

Harlan Flagg

The Hot-rodding Trailblazer

Los Angeles may be well known for its pervasive car culture, but Harlan Flagg (EE'04) has set his sights on turning the gas-guzzling city into an electric motorcycle mecca. With beautiful weather all year long and its permissive law-enforcement stance toward lane splitting, L.A. is the perfect place to test-drive this concept.

In 2009, Flagg founded Hollywood Electrics to make this dream a reality. The dealership is the world's leading electric motorcycle retailer and performance parts manufacturer. For the past six years, the store has carried the largest selection of electric vehicles in the world, and sales have grown every year since it first opened. "We have a worldwide customer base, not just buying our motorcycles, but also our performance products," Flagg says. "The industry has gone from selling a few hundred units to several thousand units in just a couple of years, and there's still a lot of opportunity for growth. It's an exciting time."

FOLLOWING HIS PASSION

Flagg's enthusiasm for electric motorcycles may have been destiny. His father, who was also an electrical engineer, always had motorcycles in the garage, so Flagg picked up the passion while growing up in L.A. Later, as a student at Penn, he worked at a motorcycle shop restoring old bikes in his free time. But after graduating in 2004, Flagg followed a traditional path, building prototype cameras while working at a company that designs imaging devices.

During that time, Flagg continued to tinker with vehicles in his spare time and even teamed up with his dad to convert a BMW car to electric power. That experience, among others, sparked his interest in electric vehicles and convinced him to quit his job in 2008 to follow his true passion. Flagg hopped on a cruise ship with his then-girlfriend (now wife) and worked on his business plan while the couple sailed around the world. "I saw a golden opportunity, because no one else was doing it. When we opened our shop six years ago, we were getting in pretty early, at the beginning of the electric motorcycle industry," Flagg remembers. "I wanted to position myself as a leader in the industry, and now we are the top electric motorcycle retailer in the world."









IN THE SADDLE

The first time Flagg rode a motorcycle, he never wanted to be trapped in a car again. He had the same feeling of freedom when he first rode an electric motorcycle, but this time the experience had an extra dimension. “There’s something about silently whizzing along on an electric bike that makes you feel like a superhero, like Batman,” Flagg remarks. “It’s like you’re slung out of a slingshot with the instant torque of an electric motor, with full acceleration right off the bat, zero to 60 in three seconds. It’s an incredible feeling.”

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Those in law enforcement also see the appeal. More than 50 police departments now use electric motorcycles, which afford officers the opportunity to quietly move in on suspects. These vehicles also have the advantages of low emissions and low cost of operation, requiring no gas and little maintenance. Plus they can be powered by diverse, domestic renewable energy sources, reducing dependence on foreign oil while supporting our national economy. “It’s the perfect solution for a

lot of people, whether you’re concerned about the environment, commuting costs, or sending money overseas to buy foreign oil,” Flagg says. “We’re running out of reasons to not go electric.”

Electric motorcycles have even caught up with gas-powered bikes in terms of speed and power. Two years ago, an electric motorcycle set the fastest overall time in the motorcycle division at the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb. The Hollywood Electrics team also made waves at the event. To prepare for the race, they enhanced the performance of a standard Zero electric motorcycle by reducing heat to the air-cooled motor and maximizing battery discharge. The trick worked: the team won first place in the production electric motorcycle class in 2013 and has successfully defended its title ever since.

But at least a few remaining obstacles keep these impressive vehicles from being widely adopted. For one, there is a need for additional fast-charging stations to make long-distance riding more practical, Flagg says. And there’s the challenge of convincing people to make the switch. “It’s a new industry and a niche market, so a lot of people have not been exposed to electric motorcycles or are not interested in trying them,” Flagg says. “Getting more people in the saddle is one of the most satisfying parts of my job.” 🍹

By Janelle Weaver