

YOU CAN'T WIN 'EM ALL

"May I help you with something?"

"Yeah, I'm looking for a big, powerful dirt bike. How much is the one over there with the tough metalflake paint job?"

"That is a beauty, isn't it? It's Kawasaki's biggest, fastest, most powerful production motocrosser. It was even bigger last year, closer to 450cc, but they musta figured that

the average guy just couldn't handle all that power. But dropping 50cc hasn't slowed this baby down any — just made it easier to control. You know who Brad Lackey is? He rode a bike like this and won the 500 National Championship. It's yours for about \$1400."

"Great. All the latest suspension on it, gas/oil Kayabas moved up and

angled forward. Long forks. Can I get green metalflake fenders too?"

"Nope. You'll have to do that yourself. Those are tough plastic."

"Plastic? Boy, I'll bet it's light."

"Hi, remember me? I was in last week and bought a Brad Lackey Replica KX400. Well, I did everything you said and made sure

It would have been dynamite in '72

KAWASAKI KX400

BY THE Staff of GREEN BIKE



everything was tight — nuts, bolts, spokes 'n' all. I took it out to the racetrack to get some practice — boy, is it fast! — anyway, I had done about ten easy laps when, going through some esses, the bike just fell out from under me. I looked at the track and there weren't any holes or rocks or anything. Then I looked at my new bike and I couldn't believe it, all but one of the long spokes on the front wheel were busted. My buddy and I carried it back to the pits and found out that the spokes had unhooked themselves from the hub. I can't figure out how they go back in. Is there some kinda guarantee . . . ?"

So it goes.

It did it to us; it could do it to you.

But that's just petty sniveling; what really bummed us out was the suspension. It looks good but it isn't what we've come to expect these days. The forks are built by Kayaba to Kawasaki's specifications and this means 188mm of travel. The 7.4 inches is in the "all right" category, but the action isn't. That became apparent when riding through large sections of whoopdies. Rebound was too rapid and stability disappeared. A change to 20-weight (from what looked like five-weight) made a 100-percent improvement out in the sand, but on the track the solution wasn't so easy. There, at first, a definite jolt went up through the bars to your shoulders. The oil change helped and most of the arm

shock went away, but the ride isn't what you'd call plush.

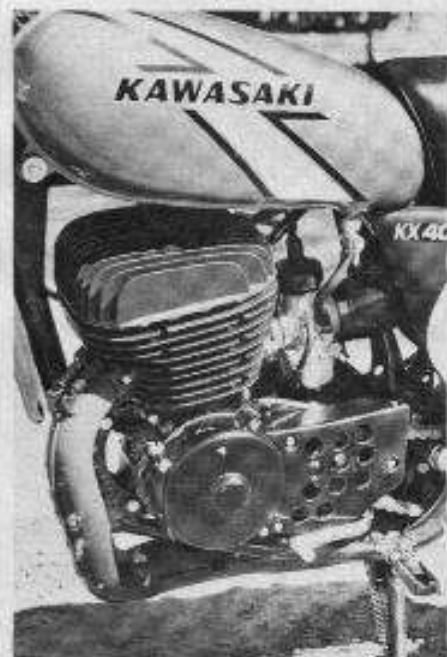
Out back are Kayaba nitrogen shocks, again built to Kawasaki's specs; actual axle travel is 180mm (7.1 inches), and according to the numbers, that's pretty good. But despite all that travel, it isn't top-notch.

There are five preload positions available, but even our heaviest riders went for minimum preload. All in all, we have to rate the suspension as harsh, and feel that it's as good as you're going to get it without major changes, since spring rates and positions seem right-on.

Those suspension inadequacies show up in two other places — in the handling and in the delivery of the



Lotsa grunt. But in the KX chassis, it'll throw you from side . . .



. . . to side.



The KX where it handles best; it's near neutral in the air.

power.

The steering is precise and quick when the power is on. When it's off, the front end will dig in unexpectedly, put you into a whip, and try to spit you off. It happened to us more times than we care to remember.

In addition to that outstanding handling characteristic, it feels as if the rear of the frame and/or swingarm flexes through high-speed sweepers. The KX sort of wiggles through the corners. Combine that with the harsh suspension and you've got a bike that's full of surprises when you need them least. You can multiply the twitch with large applications of the throttle. All in all, our test riders described the handling as scary, and when you

get it really going, it's unstable — either accelerating or braking. After it deals you a couple of bad hands, your confidence is destroyed.

There are saving graces, however, mostly the power. The KX is by no means a slow motorcycle. On smooth ground, with good traction, it'll stay side by side with an RM370 Suzook. But put it on a track with bumps, holes and jumps, and it's another story.

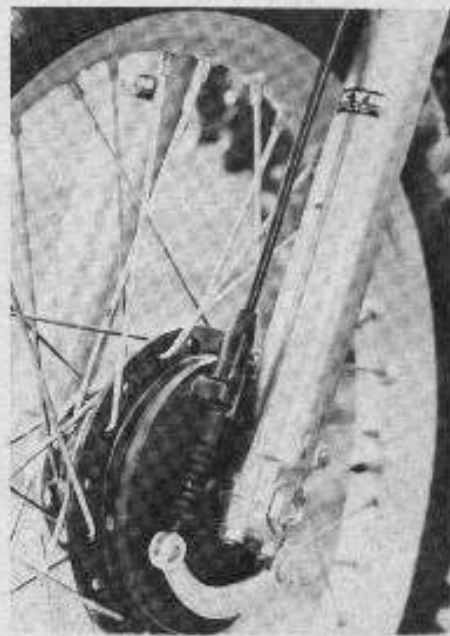
That power is genuinely usable, too. Bottom end and mid-range are like a CZ or Husky — except without the punch on top (the punch you're gonna need to get out of a corner and whip past the guy in front of you).

Our desert dog-piloting friend,

John McCown, reports that his KX makes dog food out of MX400 Yamahas up desert hills, and that with his and KJ's weight, the suspension is right-on. Recently he made a switch to Works Performance shocks, though. John also has been racing regularly for eight months without any mechanicals at all.

Back to the KX we had and the motocross track. We found it difficult to keep it straight off the line; something that'll tend to make people move away from you at the starting gate for the second moto as if you were the feature actor in a bad breath commercial. When you hit second gear the wheel is spinning so rapidly that it tries to pass up the front end. This is especially true if

Number plates are commentaries. Originally we thought the bike would be found under first-timers, pie plate experts. Then we decided #72 was more appropriate; that's the year this bike would have been dynamite.



Kickstarter bends out when starting, must be bent in again for riding.

the traction is anything less than perfect. Second gear starts are definitely the hot setup.

Our KX shifted short and felt good, but all those shifts had to be deliberate. You either had to shut off the throttle or use the clutch, sometimes both.

Brakes are all right, again if the traction is good-to-perfect. When it's not, you've got to be on your toes.

And accompanying you down the track is an annoying clanking from the chain hitting the guide. It's hard to convince yourself that there's not someone coming on you to pass.

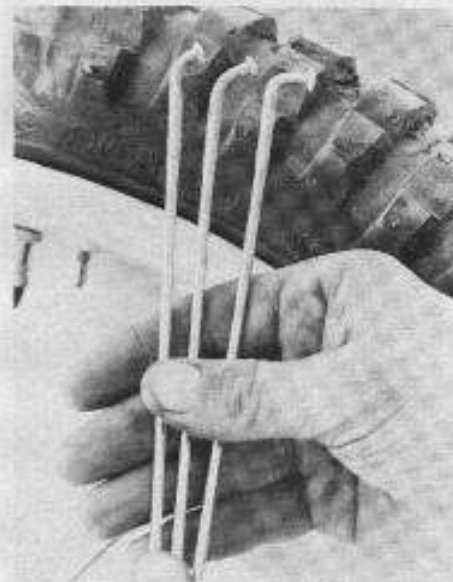
HERE AND THERE

The bar/peg/seat relationship is very good. Everyone felt comfortable standing and sitting.

Fuel tank is longish and not too wide; blends nicely into the seat.

Side number plates, air box and fenders are made of decent plastic and should hold up well to vibration and abuse.

Wheels are old-style D.I.Ds. Very good. Not so for the spokes. The cause of the spoke problem is that they bend nearly 90 degrees where they go through the hub. Also, they are longer there than they need be. As you tighten them, they gradually unbend. They haven't stopped their straightening process yet, nor have

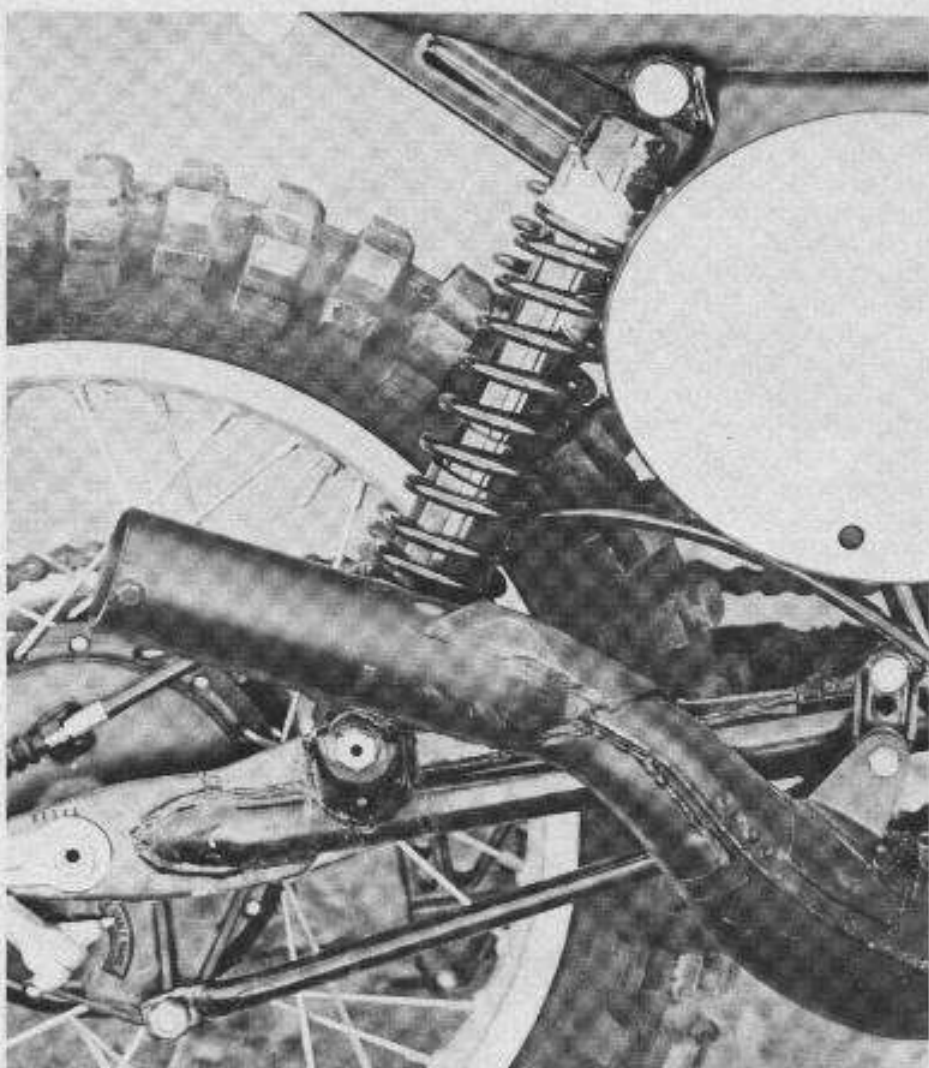


Stock spokes in varying degrees of straightening.

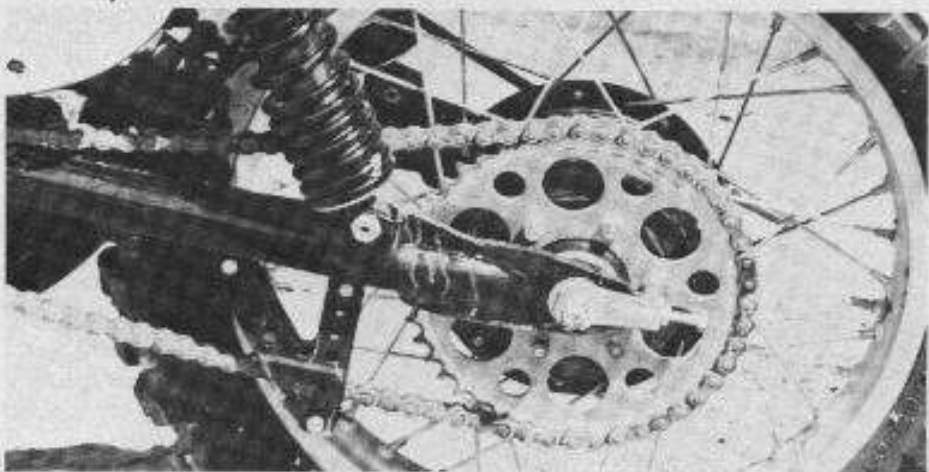
we broken one. Lots of nipple twisting.

Japanese Dunlops are not the best possible choice for Southern California's tricky trax.

Every time you use the kickstarter, the entire lever bends outward and



Check out trick holes in axle and shock mount; sheetmetal frame bracing behind top mount is not trick.



pushes against the inside of your calf. You can bend it back in, but it'll just be out there again the next time you use it. Very annoying. At least it has primary kickstart.

FINAL FEW GRUNTS

The power is very respectable at 36.7 hp but, due to the suspension, track conditions must be smooth and tacky for the KX's advantages to show. Even then, you'd have to be a little strange to want to push a bike

that you know has a mind of its own and could spit you off without a moment's notice.

All who rode it agreed right off that it would make a good playbike, because of the combination of precise steering (usually), good power and playbike-type suspension and handling. But, for roughly the same price, we can think of at least one bike that would make an excellent playbike while being very competitive as well.

KAWASAKI KX400

Price:

(approx. retail, West Coast) — \$1385

Engine Two-stroke, piston port
Displacement 401cc
Bore and Stroke 82mm x 76mm
Compression Ratio 6.5:1
Carburetion Mikuni VM36SC

Standard Jetting:

Main: 142.5R, Air: 0.5, Needle:
6DH3-4, Needle jet: PO, Slide
cutaway 2.5, Pilot: 50

Horsepower:

Claimed 41 bhp at 6500 rpm,
Actual 36.7 at 7500 rpm

Clutch Wet, multi-disc

Primary Drive: Straight cut gears, 2.52:1

Transmission Ratios:

- 1) 2.50:1
- 2) 1.77:1
- 3) 1.40:1
- 4) 1.19:1
- 5) 1.06:1

Final Drive:

D.I.D 520 TM
15-tooth countershaft
46-tooth rear sprocket

Air Filtration Oiled foam

Electrics CDI

Starting Primary kick

Lubrication Pre-mix, 32:1 ratio

Recommended Fuel Premium

Recommended Oil Torco 50

Fuel Tank Capacity: 9 liters (2.38 gallons)

Frame Single downtube

Suspension:

Front:

Kayaba telescopic forks,
18.8cm travel (7.4 inches)

Rear:

Kayaba nitrogen gas shocks,
18.0cm travel (7.1 inches)
(measured at the rear axle)

Wheels and Spokes:

Front D.I.D 1.60x21

Rear D.I.D 2.15x18

(shouldered steel spokes f&r)

Tires:

Front:

Dunlop Sports SR (Japan)
3.00x21 nylon

Rear:

Dunlop Sports Senior SR (Japan)
4.60x18 nylon

Dimensions:

Wheelbase 141.7cm (55.8 inches)

Swingarm Length 47.3cm (18.6 inches)

Ground Clearance 23.0cm (9.0 inches)

Bars, Height 111.8cm (44.0 inches)

Bars, Width 89.0cm (35.1 inches)

Pegs, Height 32.0cm (12.6 inches)

Pegs, Width 45.0cm (17.7 inches)

Seat Height 85.0cm (33.5 inches)

Fork Angle 31 degrees claimed

Weight:

Claimed 106kg (233.7 pounds) dry;

actual 106.6kg (235.1 pounds) dry;

44 percent on front; 56 percent on rear

Brakes:

Front 140x28mm conical drum

Rear 150x28mm full width drum

Instruments None

Silencer Yes, MX only

Spark Arrestor None

Warranty None

Parts Prices:

Piston \$28.40

Rings \$16.20

Clutch cable \$3.50

Brake pedal \$10.50



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