta frame, two CR500s, RD350YPVS/Mito/RGV special, Aprilia RS250, 2003 Fazer 1000 with a blown gearbox

PHILOSOPHY 'I could be a very safe rider – but I don't see why the front wheel has to stay on the ground'

MAIN Steve's revisiting his 1990s Blade owning days, but this time - he hopes - without the crashes **01** Harrison front caliper conversion is a sign of the previous owner's love for the bike **02** Stock shock is going to be past its best **03** With under 9000 miles the engine should be fresh as a daisy



People who've spent a fortune on a 1098, GSX-R or ZX-10R can't explore the limits of these newer machines in the real world