

KINGS OF POWER

By Joe
"Slender Hunky" Koch



Never, in any race, have these bikes been matched against each other. They are products of different times, different engineers and different planets. They all, however, were kings of power.

Powerful reputations face the mighty KTM 550 & the harsh light of truth

Bench racing for college professors probably involves well-informed discussions of how General George Patton would have dealt with Sadaam Hussein in the Gulf War, what planets humans might be living on today if we didn't blow so much dough and brainpower on bombs and, after a few cognacs, what's going to happen if Howard Stern really *does* become governor of New York.

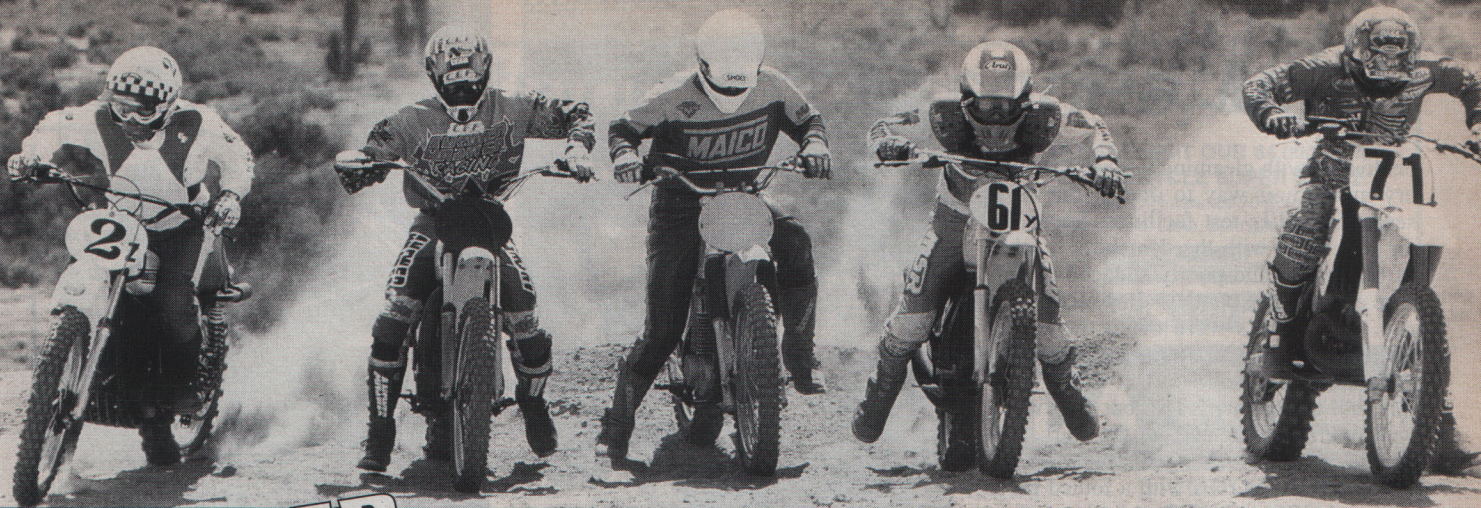
Dirt bikers have far more weighty topics to ponder. The Maico 501—well worth discussing into the wee hours in its own right—can spark debates when other bikes are brought into the discussion that result in spilled beers and black eyes if left to go too far. Want to live dangerously? Mix the Maico 501, Yamaha SC500 and Suzuki TM400 Cyclone in one conversation. If you want to go a step farther and you have a baseball bat leaning against your bar stool, throw in a modern open bike.

The editors of *Dirt Bike* are doers, not talkers. Well, we are talkers, too, but we do almost as much doing as talking. Anyway, I thought it was time to do the comparison that I and every other dirt biker (well, me and at least four other dirt bik-

ers) have always wanted to see: the Maico 501, Yamaha SC500, Suzuki TM400 Cyclone and KTM 550 (today's power king) all wide open on a start straight at one time and then each one on the same dyno on the same day.

Great idea, right? Try doing it. Where do you get three strong-running examples of fragile 20-year-old roost throwers? They are out there, no doubt about it, but most of the guys who have hunted down these bikes and restored them don't want to see a rare, freshly rebuilt engine go up in smoke trying to twist a dynamometer. The thought of hundreds of hours of parts finding, paint work and engine assembly laid to waste in the violence of a photo shoot doesn't excite the average old bike owner, either.





POWER

After days on the phone listening to guys politely (and not so politely) telling me that I should trade my CZ jersey for a jacket with sleeves that tie in the front, I called Rick Doughty, the owner of Vintage Iron. He is no average old bike owner. He is so passionate about old bikes I sometimes wonder if the clutch in his head isn't slipping a bit. Lucky for me, his love for old bikes is so strong he let me have a perfect TM400 to do my evil deeds. Then he insisted I take a bike I hadn't even asked for, the '74 YZ360, the

bike he risks black eyes and spilled beers for in heated bench racing discussions. He's such a fanatic he actually backs up his claims on the track, too. After that, I found a Yamaha SC500 much closer to home, right in the garage of Robb Mescher, *Dirt Bike's* advertising account executive.

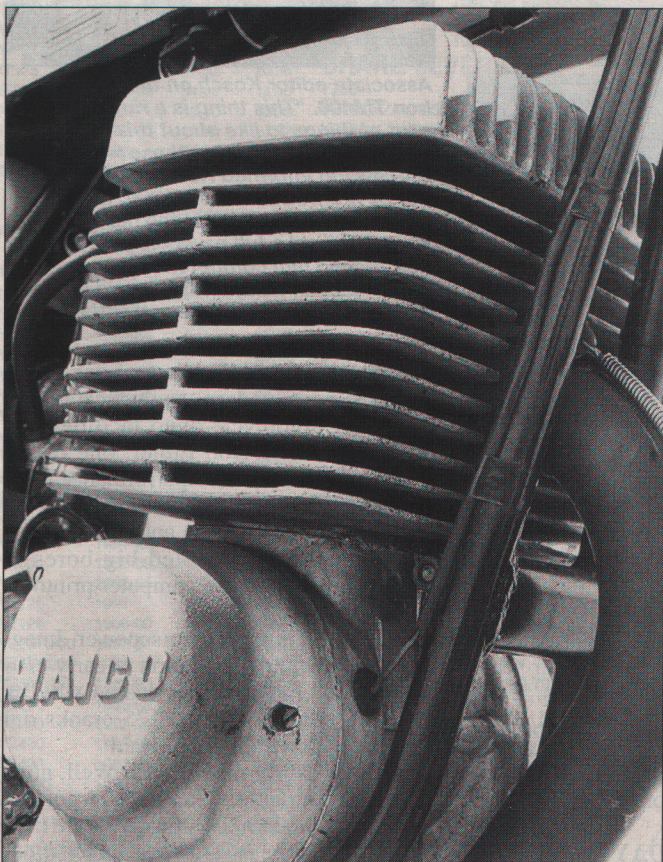
I was still missing the Maico 501, which in my mind was the centerpiece of the story. My best Maico sources didn't have one. Nervous collectors wouldn't cut loose with their prized 501s. Then I found Charlie Beck. He loves Maicos, races a gorgeous 440 radial and owns a perfect, all-original 501. He keeps it in his garage just for the joy of looking at it. Once he finished restoring it he parked it. The 440 is his race

Horsepower legends of different eras meet. Yamaha's YZ360 and SC500 vs. Maico's 501 vs. Suzuki's Cyclone vs. KTM's latest 550.

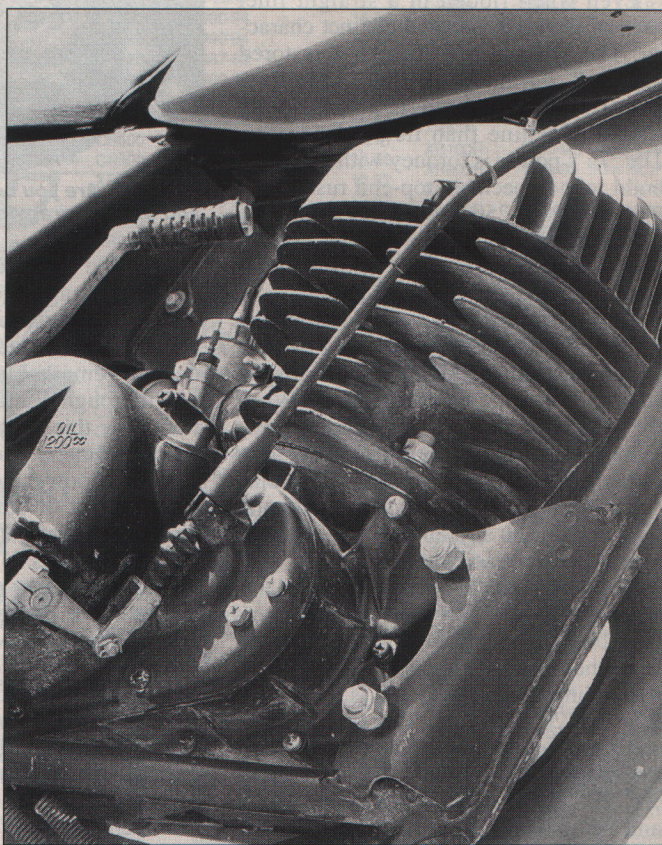
bike. The 501's job is beautifying Charlie's garage. The fiberglass fenders are from a Maico he owned 20 years ago. The butter-soft steel rims are ding-free and gleam like mirrors. Could we have the bike for photos? "Sure," said Mr. Beck. Put it on the dyno? "Go ahead, the fresh top end I installed when I was restoring it is kind of going to waste, since I don't ride the bike." This Beck fellow is a rare individual.

TO THE TRACK

Cars swerved and heads turned as the convoy of *Dirt Bike* Test Bike Transport-



Maico's awesome 501. If the WWF let machines compete with men, this bike would take The Belt.



Suzuki TM400. Don't let anyone tell you to triple your insurance coverage before riding a TM400. Our '75 Vintage Iron/Sumner's Suzuki test bike was a pussycat.

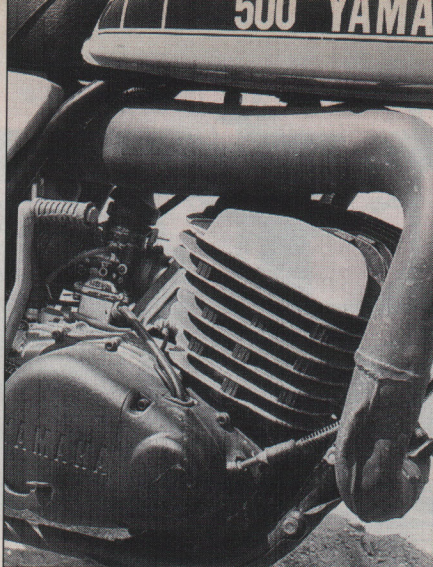
POWER

ers loaded with gleaming vintage machinery made their way to one of the most secret *Dirt Bike* test facilities. Soon, the air was filled with the deafening crackle of unsilenced and poorly silenced expansion chambers. Countless drag races were run. The results were often the same. Rick Doughty's YZ360 wheeled away from all but the KTM 550. It would actually pull the mighty KTM, but only when Rick blatantly cheated on the start. The Maico was left sitting on the line for about half of the runs with a fouled plug, the result of a sticking float in the ancient Bing mixer. When it ran it would occasionally lurch ahead of the SC and TM, only to be reeled in and passed seconds later. Then a wire came off the condenser, disabling the bike for the day. Eventually, Doughty's YZ fell prey to old bike ills. Its transistor ignition, the Achilles heel of early Yamaha motocrossers, went poof and the bike ran no more. Even though Doughty has a shelf full of vintage Yamaha ignition components, there wasn't time to ship the YZ to Vintage Iron headquarters and back in time for our appointment with the dyno facility. The SC500 and the TM400 were so close for so many runs they looked like a big yellow four-wheeler roosting off into the distance. They were, of course, being roosted by the KTM.

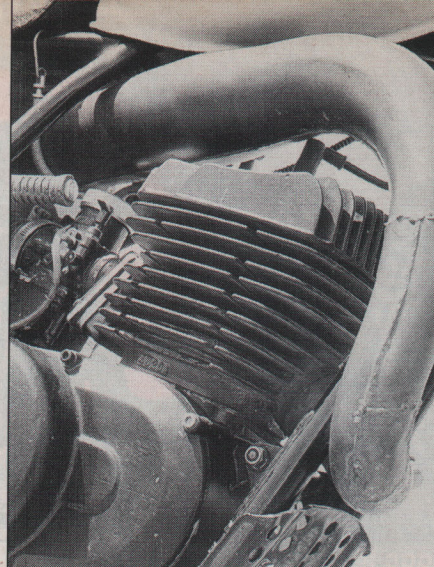
Even when ridden in a straight line, each of the bikes showed distinct character. The Vintage Iron Suzuki, a restored but stock '75 model, the last of the five-year TM400 model run, is a vastly more rideable machine than its predecessors. The '75's power is torquey with a smooth build to a respectable top-end rush much like a modern 250 enduro race bike. It's thin and feels light. The slender control levers and light, positive transmission would impress any new-bike rider.

Despite its reed-valve induction, the SC500 runs no more crisply than the piston-port Suzuki and Maico . . . less crisply, actually . . . well, not crisply at all. When the SC climbs into its midrange-only power it moves quickly, a thrilling but not altogether enjoyable turn of events. This bike has a disconcertingly light front end and feels nervous on any surface. It is easily as grim as a first-year TM400.

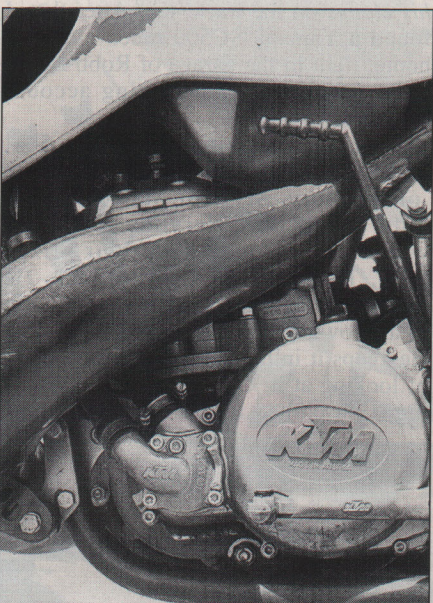
The Maico has a more balanced, planted-on-the-ground feel than the other vintage bikes, and on mild terrain it even beats the feel of the modern KTM. Hunky was telling it like it was and is in the *Dirt Bike* test 20 years ago. This bike handles and feels natural, even to new-bike riders. The mighty Maico can't touch the modern 550 in the acceleration department and has a tough time hanging with the other vintage kings of power. It makes up for everything it gives away in acceleration with tractability. The 501 doesn't



Yamaha SC500. You think your modern bike has headshake? Try this baby.



Yamaha YZ360. This thing is a rocket. Yamaha should still be selling a bike with this engine!



KTM 550. Are you bored by your jet boat and top fuel dragster? Try one of these.



Associate editor Kosch on the Vintage Iron TM400. "This thing is a riot; there are a lot of things to like about this bike." Immediately after uttering those words Editor Lawson informed Kosch that he would not be allowed to contribute to results in *DIRT BIKE* bike tests for the next three issues or until a full psychological evaluation proved him competent. Lawson then rode the bike, admitted he would love to race it, and withdrew the restriction.

have a reed valve but feels like it does.

The Vintage Iron YZ360 is one of Doughty's personal vintage race bikes. The YZ's advanced (for '74) lightweight design, remarkable (even today) power and thorough Vintage Iron race preparation make this bike feel very modern. YZ frame geometry and the abrupt nature of the 360's power demand concentration. The thought of crashing becomes especially unpleasant once you know most of the parts on this \$10,000 dirt bike are no longer available.

You have probably read *Dirt Bike's* test of the KTM550. It's '94's fastest Open bike and it feels even faster when you hop on after riding a few '74s. It carburetes perfectly and accelerates like a fighter jet leaving the deck of an aircraft carrier. Amusement parks could make fortunes selling rides on KTM 550s. It's *that* incredible.

DYNO DAY

With the track testing complete, the convoy made its way to the not-so-secret

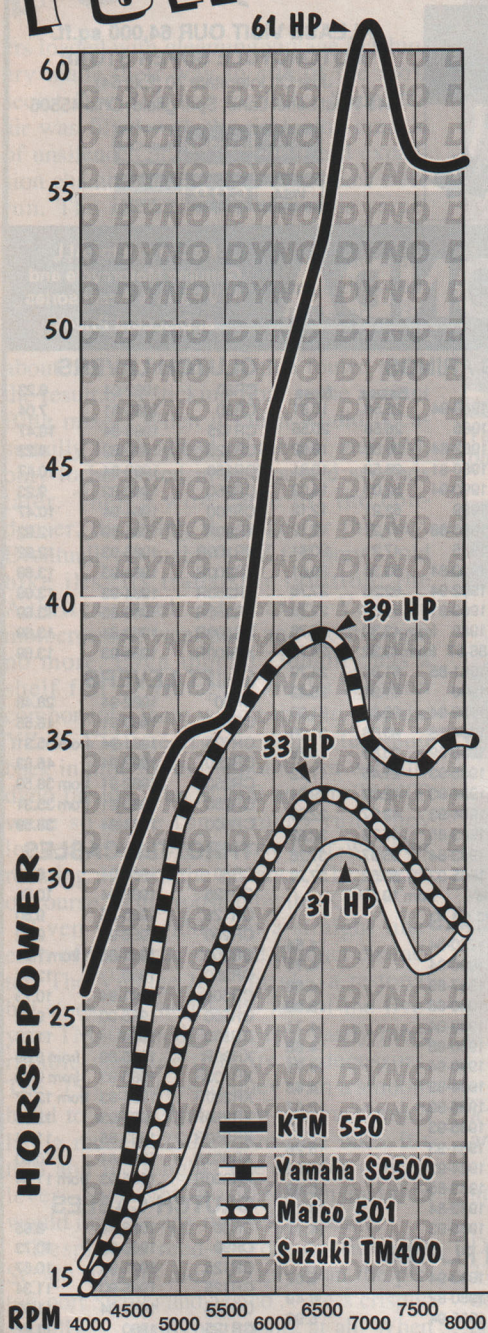
headquarters of FMF, home of one of the world's most modern, sophisticated and effective motorcycle dyno facilities and second home to Don Emler, one of the world's most respected performance parts designers. Soon the air was filled with the sweet aroma of race gas and the sound of painfully loud air-cooled big-bores at work. One by one, the computer printouts appeared.

TM400: Thirty-one horsepower. Imagine that: an entire generation of early-'70s "iron men" motocrossers scared silly by 31 little ponies. A good 125 cranks out more than that these days. Hah!

SC500: Thirty-nine horses. Well, now, that's respectable. This baby's got the beans of a modern 250. Factor in the handling of this beast and you have something to be scared of.

Now for my personal favorite, **Maico**

POWER



FMF president Don Emler's face shows stunned disbelief upon seeing the dyno numbers for the Maico 501. Everyone had the look of stunned disbelief when the Maico ran for five straight minutes without fouling a plug. ▶



501: I made sure the FMF dyno-room technicians took special care with the big yellow beast for its safety and our own. "Make sure that dyno is securely anchored into the concrete," I bellowed, "because that big-block head is going to rip the . . ." 33.1 lousy horsepower? I tore the paper out of the printer and mashed it into a little ball. I pounded on the dyno room window and shouted at Mr. Emler, "I demand a recount! I demand a recount! New dealer! New dyno! Whatever!" All this must have looked pretty funny to Emler, seeing as he could

not hear a word I was saying in the soundproof dyno room. I calmed down, stepped in and explained to Don that I felt the results of the 501's dyno test were questionable. Emler happily agreed to another run. Thirty-three even. "The engine was hotter on the second run. I'm surprised it only lost a tenth. Isn't it amazing how consistent this dyno is?" said Emler. I stepped outside for some cool air. Embarrassment was making my head hotter.

KTM 550: When I walked back in, Emler and Ron Lawson were watching a

piece of paper emerge from the printer. They both said "wow" at the same time. The KTM was cooling in the dyno room. Sixty-one horsepower, almost *twice* what the Maico made.

I KNEW IT ALL ALONG

Like I have said many, many times to many, many deluded old bike lovers, those old piles are simply no match for today's high-tech machinery. Of course, quality control at Maico wasn't the best during the later years of the 501. Now if we had a *sharp-running 501* instead of that junker Beck stuck us with . . . □