

KAWASAKI KDX500

Ram in wolf's clothing.

Everyone knows the old 1981 KX420 wasn't the hottest Open Class motocrosser available, and it takes a while to overcome a stigma like that. Their 1983 KX500 was a radical — and far better — update, but its reception was lukewarm in Australia, to say the least.

In an effort to sell leftover KX500s, Kawasaki Australia has made the bold decision to gather an optional enduro kit which will transform the KX into a KDX.

by Geoff Eldridge

Your first question is going to be: "If the KX500 wasn't an overnight sensation on Australian motocross sales, why should it be a good playbike-with-lights buy?"

Good question. First, what were the reasons the KX500 didn't sell in quantity in 1983?

Actually, the motocross market was so lukewarm in 1983 that no big bore sold very well, but Kawasaki sold proportionally less because it always takes a while to overcome the reputation of a bad model (ie, the 1981 KX420) and who could blame buyers for being cautious? As well, word went around that the KX500 had a real detonation problem as it warmed up, and gossip on that subject alone did a lot of harm: despite a lot of good features on the bike, the engine let it down. Plenty of power, but difficult to get it out of the thing in any consistent fashion.

Enter the KDX concept. Kawasaki Australia's Kevin Doyle added an extra head gasket to eliminate the detonation problem and mellow the power out. He then lengthened the silencer unit by around 100mm to take the edge off the exhaust's bark. Jetting is adjusted to suit both

these changes and as you will buy the KDX500 will be spot on for anything but high altitude running.

Finally, a lighting coil was bolted into the ignition system to power a KDX250 front headlight/number-plate combination and a KLX250 taillight. Just remember the light beam is suitable for enduro type work, rather than Mt. Ebenezer 12 hour night racing stuff.

An optional Phase II kit is being offered: it comprises of a KDX tripmeter/stopwatch on the bars coupled to the sensor unit at the front wheel. Extra machining is necessary to fit this part to the wheel. For most people a normal speedo would be a wiser investment. And that's it! Yessir, she's a genuine motocrosser with lights, no doubt about it.

And how does this package work?

As far as we can tell, the KX500 works very well in KDX guise. Just about the only problem is the tallness of the bike — footing and balance is affected in some situations. Mind you, this height also means the kickstarter is tall. But the extra head gasket at least makes the KDX easier to kick over.

As far as riding the bike goes, the



soft front end coupled with the disc front brake means you need to get to know how the front will react as you dive into an unknown corner on a trailride. It can be an asset — the front end compresses so fast it alters the steering geometry and actually makes getting around corners easier. This helps in tight riding, especially when you consider the rear end feels stiffer by comparison, even if you back off the spring preload.

For enduro or trailriding, the KDX will work far better if you set it up slightly soft. Not only is this easier on you on a long ride, but riding over rocks and logs is more predictable with softer suspension. But the

Uni-Trak is a good system and it won't give you any dramas on the big holes. Stock springs are fine, and if you get picky, Bel-Ray 10 wt fork oil measured 6.5" from the top of the fork tubes with the springs removed and the suspension compressed is a good place to start.

Our test KX500 clutch didn't exhibit the same grabbiness we found with our 1983 KX250, nor did our Finke KX500, but the clutch is nevertheless not a gradual one — it's far more like a Honda. But with a 500 there should be hardly any call for using it anyway.

Tyres are Dunlops and aren't too bad at all. The rear brake tends to lock easily at first, but gets better

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FAR LEFT
This is a publicity shot of Trevor Williams we were supplied with, in case you are wondering at the ordinariness of it and the lack of any ADB style in the photo.

ABOVE LEFT
For extra dollars you can get a Phase II KDX500, which has this tripmeter/stopwatch hooked to the drive pulsar on the front wheel.

BELOW LEFT
An extra head gasket has tamed the engine for enduro style work, and gets rid of the KX500's worst problem — bad detonation which ends up blowing the bike up.

ABOVE
It doesn't look much different to a KX500, because it isn't. A lighting coil supplies power to the KDX250 headlight and KLX250 taillight, while an extended muffler takes the bark out of the exhaust note. Jetting had to be slightly modified.

with age. Water seems to have little effect on it. Up front, the disc is great, although it might pay you to drain the brake fluid and install waterproof brake fluid if you plan on riding wet terrain.

What of the engine? Excellent with the extra head gasket. Power is down ever so slightly from stock, but a stocker is more powerful than any other Open Classer anyway (they make the best Finke bikes for that very reason). Naturally, it's still as rorty as you'd expect any Open Class motocrosser to be, but it's somehow a nice power delivery spread over a good rpm band.

Since this model is an adaptation of another model, it won't have all

the creature comforts riders expect on enduro bikes these days. No compliance plate means it can't be registered, there are no blinkers or mirror mounts, no pipe protection (actually, come to think of it, what enduro bike has it anyway?), no tool pouch, no quick detach wheels. But everything else is there. We had a chance to ride Geoff Ballard's KX500 during the trip to Cape York and it handled the job like a European enduro bike: very predictable and with safe handling.

For a serious rider prepared to fine tune the bike, the KDX500 would make a great enduro mount. For a more casual fun rider it's more demanding because it's more spe-

cialised than, say an XL600. But it's got buckets of power, light weight and handling.

Speaking of weight, a KX500 is second lightest in the class anyway, so the KDX500 is the lightest enduro bike in the class. That always helps.

Perhaps the best thing about all this is that you can have it for the same price as KX500s were selling for (and still are as far as we know). You'd have to be mad to get one any other way.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Kawasaki's 500 has a strong character and to an extent you need to adapt to it, but the basic

packages always offered by Kawasaki are strong on handling. Lately, they have sharpened up their act on details of design, and Kawasakis are getting to be a pleasure to own (read that as meaning you can shot 'em in the garage and leave them untouched till your next ride).

The extra head gasket has made all the difference in the world, and actually seems to work better for enduros. The five-speed gearbox and stock sprockets are good for any trail use. And the bark has been taken out of the exhaust note.

We can't understand why Kawasaki hasn't made one before.



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