The ingenuity of scrambles and Grand Prix motocross-riding brothers Don and Derek Rickman begat the Rickman Métisse scrambler, which was a true privateer weapon in both motocross and in US desert racing circles throughout the 1960s.

The Rickman boys, Don and Derek, were born into motorcycles. Their dad was a competitive speedway racer, and his zeal quickly infected both lads. With Dad’s help, the boys began entering club races and other small events. In the 40s, the brothers began to be noticed in trials and scrambles.

In the ’50s their fame grew, and they were selected to represent Great Britain in a series of high-profile events, including the Motocross des Nations, an international competition that remains the single most important motocross race in the world to this day. The competition was fierce, and the Rickman boys wanted to win it.

Race team successes are aided by progress in two areas of design: make things lighter and make things stronger. If the brothers expected to keep a competitive edge in international events where national and factory teams were using custom frames, they could not afford the handicap of using heavy stock chassis.

Initially, they began improving existing BSA frames/engines. However, they had their own ideas and eventually would build their own frames designed for Triumph or Matchless power. Their intuitive frame geometry produced a platform that was both torsionally stiff and light in weight; twin traits that greatly improved handling of the heavy vertical-twin motors. Decades before CAD-CAM, endless meetings, and terabits of software, their ideas were developed by racing success and seat-of-the-pants engineering. And their racing was good.

The brothers are best known for mating two previously separate worlds and proved that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. Those early bikes, melded of Rickman bits and British power, quickly acquired their famous nickname “Métisse,” French slang for “mongrel.”

The brothers sold kits in various stages of completeness, providing enthusiasts both a good foundation and a free hand in designing their own machines. In the 1960s, whether in road racing or scrambles, Rickman equipment was recognized as some of the best a privateer could buy.

Over time, the MKIII frames have proven to be the most popular. Their nickel-plated, high-tensile, chrome-moly tube, Aircraft 4130 chassis featured joints that were profiled and bronze welded, with triangulated subframes and well-braced headstocks that improved handling with the heavy British motors.

In collaboration with Lockheed, Rickman Métisse provided some of the first available disc brake applications for motorcycles.

Tom Martin’s first job at 15 was at a motorcycle shop. His dad, already an enthusiast, soon had the youngster riding a 500 AJS in the desert. Young Martin had
an epiphany when he saw the successes that Jeff Smith and his personal hero, Chuck “Feets” Minert, were having with the new BSA Victor 441. In 1966, he bought a 441 from Long Beach Honda while he was still working at a BSA dealer. He rode the Beezer religiously. In 1967, one of his co-workers at Modern Cycles had a rebuilt Triumph 650 engine for sale. Martin bought it for $300.

“I didn’t have a Triumph or a frame at the time,” Martin says. The engine sat in my bedroom on the floor. At Christmas, Dad and Mom surprised me with a Rickman kit.”

The kit came with all the fiberglass, engine mount plates, pipes, etc.

“Everything except engine, shocks, forks, and wheels,” he says.

Martin cannibalized his Victor for any useable parts, including its Ceriani forks, building the Rickman up with what parts he had available.

“Ceriani forks from the Victor, a heavy Triumph front wheel...” Martin says. “Later I put a lighter BSA wheel. I was 17 when I first fired it up,” says Tom.

Martins campaigned the bike for years in the desert until 1973 when Husqvarnas and Maicos started appearing and winning. Courses gradually began changing from full-bore, open desert thrashing to more technical courses where the smaller, lighter bikes had an advantage. The racing success of these lighter two-strokes ultimately banished the heavy four-stroke Rickman into a shed behind his mother’s house in Fountain Valley, California. There it sat for years while Martin switched to Huskys and then spent more than 20 years as half of the Martin Brothers team in a Class 1 off-road racecar, running in such legendary events as the Baja 1000, the Baja 500, the Mint 400, and others.

But Martin never forgot about the old Rickman, and even if he had, his dad was always nudging him about it. So, about 10 years ago, he had it repainted. Then he began to restore the bike in earnest a few years later, searching for all the correct racing bits. He sourced the rare magnesium Rickman wheels from “Feets” Minert, and he found a set of complete Rickman forks to replace the old Cerianis from another racer friend. Swap meet scavenging, phone calls, internet prowling, and cash can find almost anything with enough diligence.

Back in the day, the Rickmans engineered some unique and subtle upgrades in their constant quest for improvement. For instance, they designed an immense fiberglass air box that allowed improved filtering via a larger surface area medium. In order to diminish even the tiniest bit of unsprung weight, they moved the rear chain adjusters from the axle end of the swingarm to the pivot end. The chain’s length can be adjusted with eccentric cam plates. The Métisse’s backbone frame tube carries oil, eliminating the need for a separate tank. An ARD magneto supplies the juice as well as obviating the need for any heavy rotor/stator in the primary chain case of Martin’s Métisse. A Barnes primary cover and clutch plates finish off the drive side of the motor.

Martin has also done a bit of extra work done to his Triumph engine 650, including racing cams, subtle porting, and high-compression pistons.

“It’s just what racers did back then to make a fast desert bike,” he says.

Want a Rickman Métisse of your own today? You can get one, but bring money. Back in 1968, Martin’s Rickman kit, complete except for forks, wheels, and motor, could be had from Steens in Alhambra, California, for $597. A complete rolling chassis (no motor) was $1096. Today, figure around $20,000-$25,000 for a complete new Rickman Métisse MKIII.

And you can buy fresh examples. Rickmans, still popular with vintage racers, are available through two authentic entities. The Rickman name is owned by Adrian Moss at Rickman Motorcycles Ltd., while the Métisse name is owned by Pat French at Métisse Motorcycles Ltd. French also owns the US and Australian rights to the name “Rickman Métisse.” (See rickman-motorcycles.com or métisse-motorcycles.com) Both sell parts and complete machines. Check out the “Steve McQueen Desert Racer” from Métisse, it’s an accurate recreation of the original bike built by McQueen and the legendary Bud Ekins.

Thanks to the enthusiasm of original owners like Tom Martin and a new generation of classic bike fans, the Rickman Métisse legacy lives today.