

LONG-TERM TEST
... REAL LONG

5 YEARS ON A KTM 500

*Living in sin with a
bike that refuses to die*

Mike Whitcomb jumps the ancient KTM under the glare of an unforgiving midsummer California sun. A top amateur, Mike races a KTM 540 and practices with Rick Sieman in the desert.

By Rick Sieman

In late 1984, *Dirt Bike* tested the first water-cooled KTM 500. Prior to that, the big-bore flagship was the air-cooled 495, a brute of a bike that vibrated like a Buick station wagon with two square wheels.

I fell in love with that 500. It was light (223.5 pounds, dry) and had gobs of low-end and midrange torque. The bike was raced and ridden hard for a year, and when it was supposed to go back to KTM, I cried crocodile tears and whined. They cut me a deal I couldn't refuse.

It is now mid-1990 and that very same KTM still sits out on my patio, among a very odd assortment of dirt bikes. I'd like to tell you what it's been like to live with that particular bike for the last five years.

INITIAL SETUP

Like most KTMs of that era, my 500 came jetted too rich. I leaned the pilot out two jumps, moved the needle one position leaner and dropped one on the main jet. The magnesium Type 55 Bing carb was (and still is) very easy to work on and responds dramatically to small jetting changes.

At first, I ran through rear brake shoes like mad. It seemed like I couldn't finish a two-hour Grand Prix with any stopping power left at the rear end. Then Rod Bush (the KTM guru) showed me how to properly adjust the double leading shoe cams, and the brakes have been great ever since.

Some mushiness was felt in the front disc brake at first but, after bleeding the brakes thoroughly, it was no problem. The front

brake lever was also too far from the grip for my medium-sized hands and I simply bent the malleable Magura lever back to where it felt comfortable. Honda grips replaced the stockers.

I replaced the stock small-knobbed Metzeler tires with a regular old-fashioned MX/enduro up front and a Multi-Cross at the rear. I've stayed with that combo ever since. Also, the aluminum rim locks were discarded (they tend to shatter on rocks) and replaced with rubber ones from a Suzuki.

Because the KTM was mostly used for desert and Grand Prix work, I replaced the stock 14/52 gearing with a huge 16-tooth countershaft sprocket and a teensy 44-tooth rear SideWinder. This gave the KTM a theoretical top speed of slightly over 115 mph. Enough. It still has enough torque to use for slow and easy trail riding.

Stock reeds were put on the shelf and Boyesen reeds replaced them. Low-end response was improved and the big 500 even started easier. A Banzai Bros. pipe protector was hose-clamped on the low-hanging part of the pipe. It's taken quite a bit of abuse and saved a few pipes.

The crossover tube between the radiators tended to hit the frame backbone. By tweaking it down slightly, the problem was solved. A large (3.4-gallon) tank replaced the stocker. This gave the KTM a racing range of 65+ miles, and a trail riding range of over 75 miles.

A gas/oil ratio of 32:1 was used for the duration, mostly running Yamalube R or

Kawasaki two-stroke oil. A Honda kill button replaced the Magura short-o-matic. Answer Products' RH III Suzuki bend bars replaced the stockers once they got bent. We cut them to exactly 32 inches. Yamaha plastic hand protectors kept the fingers safe from brush impacts. An Answer Products SA spark arrester/muffler has been on for four years and is still acceptably quiet. A SideWinder O-ring chain replaced the stock Regina Extra when it got floppy. A small piece of plastic was attached to the top of the swingarm to keep the chain from sawing through the metal. It gets replaced every six months or so.

FIVE YEARS OF WEAR & TEAR

After five long years of riding and racing, the KTM still has its original piston and rings. The stock clutch and gearbox are still in the cases. Little-known fact: All European MXers come with forged pistons; all Japanese bikes come with cast pistons. Is the cost differential worth it? Well, how many Japanese bikes can go five years on the same piston and rings?

It's only fair to mention that the air filter was cleaned after every ride and the gearbox oil was dumped out immediately after every ride while the fluid was still hot. Also, only Maxima gear oils have been allowed inside those cases. Dave Holeman from Maxima told us it was good stuff. Five years of use back up his claims.

After one year, the stock shock started losing the rebound qualities. White Bros. redid the shock. It went another year and a

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5 YEARS

half, then Bill Saltzman freshened up the shock and it's just now starting to get tired. We played with the forks ourselves and have been happy with them, other than the tendency to pump up with air after several hours of riding.

The front pipe mount broke three times. We made our own mount out of an old car shock eye and solved the problem forever. Front motor mount bolts are hard to keep tight. I replaced them with F-911 bolts and the problem was cured forever. Once a motor mount plate failed and I had to fabricate a new one out of thicker aluminum plate. When the swingarm pivot bolt gets loose, engine vibration rises. Keep it tight. Greasing the pivot points keeps the linkage alive. About once a year I take it all apart and stuff fresh Bel-Ray grease in there. The top shock bolt was also replaced with an F-911 bolt after it showed signs of scoring.

Foot peg bolts tend to wear every six months or so. Again, F-911 bolts solved this small problem. Plan on replacing footpeg springs every year or so when they sack out. The stock filter will start splitting after a year or so. A Twin-Air works okay, and you can use a Honda filter (84-85 type) in a pinch. Maxima filter oil *only* was used on this bike and all others that I really care for. I have simply not found a better filter oil.

Bosch plugs seem to yield about a year

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5 YEARS

of service before I get nervous and replace them. The forks, once set up, have never—repeat, *never*—had the oil changed or replaced. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

NORMAL WEAR & TEAR

There have been about 15—maybe 20—fresh rear tires on the bike. Seven new tires have been wrapped around the front hoop. The SideWinder O-ring chains have yielded phenomenal wear. I put a new one on each year, just to play it safe. The SideWinder countershaft sprocket has never shown any wear. Again, once a year, I put on a new rear SideWinder when it gets a new chain.

One new master cylinder was needed when the bike was dropped and the lever snapped off at the base. The rubber has rotted off the brake line, but the line itself is intact and functioning just fine. A small tear (from an awkward crash) is on the right rear of the saddle, but the foam is still firm. You should drain the float bowl on the Bing carb after you wash the bike. Somehow, water will find its way into the float bowl. Blow out the pilot jet with contact cleaner every three or four rides. If the engine starts running erratically, it's almost always due to a clogged pilot jet.

STOUT STUFF

Not one spoke has ever broken. The wheels are first-class. No cracks have ever appeared in the frame. The bike still starts easily (once warmed up) and the compression is high. You do not try to start this bike in tennis shoes.

Stock piston and rings are still riding up and down in the cylinder and the head has never been off. The base bolts had to be snugged down one time. Yes, the stock clutch and gears are working just fine and the elec-

trical system has never even burped.

Running the 1985 bike against brand-new bikes shows that the power is still excellent. Nothing pulls it in a drag race and only Bill Saltzman (on another KTM 500) edges it on top speed. Bill runs a 43-tooth IT 175 rear sprocket (same bolt pattern) and can creep by us on flat-out straights.

Vibration is a bit more than when the bike was new, but that's normal. The motor should probably be gone through and freshened up, but we're curious as to how long it can last with the original parts inside.

A guess-timate of running time is just that, a rough estimate, but we'd say that the KTM has about 80 to 100 races on it, and another 100 trail riding sessions.

Do I just ride the bike easy, and that's why it lives? Well, that's possible, but let me relate a little story to you. Honda was curious about the KTM and David Bailey and Johnny O'Mara stopped by my house and borrowed the Katoom for a day and rode the living hell out of it.

David thought it had the perfect power for a Novice or Intermediate, but thought that an Expert/Pro needed a more violent hit. He was impressed that the bike was so light. When they put it on the scales, it was 8.5 pounds lighter than his works Honda. He thought it was incredibly stable, but felt it didn't turn as quick as his Honda.

PERSONAL TASTES

There are big bikes that turn quicker, for sure, but I've reached a point in my riding where I don't try to be a hero in the corners. However, I do like to hit the whoops as fast and hard as I dare, and here the KTM shines.

It's a tall bike, and very long, but that sucker can get up on top of the bumps and take everything in stride, with no more than a little quiver at the forks to let you know that you're almost over your head.

It's certainly not for everyone. No Open-

All sparkly and shiny, The Old Warhorse is shown in action when it was new. Jim Holley is at the controls. Now it's crusty, scratched-up and tired, but it still has tons of torque and plenty of power.

class bike is. You have to give it a smart boot to kick it over, but it almost always starts on the first kick once it's warmed up. When you get tired and hammered, the tremendous low-end torque lets you shift early and lug the engine. You can still keep a decent pace up, even when your arms are nearly gone.

How does it compare to the newer KTMs? Well, I've put a leg over most of the new models, and they feel tight and crisp and clean, but the old '85 has a familiar feel to it that's hard to beat.

How long will it last? I have no idea, but I think this particular bike should go at least another year with all the original stock engine parts. I'll probably just ride it into the ground and then do a complete rebuild when the bomb goes off.

If you want a good used bike, I'd recommend that you get your hands on one, stop by a good KTM dealer and have him freshen it up for you, then simply enjoy it. At anything less than Expert/Pro level, this old warhorse is still competitive.

Someday, sometime, when I get all old and rheumy and do an article on the best bikes of all time, you can bet your buns that this scoot will be right up there near the top. For now, it's the bike I grab when I go trail riding with my friends. Old reliable. Sort of like an old Ford pickup that's been in the family for years. Maybe a year or so from now, I'll share an update with you on The Workhorse. This weekend, though, I'll be heading out to the desert with a few friends and it will get hammered for yet another ride. □