

The TomBo Touch

Tommy Bolton was the first African American to reach 200 miles per hour on the drag strip. Now he works to inspire others at his Oklahoma City custom motorcycle shop. By Bill Dragoo

FOUR GANG MEMBERS stepped into my yard, calling me out,” recalls **Tommy Bolton**. “I was fifteen. Mama walked onto the porch with a twelve-gauge shotgun. I had to fight, but Mama was going to keep it fair.”

Bolton’s home in Los Angeles was on the dividing line between two rival gangs, the Crips and the Bloods. The Crips had come to Bolton’s house to recruit him. He had refused to join, but the gang wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“I didn’t want to fight, but they wouldn’t leave me alone unless I joined them,” Bolton says.

Bolton held his ground that day. Instead of joining the Crips, he focused on his passion. It was the mid-1970s in Southern California, the drag-racing mecca of the U.S. Shops owned by some of the top names in racing—Caroll Shelby of Shelby Cobra fame and Russ Collins’ RC Engineering—were near Bolton’s home. Bolton met one of his most influential mentors, “Honda Jim” McGlynn, at the local track. McGlynn raced B Gassers on the drag circuit all over the U.S. With the encouragement of these men and others, Bolton learned to build, tune, and race the fastest drag bikes on the planet.

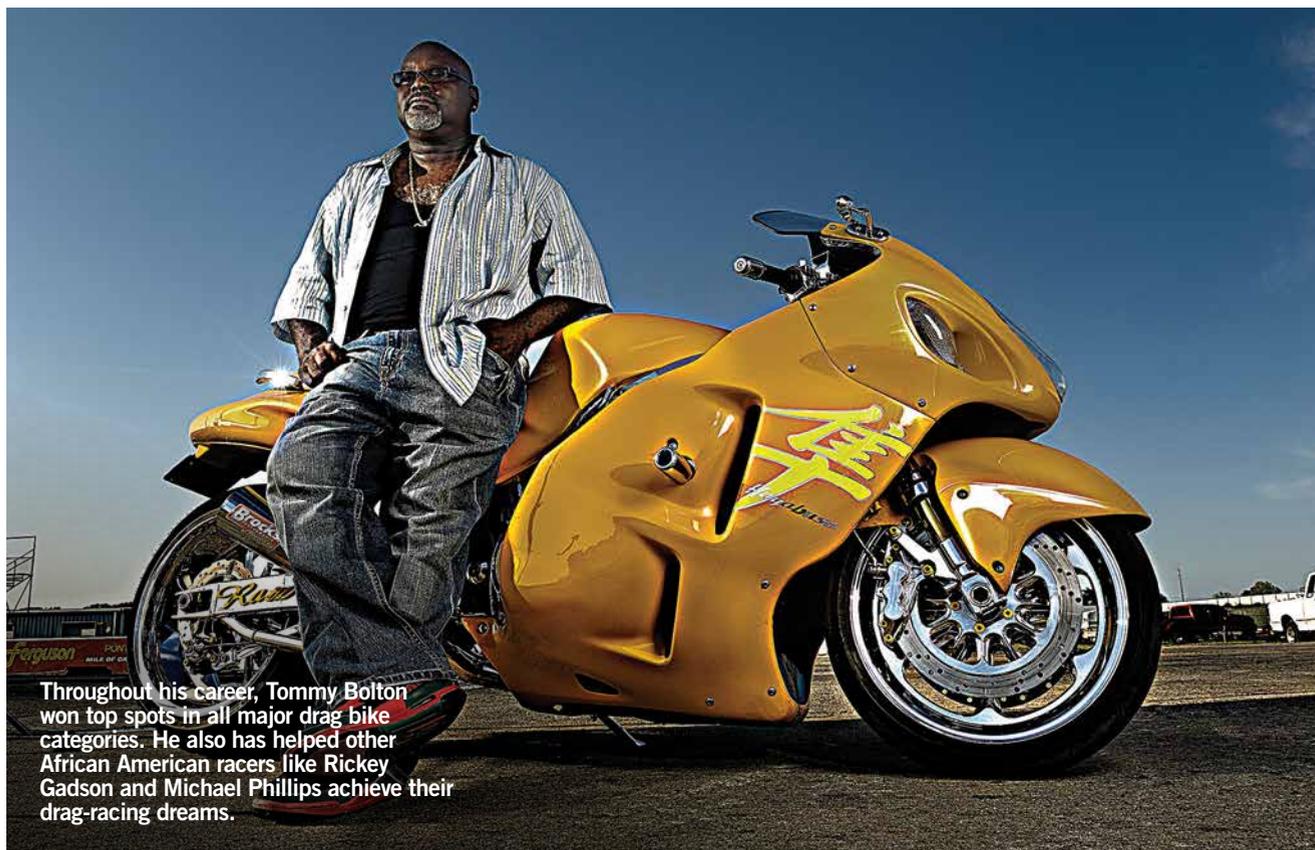
In 1990, at age 30, Bolton burned up the quarter-mile at the Texas

Motorplex, hitting 205 miles per hour in 7.18 seconds on a turbo-charged, alcohol-fueled Suzuki Funny Bike, becoming the first African American to break 200 miles per hour.

In 1994, Bolton moved to Oklahoma City, where he opened a shop, TomBo Racing. His creations are said to have the “TomBo Touch,” a blend of a long, sleek chassis, show-winning paint, and tire-scorching horsepower unique to Bolton’s machines. Today, he is scouting for sharp, young talent eager to learn some of his secrets to winning.

“Motorcycles saved my life,” he says. “Maybe they can help some of these youngsters, too.”

Get There: TomBo Racing, 1033 Southeast Grand Boulevard in Oklahoma City. (405) 606-8662 or tomboracing.com.



JAMES PRATT

Throughout his career, Tommy Bolton won top spots in all major drag bike categories. He also has helped other African American racers like Rickey Gadson and Michael Phillips achieve their drag-racing dreams.