

RIDERS ON THE STORM

American Motorcyclist Association President Rob Dingman's tenure has been marked by controversy almost every step of the way. He says it's all for the greater good, and his members agree.

By Kim Fernandez

The headlines started racing across industry publications and websites not

long after Rob Dingman took the helm of the American Motorcyclist Association (AMA) in late 2006.

“AMA Dismisses Three Veterans”

“AMA Racing Sold”

“AMA Staff Firings: Good or Bad?”

“Employees Revolt”

Not surprisingly, some of the association’s members got nervous. Very nervous. And they spoke out—on internet message boards, through letters to the editor, and by writing to AMA board members directly. What was going on?

“There was a period of time when we were receiving lots of letters from members,” says AMA board chair Stan Simpson. “They wanted to know what we were doing to their association, and they questioned everything.”

It wasn’t exactly surprising. Founded in 1924, AMA had a long and proud history of representing motorcycle riders from all walks of life and all areas of the country. It also had several high-profile staff members who had been around for a long time, and members who very much enjoyed their affiliation with pro racing through AMA Pro Racing, which oversees more than 80 professional racing events and 4,000 amateur events every year.

Dingman, who was named president of the association in November 2006, was seemingly changing all of that. Several long-term staff directors were fired within 18 months of his appointment, board members quit, AMA Pro Racing was sold to the Daytona Motorsports Group, and rumors of an internal culture of fear and chaos ran rampant, with lots of online attention directed solidly at Dingman.

He, however, remained undeterred. And, just as importantly, a restructured AMA board stood steadfast behind him.

“We hired Rob to take the AMA to the next level,” says Simpson. “What occurred as we started making plans to go to that next level and improve the association for our members was that we found many things we were not aware of before. So he spent the first 18 months finding and correcting mistakes from the past, and he

has done a yeoman’s job of that.”

For his part, Dingman says that while he knew from the outset that AMA would need to make big changes to move forward and expand its membership base, he had no idea—and nor did anyone else—that he would lead the organization through almost a complete overhaul, from staffing to finance to infrastructure and systems. And, he says, it’s not surprising that those changes felt earth-shattering to some longtime members, many of whom looked at the association as more of a club than as an advocacy organization.

Now, more than two years into his tenure, Dingman says most of the fires he found upon arriving at AMA’s Ohio headquarters in 2006 are out. There will likely be more changes, he says, but they won’t be as earthquake-inducing as those that are already behind him. And from here on out, AMA is looking forward to a future as a strong association, with all the advocacy and benefits and priorities that entails.

The Beginning

Rob Dingman’s resume fell into an enormous pile when it arrived at AMA headquarters in 2006—Simpson can attest to that. “We had more than 500 applicants when we sorted it all out,” he remembers.

“So many people look at the AMA and say it’s a club, and you get to ride your motorcycle all the time,” he says. “It’s fun to think of it that way, but it’s far from what we are.”

The board got to work, and narrowed the 500 applicants down to 25 people with the appropriate experience and education to lead the organization to the next level; even then, the board knew there were big changes that needed to be made for AMA to thrive.

From there, the pool of 25 was cut to three, and those three people were screened by association experts in Washington, DC.

“All of those people came back and said the best candidate we had was Rob Dingman,” says Simpson.

Dingman was no stranger to AMA:

He spent five years as the association’s Washington, DC, representative before becoming the Assistant Commissioner for Transportation Safety for New York State’s Department of Motor Vehicles. He also held a master’s degree in political management from the George Washington University and had been an AMA member for 13 years.

Still, he says, he had no idea what was about to hit him.

“The AMA had existed for 85 years,” he says, “and had never progressed from the world’s largest club based in central Ohio to a professional association.”

That, he says, was a clear result of missed opportunity. And he told board members that during the interview process. He argued that AMA had missed the boat on lobbying, membership benefits, and its overall priorities. He would change all of that.

The road, however, would be substantially rockier than he anticipated. First, the then-chairman of the board resigned amid allegations that he submitted fraudulent travel reimbursement claims. (AMA and the individual later reached a settlement.) “That’s the kind of thing I didn’t expect when I came here,” says Dingman. “I didn’t expect to find that lack of fiscal controls. But we had no choice. We had to address it. A forensic auditor took a look at the entire organization and found a lot of deficiencies we had to correct.”

A total financial overhaul followed. And after that, something of a personnel overhaul began.

Unrest

“We did have people who were let go, and they were scattered throughout the organization,” says Dingman. “That was somewhat a function of being overstaffed in some instances, and in some cases, we didn’t necessarily have the right people in the right jobs. So what we’ve tried to do is bring a stronger knowledge base and a stronger skill set to bear with the personnel changes we’ve made.”

That included three high-profile firings, including two staffers who’d run AMA’s magazine for more than a decade.

Those changes induced howls of protest, both from members who were distressed to see familiar people shown the door and from AMA staffers who felt the firings were unfair, inappropriately executed, and harsh.

Those staff members, who declined to be interviewed for this article, took to the internet, posting their complaints on message boards and in online motorcycling publications. They said a “culture of fear” had been established. That morale was sinking to dangerous levels. That AMA was losing its very foundation.

Dingman said: Nonsense.

“Some of the people who were let go were longtime AMA employees,” he says. “They were dedicated to the AMA, but they weren’t in the right jobs anymore. We need to evolve, we need to bring to bear a skill set, and we need to enhance that skill set.” He says several others were loyal to a former association president and had been uncooperative from his first day on the job, waylaying his efforts to restructure and improve.

He knows the firings — especially those of AMA’s two magazine editors — were tough on everyone in the office. And they were tough on members, many of whom saw the headlines and worried that the association was disintegrating.

“It made me wonder what the heck had been going on behind the scenes and what other problems members hadn’t been made aware of,” says New York member Brian Salisbury.

He says he never worried that AMA was falling apart, but was a bit disconcerted by the news that came from the office in the year after Dingman was hired.

“I found it surprising when reports of the internal upheaval started to come out,” Salisbury says. “The association had been a rather innocuous entity to me, and probably to other members and nonmembers. Then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere for the members, it is hit by executive scandals and a boardroom cleanout.”

Dingman admits it was a rough patch.

“We tried to do things as methodically as we could,” he says. “We had 115 employees when I got here, and now

we’re down in the 80s. We’re operating more effectively and efficiently. We don’t have to have multiple people contributing to one job. We all hate to see people leave, but the change is good for the organization.”

“It did take a toll on morale,” he says. “When I got here, morale had been very low and the group had been in transition for the better part of the last 10 years. There had been a number of efforts to change the AMA.”

There was one more big change for members to absorb. In March 2008, Dingman entered into an agreement to sell the sanctioning, promotional, and management rights for AMA Pro Racing to Daytona Motorsports Group.

He says the group’s exit from pro racing was the best way to untangle its mission of representing motorcyclists from its interests in promoting suppliers and partners of racing. In other words, selling the pro-racing arm of AMA would allow it to focus on the needs and desires of regular people who ride bikes, and lessen its obligations to those who sell products and services to those people.

“We were a sanctioning body for professional motorsports, and that had become extremely controversial over the years,” he says. “People want to win and they do what it takes to win. And nobody ever likes the umpires. What happened was that we had this dual role as a membership organization and as a sanctioning body. When you get a black eye from one, it impacts the others.”

It was also a financial necessity, he says, coming full circle to his original goal to get back to basics and clean up the books.

“We not only lost money on racing, but we budgeted huge, six-figure losses,” he says. “My view was that we shouldn’t put our members’ money at risk, and we certainly shouldn’t be budgeting for losses with that money.” An RFP process was followed to find the best entity to take over the racing arm; after all, says Dingman, there’s no question that racing was a huge benefit to many AMA members. The association, he says, took great pains to leave it in the best hands it could.

Despite the care and the explanations, members yelled and several board members resigned, either because they thought exiting racing was a mistake or because they had a vested interest in the sport.

“Half the people were happy and half the people were not,” says Terry Frazier, who’s been an AMA member on and off for 25 years. “Motorcyclists are real racing fans, and I think a lot of us would like to see the association more involved.” That said, he adds that AMA “did a very poor job with professional racing.”

Frazier says the racing partnerships reflect what may be a fundamental flaw in the way AMA is structured, with both bike riders and suppliers among its priorities.

“The AMA has a structural flaw,” he says. “If you look at AARP, it represents people over 55. It does not represent the companies that sell to those people. It may negotiate with those companies to bring the benefits to its members, but its primary responsibility is to those members. AAA also represents its members. It has relationships with different companies, but those companies don’t make up its board of directors.”

“The AMA came from the Motorcycle Manufacturing Trade Association,” Frazier continues. “Its goals were to promote motorcycling and bring members in. And today, a problem exists. It tries to serve two masters. It has members on one hand and manufacturers on the other, and those two groups do not have the same needs. How [Dingman] is going to deal with that, I don’t know.”

For his part, Dingman says selling AMA Pro Racing was the first step to untangling that knot.

“Racing has always been a significant part of our heritage, and the professional side of racing is the most visible side,” he says. “It’s cool to be associated with that. It’s hard to let go. But if you look at it objectively, you see that this isn’t in the best interest of our organization.”

The Future

That steadfast resolve for the overall good of the association is what Simpson

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says makes him 100 percent positive that Dingman was the right person to choose to lead AMA.

“Rob Dingman is exactly the same person every day,” he says. “He has one mission and there are no hidden agendas. He truly works for the members and the association every day and he has not allowed external and internal issues to deter him from that path. He’s certainly had more on his plate than he thought he’d have when we hired him, but he has stayed the course.”

For his part, Dingman says that course has one ultimate goal: to represent and serve American motorcyclists. And he’s not finished polishing that up.

“We have to be more member focused and do what’s best for our members,” he says. “We kind of lost sight of that. And our members have been confused about what’s happening. When one of your biggest issues is addressing the infrastructure, it’s hard for people to see what’s happening until it’s fixed and people can see the benefits.”

In the immediate future, Dingman will be working to replace the AMA staff computer system by the end of the fiscal year. That, he says, will allow staff to streamline their efforts and focus on serving members, not fighting with machines.

Member benefits are also very high up on the priority list, with several new offerings poised for launch later this year. Dingman also plans to focus more on lobbying and monitoring regulations and laws that might affect bikers.

He hopes to establish better communication with members and with nonmembers. “One of the things the organization had not done enough of is reach out to our members and get input from them,” he says. “The other thing we’re doing is researching our nonmembers, to find out why they haven’t joined or why they joined and then left.”

That said, the major changes—the ones that shook AMA between 2006 and 2008—are behind him.

“I joke with our chairman that there’s a lot of things they didn’t tell me when I took this job,” he says. “That’s in large part because they didn’t know. My belief in coming into this job was that it was the land of missed opportunities. What I found was an organization that lacked the infrastructure to sustain a growing membership, let alone go out and grow the membership.”

The past two years have been stressful on everyone. Despite the fights and the turmoil and the challenges, Dingman still remembers why AMA attracted him in the first place. His garage houses three motorcycles for street and off-road riding (“my wife is always looking for more room in there,” he jokes), and in the house, he’s welcomed by his three children, ages 10, 8, and 4.

“I think you have to go into everything with an open mind,” he says. “You have to be willing to make change. Change is never easy, and there are always people who have a vested interest in the status quo. You have to remain mission focused, don’t take your eyes off the horizon, and don’t worry about your detractors.”

Members say those qualities are exactly why they’ve stuck with him and the association, despite the headlines and the controversy.

“Rob Dingman, to me, appears to be a sincere, capable, take-charge kind of guy,” says Salisbury. “The AMA needs such a person at the helm, along with tough lobbyists in Washington, to fight for motorcyclists’ rights.”

Frazier agrees, despite his trepidation that the structure of the association may be fundamentally flawed. “He’s got a tough situation,” he says of Dingman. “The organization really had some structural and image issues, problems with finances, problems with membership.

But in general, Rob Dingman has come in with a mandate to clean things up and turn them around.”

Dingman says the AMA of the future will be a much larger, much more effective association. And he plans to stick around to see it.

“Everybody thinks the president of the AMA must get to ride all the time,” he says with a laugh. “They had 500 applications for this job, and most of those people wanted to be president of the AMA so they could ride their motorcycles all the time. That’s the one thing I don’t get to do enough! But on the rare opportunities I do get to ride as part of the job and I get to interact with members on that level, that’s where you get a sense for how it’s all going. That camaraderie is what motorcycling is all about.”

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