

**DIRT BIKE'S STREET-LEGAL KNOBBY SHOOTOUT**

# TRACTION ACTION

*The hot ticket in dual-sport tires may save you a ticket*



**You can have a new dual-sport bike for about \$100. Well, you will THINK you have a new one if you put street-legal knobbies on it. These tires are the most important item for making a dual-sport work in the dirt and you can get a set for a C-note and some change.**

On planet *Dirt Bike*, where good things are always happening, you might visit your local bike shop to pick up some oil and a clutch lever, just in case you go riding on some other planet where bikes crash or run out of gas. The parts man would disappear into parts land to get your lever (it's in stock) and you would stroll out onto the showroom floor to get a closer look at the latest motocrossers. Oops, you've walked close enough to the machines to trip the spider-web-like attention sensors of the web-

tender, the salesman. "The new YZs are beauties, aren't they?" the salesman asks in a bit-too-chummy tone (it's the same on every planet), "and these babies are *street-legal* too." Wha? Whoa, *yeah!*

We don't have spacecraft advanced enough to reach planet *Dirt Bike* but sometimes Earth seems almost as good, like when the major motorcycle tire manufacturers started making knobby tires that were street-legal. Some even last pretty long when used on pavement, too. It couldn't have happened at a better time.

Some modern dual-sport bikes are pret-

ty good dirt bikes except for their original equipment tires. Stock dual-sport rubber lets you fully explore the machines' limits on pavement but cripples them in dirt. That's where street-legal knobbies and this tire test come in. We put the most dirt-worthy, DOT-approved tires from each of the major tire manufacturers on a group of dual-sport bikes, mapped out a brutal 400-mile pavement and dirt test route and went riding. When the riding was over, we recorded our findings and measured the amount of knob wear on each tire.

### PIRELLI MT21 RALLYCROSS FRONT, \$55

**Comments:** Pirelli's Rallycross was developed for high-speed, off-road rally racing. Because of the machine weights and speeds common in rallying, tires like the Rallycross with shorter, more closely grouped knobs with rubber compounds on the firm side are desirable. Our testing revealed the Rallycross to be the most desirable tire for dual-sport riding. Everyone who rode it praised its secure, predictable feel off *and on* the road. This tire was far better than all but the Metzeler Unicross, which has a slight edge in very soft terrain. It didn't wear excessively and is reasonably priced, too.

**New knob length:** 11.6 mm.

**Wear during test:** 1.2 mm.

**Dirt Bike Rating:** First.

### METZELER UNICROSS FRONT, \$67.32

**Comments:** This is a true high-performance, mixed-terrain knobby that grips hard, loose, muddy or sandy soil as well as most of the better "not-for-highway-use" (NFHU) motocross tires in its class. KTM liked the tire enough to fit it to their enduro and cross-country models as original equipment. The staff and our testers were thoroughly impressed with the Unicross front tire on *and off* road. On the street it's as wander-free as any of the tires in this test (on-center feel is less secure than the streetish stock tires, though) with good cornering and braking grip. The Unicross' tall knobs help it paddle through soft soil and the soft rubber compound sticks well to hard terrain, but these same features cause the tire to wear quickly. This tire is on the expensive side, too, so it gets second. Unfortunately, the excellent Unicross rear tire isn't DOT-approved.

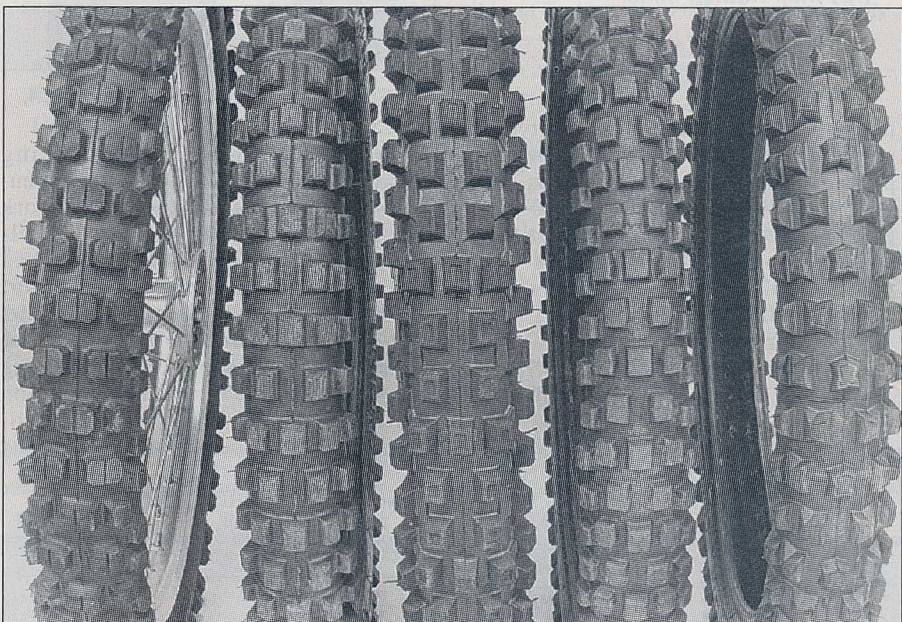
**New knob length:** 11.7 mm.

**Wear during test:** 2.0 mm.

**Dirt Bike Rating:** Second.

### KENDA TRAKMASTER FRONT, \$41.95

**Comments:** Kenda's Trakmaster looks like an enlarged Dunlop K490, a NFHU



Pirelli  
Rallycross,

Metzeler  
Unicross,

Kenda  
Trakmaster,

Bridgestone  
Gritty ED01,

Michelin  
Desert

motocross tire. In our motocross tire test we discovered that more tire doesn't always mean more performance. When compared to the DOT knobbies, the Kenda rolled to a solid third. This tire has extremely tall knobs made of an unusual spongy rubber and a tall, fat profile. Somehow, all the unusual design features work together to give the Trakmaster very good soft-terrain performance, respectable hard-terrain grip and acceptable wear.

**New knob length:** 14.7 mm.

**Wear during test:** 1.6 mm.

**Dirt Bike Rating:** Third.

### BRIDGESTONE GRITTY ED01 FRONT, \$55.42

**Comments:** Another rally knobby with DOT approval. This tire's knobs are extremely short and the tire gives a "worn knobby" feel on soft dirt or sand. Hard-pack and street grip are very good due to the close knob spacing and unique rubber compound. The rubber is on the soft side,

like a good hard-terrain tire, but it must be good-quality stuff because it wears slowly. Price is reasonable.

**New knob length:** 9.2 mm.

**Wear during test:** 1.0 mm.

**Dirt Bike Rating:** Fourth.

### MICHELIN DESERT FRONT, \$83.00

**Comments:** This tire has won the Baja 1000, the Paris-to-Dakar Rally and a heap of ISDE gold medals, so it's more than qualified for goofing around on a street-legal trail bike. Its short knobs and firm compound are typical of the rally tires, but its cornering grip on hardpack is not in the same league as the top four tires. Performance in sand was very good. It would carve soft terrain almost as well as the top-finishing tall-knob entries. Wears like iron, costs like titanium.

**New knob length:** 11.6 mm.

**Wear during test:** 0.7 mm.

**Dirt Bike Rating:** Fifth.

**GRAND SPORT GS-10  
FRONT, \$39.08**

**Comments:** There's a big difference between sixth place and fifth in this competition. Grand Sport's dual-sport tire, once the most aggressive and most effective dual-sport tire available, isn't in the same performance category as the new wave of street-legal knobbies off road. Its cornering grip was so unpredictable it forced testers to ride sensibly, almost as if they were on a bike with stock tires. On the street, the tire would wander in straight cruising and roll in hard cornering. Great price, though.

**New knob length:** 9.2 mm.  
**Wear during test:** 1.0 mm.  
**Dirt Bike Rating:** Sixth.

**YOKOHAMA 704  
FRONT, \$58.95**

**Comments:** Yokohama's 704 has a more aggressive tread pattern than typical stock dual-sport tires and offers better dirt performance. It's not as knobby as most of the tires in this test, so its off-road performance is far behind the best tires. Wear and on-street performance were very good.

**New knob length:** 9.0 mm.  
**Wear during test:** 1.0 mm.  
**Dirt Bike Rating:** Seventh.

**MAXXIS**

**(Price not available as of print date)**

**Comments:** Maxxis is Cheng Shin's new high-performance tire line. Cheng



**Grand Sport,**

**Yokohama 704,**

**Maxxis,**

**IRC GP110**

Shin is well known for producing affordable tires that look just like expensive high-performance tires but work like affordable tires. Their new dual-sport tire is not a copy of anything and looks like it would work well in the dirt but its performance was just adequate, only slightly better than what's typical for a stock dual-sport tire. Cornering was unpredictable whether we were on hardpack, sand, loose dirt or mud. Braking performance was sad. Wear rate was good.

**New knob length:** 7.4 mm.

**Wear during test:** 1.2 mm.  
**Dirt Bike Rating:** Eighth.

**IRC GP110  
FRONT, \$41.60**

**Comments:** The GP110's unusual interlocked center tread keeps wear under control, but that's about all the control this tire offers. Cornering was acceptable but braking grip was truly poor.

**New knob length:** 7.0 mm.  
**Wear during test:** .5 mm.  
**Dirt Bike Rating:** Ninth.

**THE RATING GAME  
HOW KNOBBIES BECAME  
STREET-LEGAL**

• We used to think "Not for highway use" on knobby tires was more than just a manufacturer's declaration of the absurdly obvious, like "kickstarter" cast into kickstarters. We thought some lab coat-wearing, squinty-eyed government gumshoe found knobbies lacked the government-specified minimum daily requirement of pavement grip and were banned from the paved surfaces of America forever. We were wrong.

Tire makers are left to police themselves as to whether their products meet the government's specifications for highway-approved motorcycle tires or not. They could put "DOT" on any tire they want to but that would be suicide in today's lawsuit-crazed world. Getting DOT approval is a simple matter of building a tire that can do the following:

• Pass a speed/durability test. The tire is placed under the full weight its maker claims it will carry for two hours at 50 mph. The tire is left to cool and is then subjected to a half-hour at full load at 75 mph, another half-hour at 80 mph and another half-hour at 85 mph. The tire passes if no



**After 200 miles of dirt and pavement riding on one group of tires, we put on another and retraced our route.**

clear evidence of breakdown can be found.

- Pass an endurance test: 50 mph for 34 hours with loads up to 117 percent of the tire's advertised limits.
- Pass a strength test in which the tire must survive five stabs with a 5/16-inch pin pushed by 400 inch/pounds of energy.

- Expose tread wear indicators when 1/32-inch of tread remains.
- Meet DOT labeling requirements. The size, depth (or height) and location of lettering for rating, construction and specification information must meet rigid requirements.