

KAWASAKI TRIALS

Now that the dust has settled, a serious look at the KT250 and its rating against the opposition.

If there were any doubts about the expected rise in popularity of trials riding throughout the world it is certainly not the Japanese manufacturers who have been doing the doubting.

Less than three years ago the world's trials requirements were being supplied by three major producers — all Spanish. Today each of the Japanese Big Four: Honda, Yamaha, Suzuki and now Kawasaki have entered the trials bike market. That they have done so is abundant evidence of their faith in the expansion of the sport.

Although nobody in his right mind questions Japanese astuteness when it comes to producing and supplying what is going to sell in large quantities, some have questioned the characteristics and suitability of trials bikes from Japan. However, it is our belief that the particular type of trials machine that the Japanese produce is very much a direct result of similar comprehensive and thorough consumer research, rather than simply a less than perfect attempt to emulate the characteristics of the established

Spanish makes.

Research would certainly have shown that most trials bikes are bought by recreational or fun riders, and that comparatively few are sold to strictly competition riders. However, to attract these recreational bike buyers their machinery must be seen to have been successful, or at the very least competitive in trials events.

Plainly, handling and engine characteristics must not only appeal to the would-be-if-he-could-be weekend fun-trials riders, but must also satisfy the true-blue specialist competition rider also.

On both scores Yamaha and Suzuki have achieved great success whilst Honda's success has been enormous in recreational type sales rather than a competition. Being late onto the scene, Kawasaki's chances of market penetration against the already entrenched three Spanish and three Japanese producers must rest entirely on its own merits. Buyers already have an almost bewildering array to choose from, and if any bike does not measure up to very high standards it stands no

chance of survival.

With Kawasaki's very long gestation period (by Japanese standards at least) of some two years, it can be assumed that the resultant product will have had the bugs sorted out and should give nothing away to the already established contenders. Price and specifications do not differ markedly from most other 250 trialsters save that the wheelbase at 1305mm is 10mm longer than the Yamaha TY250 and 25mm shorter than most of the others. Engine is an oversquare piston port two stroke with Superlube oil injection (no premixing of petrol and oil) developing 16 bhp at 6,500 rpm and 1.9 kgm at 4,000 rpm. Sparks are provided by pointless electronic C.D.I. Transmission is five speed with gear primary drive and a rear chain tensioner reminiscent of early Bultacos but trailing the right way is fitted. The engine can be kick started in gear. Frame is twin down tube with a rudimentary bash plate welded directly to the frame tubes below the engine.

To look at, the KT250 is an exception-
trail & track



ally attractive machine, both to the traditionalist and to those who appreciate modern bright styling. Steel tank and plastic side panels are the vivid, almost fluorescent Kawasaki green with white flashes; yet managing to look tastefully restrained.

Frame is classical black, and cycle parts are of chrome plated steel or very highly polished aluminium. Although styling is by no means as cleanly functional as the Montesa range, the whole bike has a look of graceful purposefulness which everybody we spoke with found attractive.

Front and rear mudguards are deserving of special mention. Made from off-white light plastic with a grained surface, their finish and degree of flexibility is perfectly suited for the knocking around they will receive in service. Aluminium or stainless steel guards such as are still being fitted to Ossa and Montesa admittedly look marvellous when new, but in the hands of most riders quickly become tatty in normal service.

Upon starting up the KT250 one is immediately aware of its great compression, it reminds one of the TL250 tested several months back. Turns of the engine per stroke of the kickstarter do not seem higher than other bikes — it's just that the Kawasaki has huge compression.

The engine takes longer than other 250's to warm up. Riding position is excellent — pretty well the same as any other properly set up bike. In fact it was not until after checking dimensions after test riding that we found out that the KT250 is closer to being a short wheelbased machine than are most trials bikes. For example, aboard the TY250 one is always aware of its shortness; on downhill runs it is particularly noticeable that there is less bike in front!

The Kawasaki must be regarded in terms of wheelbase as being short, but at no time is the rider conscious of it certainly he never feels uncomfortable about it as some TY and early Ossa owners have admitted about their own bikes.

All controls operated very lightly but not always as progressively as could be hoped for. Effort required to operate the clutch and front brake was minimal. Clutch take-up tended to be a little sudden but was soon gotten used to. Front brake was powerful, but a little more progressive "feel" would be appreciated. One can rightly be critical of spongy feeling brakes, but many of us have found that a degree of sponginess means progressive and therefore more predictable and controllable braking in dicey situations.

Lest it be thought that the front brake is in any way inferior, then that impression should be correctly understood. The KT250's brake is very very good — far better than the vast majority — it is simply that it could be improved so that it would operate more progressively.

With the rear brake it is another story. The pedal itself is neatly tucked

out of harm's way but can still be operated easily, and can also be readily adjusted for height. Action is light, but unfortunately tends to be also sudden at low speeds resulting in unexpected engine stalling. More of this anon.

While warming up the KT250 the absence of projecting parts to contact the rider's legs was immediately noticeable. On some trials bikes when moving the body fore and aft while shifting body weight, legs rub against such parts as kickstarter, exhaust pipe and in at least one case frame tubes. On the Kawasaki the designers have done a first class job — leg movement is complete unobstructed from behind the rear suspension units right up to the front of the tank.

So slender and free of protuberances is the bike along its flanks that it must rate as being as effectively narrow as Bultaco's Sherpa T's. This means that the jockey can shift his weight back and forth easily and smoothly, and at the same time he can use maximum body "english" (that is sideways body lean). On this point top marks must be awarded.

The commonest criticism levelled against Japanese trialsters concerns engine characteristics, and in particular it has been said that their flywheels have been too light. However, we believe that it should be borne in mind that the critics are most frequently old hands with decades of experience; such experience must necessarily have been largely with traditional machinery such as Sprite, Greeves, early Bultaco, Montesa, and perhaps home made bog wheels, where plonking with very heavy flywheels was what used to win trials.

Some of these old hands have been unable or unwilling to see that trials events have changed as the available machinery has improved, and that plonking alone is a far less vital requirement that it once was. It is not so many years ago that Montesas were universally regarded as the ultimate

plonkers. Plonk they did, but respond quickly they did not. Sammy Miller summed up the situation succinctly by referring to the old Monties as "gaspers".

The current 250 Cota is one of the most powerful and quickest responding trialsters available, but it would be fabulous to claim that it plonks as well as the old gaspers. The Cota has changed, and has changed for the better and will continue to change; it's not impossible that it could evolve to such an extent that engine behaviour would be similar to some of the current Japanese products!

To watch trials today is to see that the more expert riders do not often use the technique of steady plonking to get through sections. Instead the method is to use all possible momentum to blast over and around hazards. Riders anticipate where they need to obtain traction to get over the tricky parts smartly.

In other words, instant acceleration from zero speeds together with appropriate transfer of body weight does the job more successfully than the older steady plonking approach. This is not to say that machinery with plonking ability is no longer required. It most certainly is, but current techniques exploit the capacity of modern trials bikes to respond quickly more than simply to pull well.

We know that we are going to be assailed with references to Yamaha's example of increasing flywheel weight on their later model. Our response is that many riders achieved success with their TY250 A's in standard trim, and many of these had cut their teeth on Montesas and Bultacos. Others have preferred the characteristics of their A models to the new B series. It could also be true that Yamaha over-reacted to the shrill voices of the traditionalists!

What is being said is that the new Japanese bikes deserve to be open-mindedly regarded as a legitimate approach to the changing trials situation. After all, at least one Spanish

manufacturer has been known to trim weight from their flywheels recently.

The KT250's response to the throttle is impressive. Depending on the amount of throttle opening used, acceleration is lightning quick and pulling power is prodigious! At no stage could more power have been wished for. In fact, power and response were so great that we had to consciously shift body weight faster than we had normally found it necessary to do. Without transferring weight fore and aft quickly to keep the front down it would be too easy to lose control and to get off line. Power and response would have to be rated second to no other 250, although some would probably find it too quick to handle easily.

At very low engine speeds power strokes can readily be felt; as engine speed rises it becomes very smooth but retains feel and revs out cleanly, feeling like it would relish climbing cliffs.

The Kawasaki has the typical feel of a light flywheeled trialster — with the throttle shut off the bike will keep rolling using its flywheel momentum, but run-on does not inspire quite the same sort of confidence as do the more heavily flywheeled Ossa or TY250 B Yamaha. Similarly response to gentle throttle usage tends to be a little sudden, and takes time to get used to.

It is in these situations of ultra slow engine speeds that the rear brake comes in for adverse criticism. Its action is light and lacks progressive feel, making it too easy to stall by locking the wheel. We were never really happy using the rear brake in slow tight situations. We got around the problem by slackening off the adjustment until the brake barely worked in the fully depressed position! This is a pretty common practice but should not be necessary on a properly sorted out machine — in most other aspects the KT250 is an exceptionally well sorted out bike.

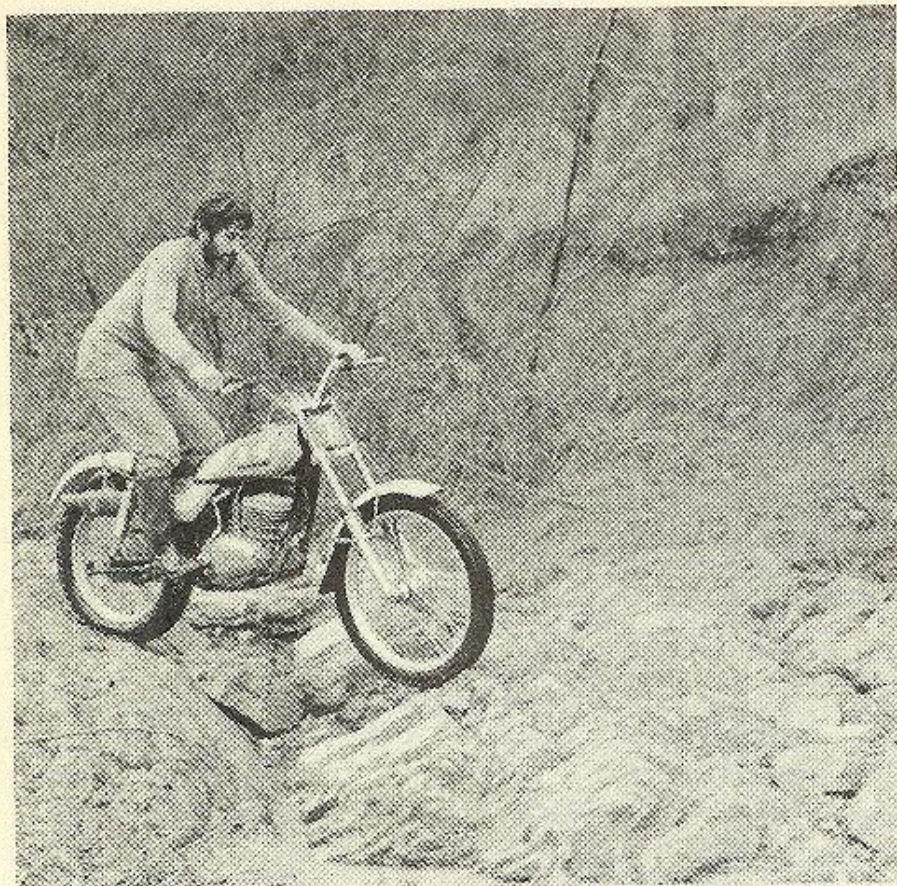
Scaling 215 lbs wet without lights the weight is about average for the type, but the bike handles at least as lightly and easily as the chrome-moly framed light weights.

Other points deserving attention here are the suspension, the petrol and oil tanks.

Suspension worked beautifully — damping was ideal, but too much travel was taken up before any load was put on the bike. Rear units could be adjusted over five steps to compensate for this, but as the front forks settled down at least two inches unladen and much more with the rider aboard, we think longer fork springs should be fitted at the front. This would provide more movement and greater ground clearance in rough going.

The Kawasaki's petrol tank is bigger than most, holding 5.5 litres (1½ gallons) and is made from steel rather than fibreglass or aluminium. Although heavier, the steel tank is a sensible fitting to a trials bike — for too long we have followed fashion at the





expense of serviceability!

Although removing the seat to top up the oil tank sounds laborious and time wasting compared with others, in practice, all that was needed was to slacken two pinch bolts before lifting off the seat to expose the oil tank. It took no longer to do this than it takes to do on a Yamaha. Oil consumption proved to be almost negligible.

By trials standards the KT250's seat was acceptable, but by any other standards of course it would be pretty grim. Quality of the toolkit supplied is well above average and the owners hand book is nothing less than a fully comprehensive workshop manual. Excellent instructions and pictures enable the home mechanic to carry out every conceivable maintenance and repair. Service life limits are given for every wearing part and each necessary special tool is clearly pictured so that the enterprising owner could fabricate his own.

The best machine was the one ridden this year by many times Victorian and Australian champion, Ian Gaff. Only non standard items were the twist grip and a gearbox sprocket one tooth down from original.

The standard twist grip is fitted with a very strong cable adjuster screwed directly into the alloy housing. When the bike was dropped the force of impact was taken on the cable adjuster which did not break or bend, but the twist grips was shattered rendering the whole bike unusable. Lesson — fit a more serviceable twist grip, preferably along the line of the Amal nylon model.

To sum up, Kawasaki's KT250 is not the perfect trials bike — that impossible ideal will probably never be built, but it is a damn fine trials bike which will appeal to all types of rider whose thing is slow going, whether recreational or competition.

We consider that improvements could be made in two main areas — more progressive, sensitive rear braking and a bash plate giving adequate protection to engine side covers.

Particular strengths are in light handling, good suspension and front brake, superb uncluttered slimness and power and response second to none. By no means least of its virtues is its good looks — black, glistening chrome and aluminium with clean green and white will provide pride of possession like no other.

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