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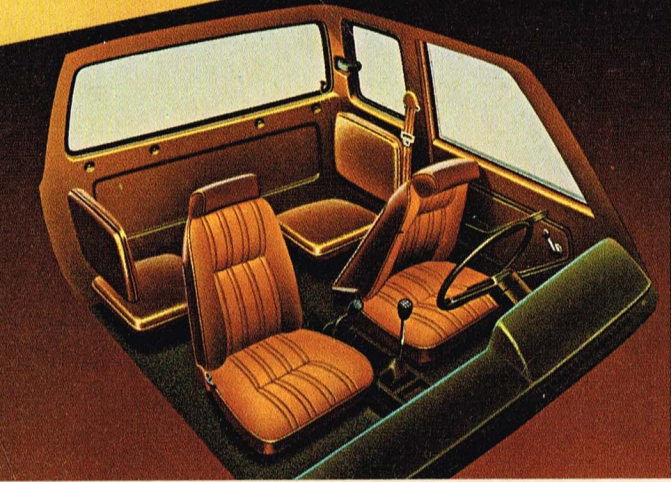
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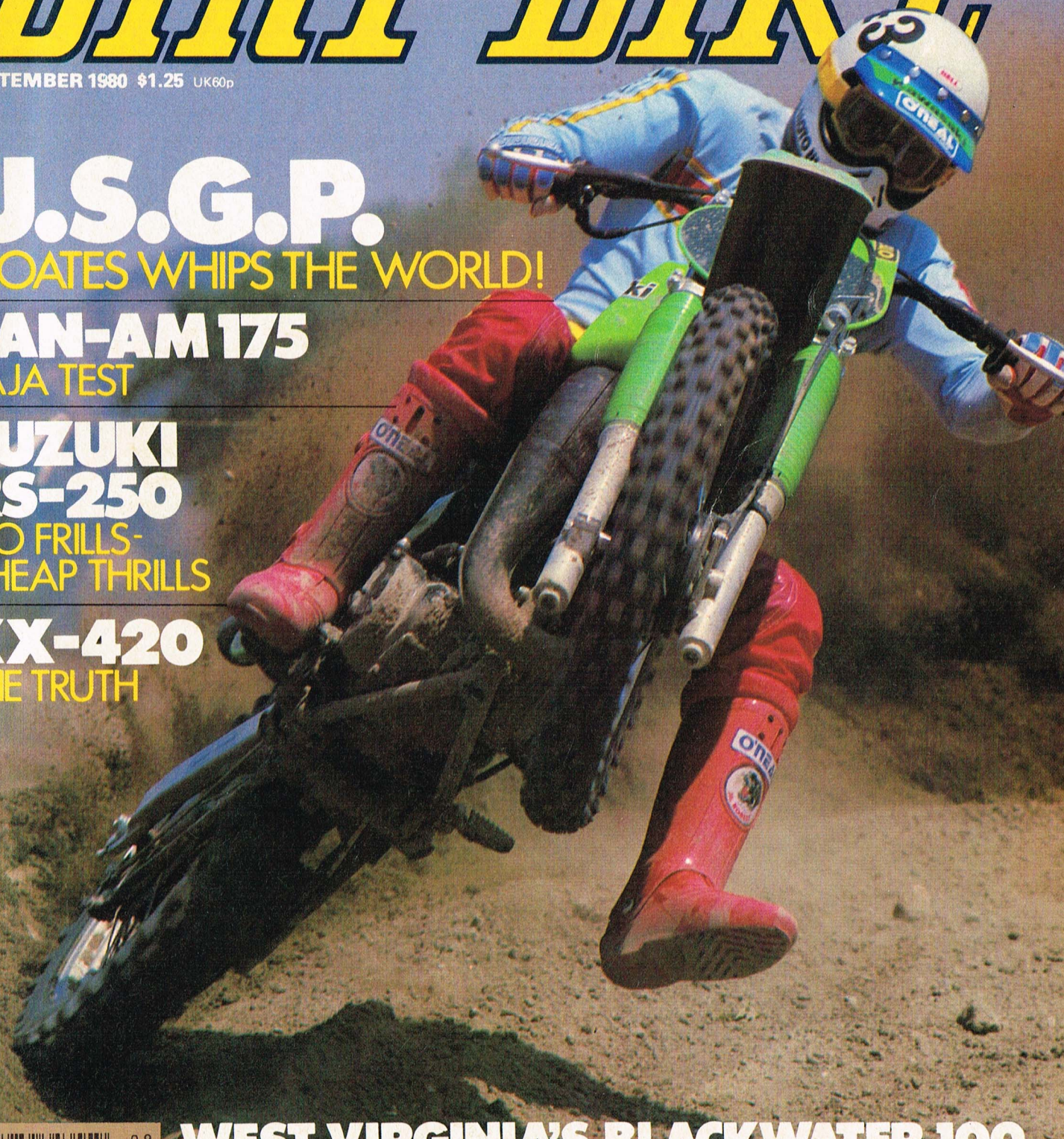
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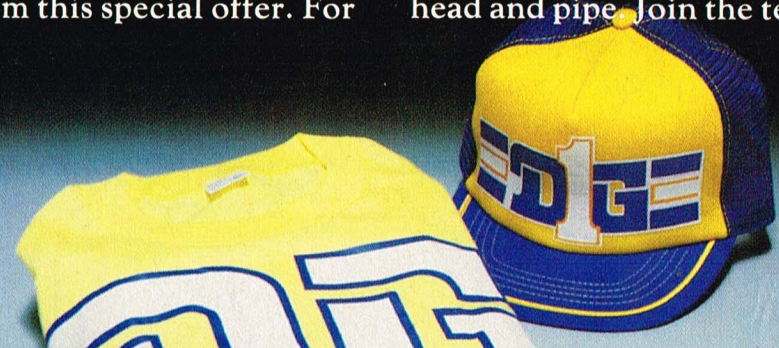
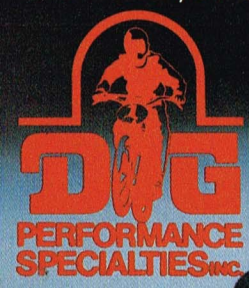


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**ON THE COVER:** — Rod Brand on the KX420.

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# DIRT BIKE

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## KAWASAKI KX420A1

# HEAVY METAL

*Long, Tall Torquer*

By The Staff of Dirt Bike

### First Date

While first impressions are great when interviewing for a job, or meeting someone at a party, they're very dangerous things to trust on a motorcycle. Case in point: the new Kawasaki KX420.

The very first time we rode the long green bike, we were thoroughly disappointed with the handling and suspension. We headed back to the pits, slipped a crate under the bike and went about the usual business of adjusting the bike to suit us. Or so we thought.

Back on the track, the KX was still miserable. Initially, the rear end was so stiff that it only moved about half a stroke except when landing from a big jump.

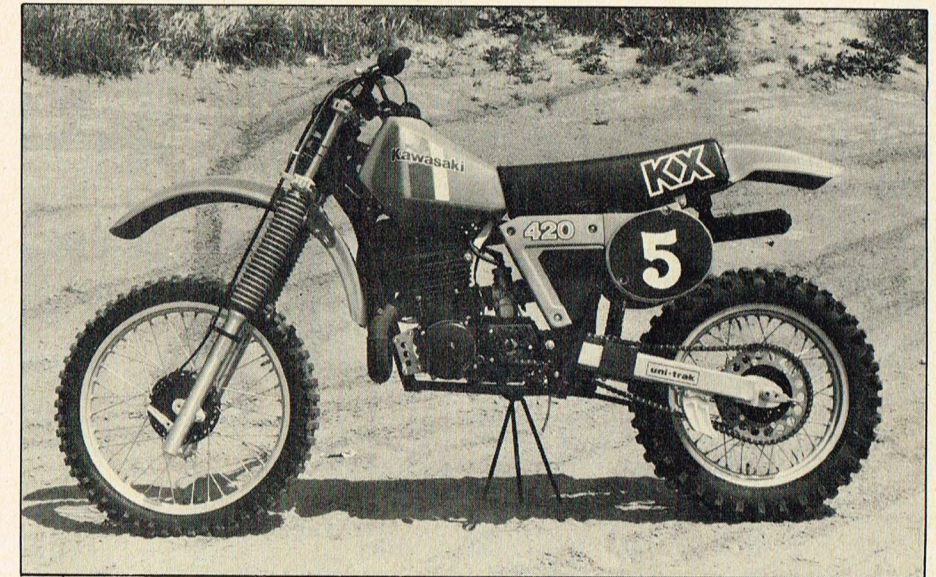
We backed way off the preload and got a crusher ride . . . one that was acceptable, with the rebound action being on the sluggish side. However, the bike then wallowed in the turns and the front end pushed badly and washed out instantly if a berm was not handy.

Back to the pits. We raised the forks in the triple clamps to get some steering accuracy back. This gave us a pronounced head-shaking when decelerating.

At this point, we were glad that we had Rod Brand with us for the test. Rod rides out of Hi Desert Kawasaki (Victorville, California), and is familiar with the Uni-Trak bikes. He rides a KX125 in the pro class and is a consistent winner on his modified machine.

Rod told us that a great deal of break-in time was required to get the Unis working right. Discouraged, we gave the bike to Rod and let him do the dirty work. After we took our photos, Rod loaded up the bike and headed for the shop to thoroughly check out the 420. He had some ideas and his sponsor, John Harris, had a few others.

We kept in touch by phone, getting



progress reports from Rod and John, and made plans to meet at DeAnza racetrack. Rod showed up bristling with confidence and proceeded to run away with the 500 pro class win. Oddly enough, another KX420 took second place and was the only bike to run with Rod for a few laps.

After Rod won both motos, we sat down and jawed with him about the 420. He'd put about eight hours of hard riding time on the bike in the interim and had made adjustments as the suspension bedded in. The stock reeds were removed and Boyesen reeds installed. Some slots were cut in the side panel covering the air filter to let additional air in, and a screen was rigged over the slots to keep debris out.

Damping on the Uni-Trak is adjustable, but only for the compression stroke. Here, Rod set the damping at the lightest setting. This is a must. Most of the 420s come set on the light position, but many come set in the middle. If yours is set anywhere other than the lightest setting, you'll probably wear the bike out before the rear end breaks in and starts to feel right.

We let Rod race the bike a few more times before we got it back to complete our phase of the test. The only other change noted between the first win and our test, was the installation of Metzlers, front and rear. The front Metzler was in good condition, but the rear tire had seen the wars. A handful of starts over the concrete Saddleback starting gate ripped off some of the knobs. We were leery of lack of traction because of the state of the tire, but went ahead and rode the bike anyway.

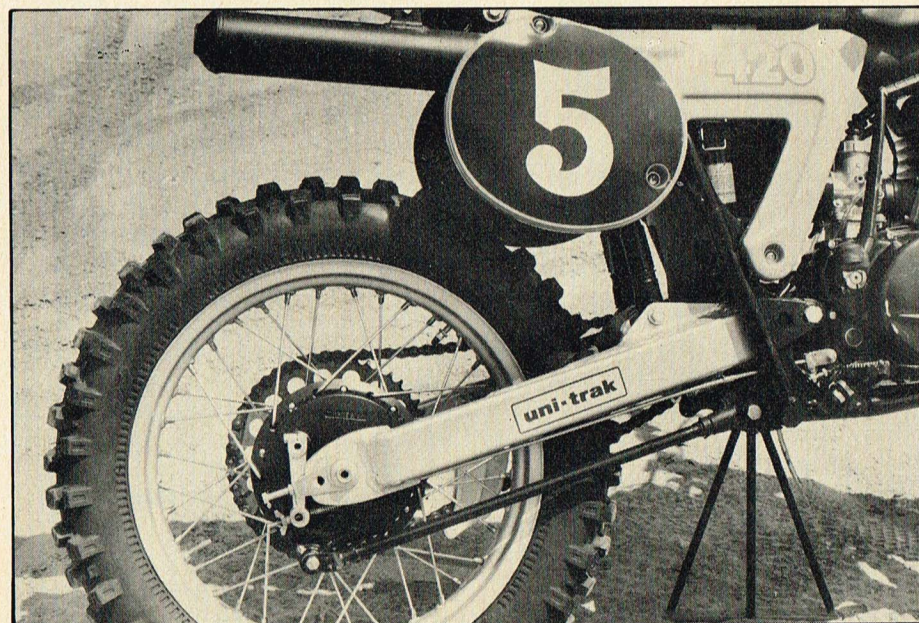
The differences between the first ride and this one were truly astounding. Now, the rear end stroked smoothly and comfortably throughout the entire stroke. Stutter-bumps were non-existent.

None of the poor steering manners of the first riding session were present. In fact, the KX420 tracked well through flat, bermless turns. At least as sharp as any other long-travel bike we've ever ridden.

While some of the improvement in steering must be credited to the Metzler up front, it was obvious that there



Joe Suebert works the 420 through a loose turn.



Longest swingarm in captivity. It was sturdy and we found no flex.

was a vast difference between the first time we rode the bike and after it was broken in.

#### Getting To Know You

Even properly set up, the KX420 takes some getting used to. Right off, every test rider commented something like: "Jeez, is that thing long!" As soon as the chain has been adjusted one good time, you're looking at a 60-inch wheelbase. Lordy! We can remember back when a 57-inch wheelbase was considered outrageously long. Guess that dates us a bit, eh?

What all that length means to you, is that the KX420 is not a bike that can be flicked from side to side. Nope. You have to set it up, plan your arc through a corner, then sit there and let the bike do the job. Try to horse the 420 around, and you'll find out that it's a handful.

Making the bike even less responsive to input, is the fact that it's heavy. The manual says the 420 weighs in at 231 pounds, dry. Ours hit the scales bone-dry at 242 pounds, which is exactly the same weight as a 1973 400 CZ, for those who are amused by number games. Add pre-mix, gear and fork oil to this, and the scales can push very close to 260 pounds, ready to race.

Too much.

Still, if one rides the 420 like a jockey, lightly poised and not fighting the machine, very quick lap times can be turned. Rod Brand's wins were obviously no fluke.

While the long wheelbase and extra weight made themselves felt in the turns, they didn't seem to affect the bike at high speeds over rough ground. Again, as long as the rider did not fight the bike. We'd have to rate the KX420 as the most stable bike we've tested yet.

There was only one area where the stability was questionable, and that was in deep sand. Here, at lower speeds, flotation was difficult to arrive at and turning required a great deal of muscle and lots of throttle.

Taking jumps on the 420 was an experience. It was best not to fight the bike at all; instead, let it assume whatever attitude it wanted. Even if the rider hit the ground with the rear end grossly out of line, the KX would invariably snap back straight. Very impressive.

Once we had the bike working right, landings were no hassle at all. None of the usual thudding and thumping experienced with most bikes was present. Even the forks worked in reasonable harmony with that magic rear end.

Travel at both ends is 300 millimeters, which works out to a fraction under 12 inches. Plenty.

Adjustability is almost limitless with the big KX, with the exception of changing rebound damping. Still, we found no need for increased rebound damping at any time. However, as the shock gets a large number of hours on it, it might need more. Please note that we said "might."

As with all Kayaba-manufactured forks, oil level, viscosity and air pressure can be easily changed to dial in any characteristics desired.

Getting to the Uni-Trak for adjustments was no picnic. According to the manual, you have to remove the shock to change the preload. We found it easier to lay the bike over on its side and tap the jam nut loose with a punch. Then, we could increase or decrease the preload nut easily with the Kawasaki spanning tool.

Getting to the compression damping adjustment was a real bear and required taking half the bike apart. However, this should only have to be done once . . . and left on the softest position possible.

Some of the initial harshness of the Uni-Trak can be traced to a lack of grease on all the pivot points. And these points should be cleaned and greased regularly, or performance and life span will suffer. Be warned.

#### Lotsa Motor

Once you get the massive KX420 lit, a great deal of vibration can be felt through the bars and the pegs, even while the bike is warming up. Oh yes . . . starting. The less said about that, the better, because the KX proved to be a real bear to start. When sitting on the bike, the rider will have his right knee cocked up almost to his ear with the kickstarter at the top of the stroke. And you can take bets that the bike absolutely *will not* start on the first kick. No way, no how. Plan on at least a half-dozen kicks if things go right. More, if you have a lazy leg. In between the first kick and the time the bike snarls to life, there'll be an assortment of ka-paffs, bangs, pops and grunts like a 1949 Dodge running on glow plugs, uphill, against a stiff wind . . . on bad gas. Get the message?

Whatever. Once the beast is lit and warmed up, off you go. Clutch action is light and engagement is smooth and predictable. At the lower part of the mid-range, vibration is bad, then the

(Continued on page 56)



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(Continued from page 25)

engine smooths out a bit, only to start shaking badly again as the revs gain.

Don't expect a lot of revs out of the Kawasaki. The engine will peak out at just over 6000 revs and the power will shut off like a door being slammed. That's OK by us, though, as the KX makes buckets of power down low in the rpm range and the spread of power is perfect for an open bike. Sure, the YZ465 makes more horsepower from the mid-range on up, but overall, we prefer the kind of power the KX puts out. You can short-shift easily and comfortably without the bike blubbering and stumbling. The 420 actually starts to pull right above idle and has no odd surges or hitches in the power curve all the way to the top. Like we said, the only thing that did bother us was the excessive vibration.

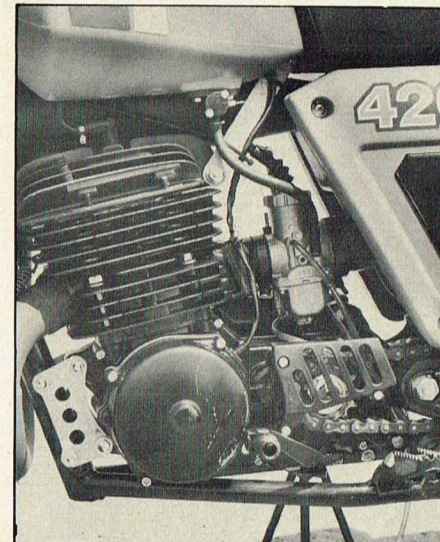
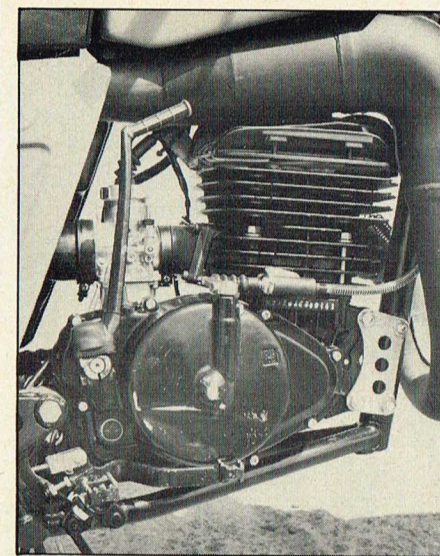
We later traced this to a chronic Kawasaki problem: motor mount bolts too small for the holes. We've experienced this in every 1980 Kawasaki we've tested this year. One additional problem rears its head: There are too few motor mounts on the engine. You have one set up front, another at the rear acting as a sub-member to the swingarm pivot, and one head steady. That's it. And that's not enough. We'd like to see at least two more bosses cast into the bottom of the engine for increased rigidity. Rod plans to drill out the stock holes and run some hefty bolts through, as well as shimming up the mounts themselves.

Even with the strong power, the KX420 had no tendency to wheelie. Part of this can be credited to the long wheelbase and part to the ultra-long swingarm, which must be the longest in captivity, as of this writing.

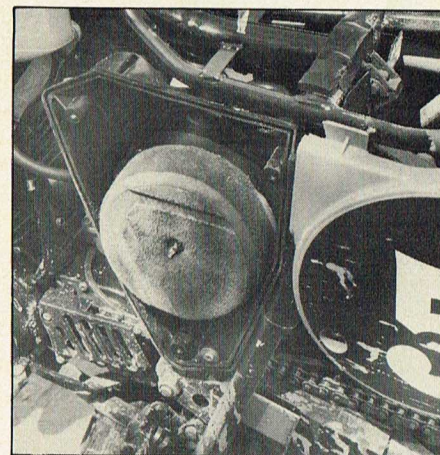
Compared to other new-generation bikes, the distance between the swingarm pivot and the countershaft sprocket seems overly long, and we expected some chain problems. None occurred, though, which should speak well for the Tsubaki 520 chain that came with the bike, stock.

### As Time Went On . . .

. . . we were able to find out more and more about the Uni-Trak rear end. Once well broken in, the ride got plusher and plusher, until, one fine spring day, the rear wheel traveled so much that it made contact with the rear fender and put one of our riders neatly over the bars. The rubber stopper deteriorated to the point where it allowed an extra bit of travel, and an



Motor shares a lot of pieces with the 400 enduro of last year. Carb is easily accessible. We felt that the distance between the countershaft sprocket and the swingarm pivot was too far, but experienced no chain problems. Fat pipe is well-tucked-in to prevent burns.



With the left side panel removed, you can see how the plastic presses against the foam and restricts the airflow. We cut some slots in our side panels to improve the airflow. Massive tubing and bracing can be seen on the frame rails above the filter.

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extra bit at the shock translated into a lot at the rear axle. We're told that Kawasaki has a spacer fix-'em in the works to solve this problem. Also, there's more than one company experimenting with adjustable aluminum vertical wishbone arms. More on this in later issues, hopefully. Chances are you'll never experience this bottoming-out if you hit with the power on. But, for those odd times when the bike really crunches into something with the throttle rolled off, be warned.

After about 20 hours of hard riding and racing, the motor started to puff a little blue smoke. The top end was torn

down and inspected, but found to be in fine shape. The trouble was traced to a crank seal, a problem that we also experienced with our KX125. Apparently, some more work is needed in this area by the factory. It never got bad enough to affect performance, so we left the seal in place and kept a careful eye on the gearbox level.

Back to the Uni-Trak. Some riders have been taking the stock spring off and grinding one millimeter off the outer edge of the bottom three spring coils. Don't do this, please. It'll affect the steering of the bike. While you'll get a plusher ride immediately, once

the shock breaks in properly, the spring will sag way too much for good steering control. And, as we've told you so many times, the way your rear end is set up determines, to a large extent, just how the front end will steer.

#### Bits and Pieces

We found the brakes strong, with the rear being too sensitive for our tastes. We bent the brake rod slightly by hand to put some "give" into the actuation, and were pleased with the operation from that point forth.

If the engine in the 420 looks familiar to you, it's because many of the parts are based on the 400 enduro

powerplant. Naturally, it's a bigger engine, via a bore job, but the cases are pretty much the same.

A CDI makes spark for the KX420, while the 400 KDX had an external rotor mag. A massive 38 millimeter Mikuni carb mixes things up on the 420 and retains an impressive amount of low-end punch for such a large breather. In fact, the KX420 seems to have just about the same amount of punch down low as the 400 enduro bike of last year.

This translates into second-gear starts on almost any surface, and third-gear starts on flat, dry ground. One shift will usually carry you into the first turn.

We ran some drag races against the all-powerful YZ465 Yamaha and the KX stayed with the YZ until both bikes got into top gear, then the YZ pulled the KX by a few lengths or more. In deep sand, the KX would actually pull the YZ at first, but would lose ground as the speeds got higher.

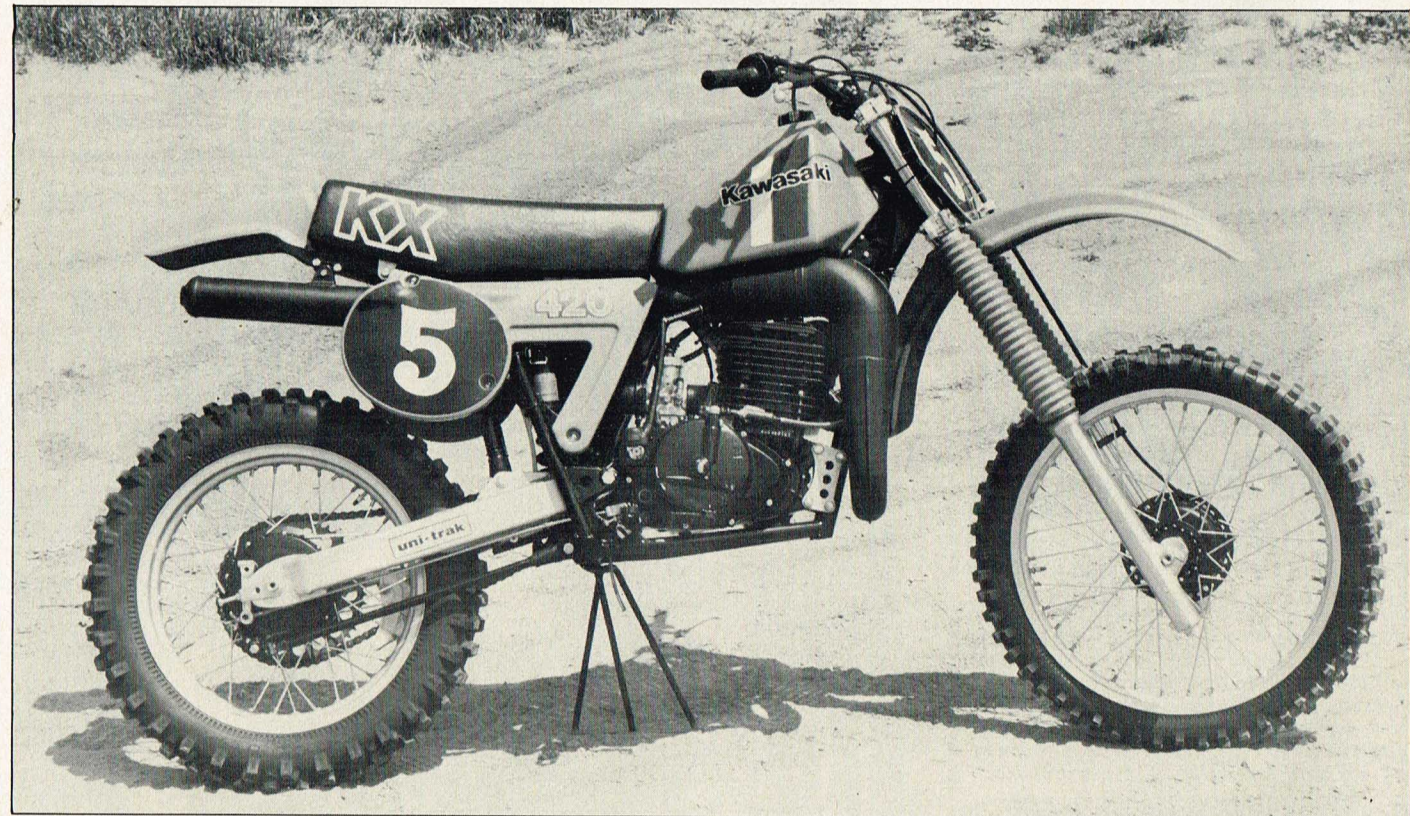
Our engine proved very reliable, showing very little wear and making no mechanical clatter whatsoever. We liked the increase in throttle response with the Boyesen reeds, even though the stock reeds gave the engine plenty of flexibility. Still, we're sold on the Boyesen reeds and use them whenever we can.

When blasting out of the starting gate, the KX 420 tracked straight and true, with no rear-end wagging. Just leave it on and shift when needed.

#### The Bottom Line

It's important to learn the KX420. Don't expect to just hop on the bike and ride it quickly right away. It takes getting used to, and it also takes patience to break it in and let the bike "seat" itself. Remember, adjustments are almost meaningless on the 420 unless you put in about eight to ten hours of hard riding time. Then, by sensibly approaching the available adjustments, you can end up with a very stable, predictable bike. We liked the kind of power the Kawasaki put out better than any other open class bike we've tested to date. It may not be the most, but it's the most correct.

There are some flaws with the newest KX, but nothing that can't be dialed in or straightened out in your garage in an evening's work. We'd like to see less weight and a solution to the bottoming-out problem, but, by and large, the KX420 is a satisfying bike with enormous potential. □



### KAWASAKI KX420 A-1 Specifications

NAME AND MODEL	Kawasaki KX420 A-1
ENGINE TYPE	Single-cylinder, two-stroke, reed valved
BORE AND STROKE	83 x 78mm
DISPLACEMENT	422cc
HORSEPOWER	38.1 at 6100 rpm
CARBURETION	Mikuni, 38mm
FACTORY RECOMMENDED JETTING:	
MAIN JET	165
JET NEEDLE	6F31-3
PILOT JET	35
SLIDE NUMBER	3.0
RECOMMENDED GASOLINE	Premium
FUEL TANK CAPACITY	9 liters (2.4 U.S. gallons)
FUEL TANK MATERIAL	Plastic
LUBRICATION	Pre-mix
RECOMMENDED OIL	Kawasaki Two-Cycle Racing Oil
AIR FILTRATION	Foam element/air box
CLUTCH TYPE	Wet, multi-disc
TRANSMISSION	Five-speed, constant mesh
GEARBOX RATIOS:	
1	2.00
2	1.45
3	1.18
4	0.95
5	0.79

GEARING, FRONT/REAR	14/50
IGNITION	CDI
PRIMARY KICK SYSTEM?	Yes
RECOMMENDED SPARK PLUG	NGK B9EV
SILENCER/SPARK ARRESTOR/QUALITY	Yes/no/average
EXHAUST SYSTEM	Expansion chamber, high-pipe
FRAME, TYPE	Tubular, single-downtube, split cradle
WHEELBASE	1520mm (59.8 inches)
GROUND CLEARANCE	355mm (13.9 inches)
SEAT HEIGHT	985mm (38.8 inches)
STEERING HEAD ANGLE (RAKE)	28 degrees
TRAIL	120mm
WEIGHT WITH ONE GALLON GAS	252 pounds
RIM MATERIAL	Aluminum alloy
TIRE SIZE AND TYPE:	
FRONT	3.00x21 full knobby
REAR	5.10x18 full knobby
SUSPENSION, TYPE AND TRAVEL:	
FRONT	Telescopic air/spring forks, 300mm (12.0 inches)
REAR	Uni-Trak swingarm, 300mm (12.0 inches)
INTENDED USE	Motocross
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	Japan
RETAIL PRICE, APPROX	\$1999

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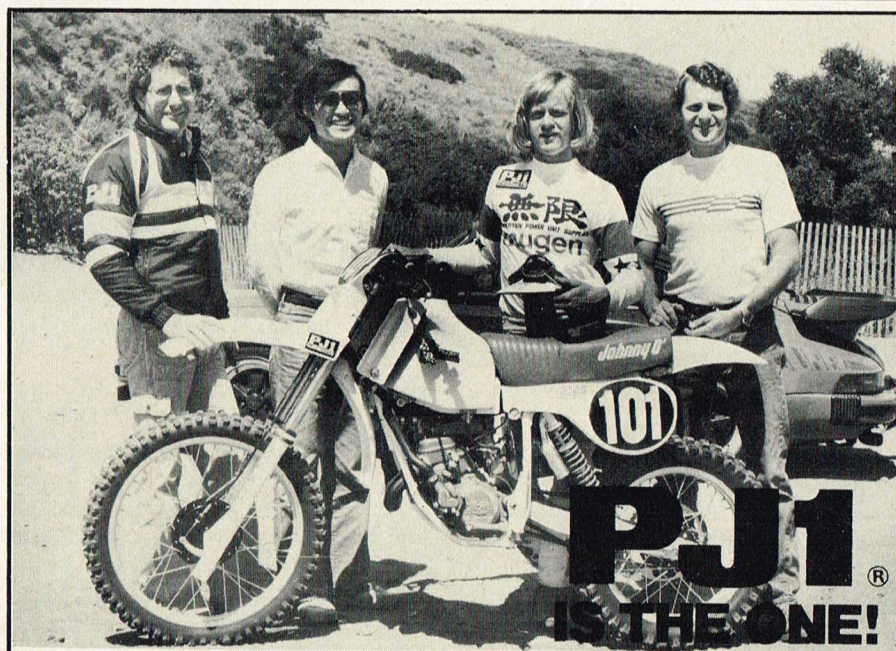
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