

Pro-racer performance with minimum effort

In ten years of testing dirt bikes, I don't think I have experienced a worse start to a test. The Lancashire moors are not a healthy place to be on most winter days but in mid-February, with the sleet being blown horizontal by a 40mph gale, they are definitely to be avoided.

But Colin Shutt, one of Britain's biggest Maico dealers, had gone to a lot of trouble to arrange for his rider Martin Holden, and a brand new 400 GP replica Maico, to be on the moors above Accrington and the show had to go on.

Colin's test track was like a scene from the Eastern front in 1944. The ground was totally water-logged and deep, clinging marsh mud was the prevalent surface. What were damp patches in summer were now small streams

and budding lakes, sometimes two feet deep and a network of ruts showed the passage of other hardy souls — although not even the keenest amongst them appeared whilst we were there.

At first, the Maico refused to fire on the kick-start — which is a point in its favour, since it unquestionably had more sense than we did and wanted to remain in the comparative warmth and comfort of Martin's van. However, once persuaded into action, it proved an unfailing starter throughout the rest of the test.

The engine is a simple single cylinder two-stroke with a flywheel magneto and points ignition. No reed-valve is fitted and lubrication is by oil in the petrol. Like any racing engine, the Maico is well finned and

MAICO 400



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on our test day, the motor took some warming up.

Whilst waiting for it to reach a working temperature, I had chance to notice that at long last the exhaust note has been reduced to a sensible level. Maico claim that it now meets both FIM and AMA standards for racing engines, which puts it somewhere in the same region as a loud roadster: an excellent step in the right direction.

First gear engaged smoothly and there was no apparent clutch drag, an important point since a dragging clutch can be acutely embarrassing when trying to manoeuvre a bike on to the starting line or in the confines of the paddock. The action was heavy but this is no detriment since once the bike is on the move, the clutch is rarely, if ever, used.

Venturing forth on what looked like being my last ever ride — the sleet was now so

heavy, I couldn't even see the far side of the track — I got the Maico on the move and plunged it into the morass. What became immediately apparent, literally within yards, was that the bike went exactly where the rider aimed it. Even on a surface with no grip worthy of the name, I merely pointed the front wheel where I wanted to go, opened the throttle and the rest of the bike followed.

Power delivery was superb — the sort of thing a racer dreams about. Only a good four stroke delivers the goods with the same degree of controllability and in many ways the Maico could be likened to a four stroke. The power commenced at zero revs and just kept on arriving in an endless, creamy surge as the throttle was opened. And in the slime and mud in which I was riding, I couldn't have asked for anything better.

Before I rode the bike, Martin warned me not to expect the motor to be an ultra-quick one — and he was right. Compared to a 370 Suzuki or even a 250 Husky, the Maico is no faster. But there is a sub-clause to that statement. The Maico is no faster if it were run against those two bikes on a dry, smooth track. On a true motocross track, with all the vagaries of surface and drive which this involves, a vastly different picture emerges.

The biggest factor in this bike's favour is that the power is useable all the time. There is no "on/off" switch as the motor hits the power band or gassing up because of a lack of revs. Instead, instant, infinitely controllable acceleration is on tap whenever, and wherever the rider wants it. That sort of power is for racing, not for the benefit of surging adrenalin through the veins of journalists.

Converting the power into drive — for drive directly equals acceleration (and prize money) in moto cross — is a very clever frame which looks as if it has just come from

the last Grand Prix of the 1976 season, which in fact, it has. Like the motor, it is very basic, very spartan and extremely effective.

Constructed from German chrome-molybdenum tubing, the chassis is of duplex construction with not an ounce of excess gusseting or over-engineered bracket. The factory's works 250 frames are very slightly lighter but for the power of the big engine, the Maico frame is right on the limit of reliability.

Looking after the front end are Maico's own forks and they offer 9½in of uncannily smooth and sensitive action. It seems that every dirt bike I have ridden lately wins my praise for the quality of its front forks, which shows, if nothing else, that every manufacturer is making progress in this field. Even in this context, the Maico's forks are superb and I will take a chance and say that they are equal to the best available at present. The average road rider just does not realise how much he is missing as he goes bumping down the road on forks which haven't been improved since Matchless introduced the Teledraulics in the 1940s. The Maico forks will soak up the impact of a six inch deep pothole, hit square on, with scarcely a tremor and all the time they are feeding the rider with the information he needs to know about the track surface.

The benefit of this cannot be overstated and time and time again I found that I could float the Maico over ruts and bogs with the front wheel giving effortless guidance, where on a lesser bike, a wheelie would have been required with a commensurate increase in the uncertainty of my navigation.

The rear end was equally good with a pair of Girling gas shocks providing the suspension medium. These dampers may not be the ultimate but I defy 98 per cent of riders to split the difference between them, and their competitors costing two or three times as much.

With 9½in of travel at the rear wheel, the normal grip-seeking characteristics of any motorcycle with long travel rear suspension is amplified. Martin had fitted the latest 5.50in x 18in "wet" Trelleborg tyre to the rear and this gave immense drive in conjunction with Maico's rear suspension design.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in practice starts. Engaging second gear and dropping the clutch at about 4,000rpm, the Maico left the line like a Phantom Jet. Despite the atrocious surface, the rear found drive and what is just as important, the bike was absolutely stable. In five starts, only one would have failed to get me into the first corner amongst the leaders in any centre scramble and that was because I slipped on the saddle and caused the bike to topple. Every other start was straight and true with the acceleration really impressive



in view of the conditions.

Maico's production machines are arguably the nearest of any manufacturer to those raced by their works riders in the Grands Prix. Certainly, a 400 Maico straight off the showroom floor is a lot nearer to Graham Noyce's bike than a Suzuki is to Roger de Coster's machine or a CZ to that raced by one of the Russians. Last year, one of the major differences between the works bikes and those raced by privateers was the magnesium wheel hubs used by the factory men. Now these are standard fittings with a consequent reduction in unsprung weight.

Both brakes are smooth and powerful needing only a light action to bring them fully into play. There wasn't a great need for ultra-keen anchors when I rode the bike — keeping going was a greater problem than stopping — but like the rest of the bike, you can't argue with the results they produce in the Grands Prix. Seeing how Adolf Weil outbrakes opponents time without number, there cannot be so very much wrong with the Maico design.

Another improvement from last year is the fork seal, which, it is claimed, gives a longer life and a better wiping action. There is none of the "stiction" which Maico forks used to exhibit when new and judging from the cleanliness of the stanchions at the end of our test, the seals were doing a thorough job of clearing away the debris.

Internally the motor is much the same as last year's with the exception of the piston which now carries a single Dykes ring and the carburettor, a new 36mm unit from Bing. Claimed power is now slightly increased to 43bhp although this figure is somewhat misleading. I have no doubt that the best Maico engines do give 43bhp but unless my riding ability is vastly improving, the power which the Maico produces is nothing like the arm-wrenching, eyeball crushing genuine 44bhp which Bultaco's 400 MX'er used to give. I quote this bike because I can be positive of the power output and also because it was the most ferocious machine I have ever ridden on the dirt. In my experience, much above 40bhp and things get very hairy for all but the world's best riders, and as I said at length, the Maico's virtue lies in the amount of useable power it produces, not in its ability to flick its riders off the back of the saddle.

The gearbox is very much Maico, with a perfect clutchless selection being guaranteed. Five ratios are provided but bottom is usually superfluous in racing conditions, although useful for manoeuvring the bike in the paddock.

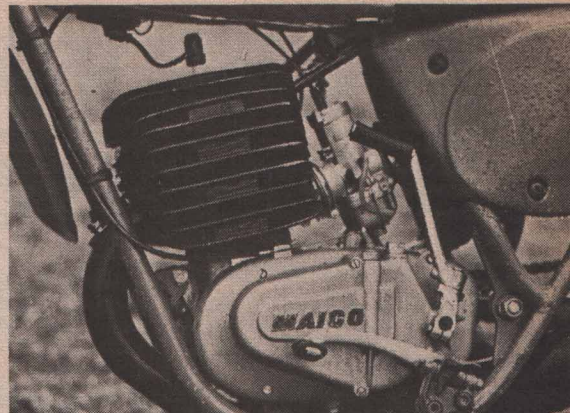
Now that the suspension movement has been increased, the saddle thickness has had to be reduced somewhat in order to lower the overall height. Maico are experiencing the same problem as all manufacturers of machines with long travel rear suspension in that the bike has to be high off the ground in order to avoid the

frame bottoming when the suspension is fully compressed. I could just about cope comfortably with the Maico's seat-height and I am over 5ft 10in. Shorter riders would be well advised to avoid footing.

The biggest drawback with increased height is that it makes power sliding the bike more difficult since the centre of gravity is so high. It is little use trying to employ a gentle throttle hand if you want the Maico's back end to step out. Rather, a really good handful of throttle and the rider's weight well forward is needed to break traction, after which, the drift can be comfortably held with the rider safe in the knowledge that the back end will straighten up as soon as the throttle is closed. Not only is the Maico a GP bike in name, but it also takes more than a little of the GP rider's approach to perform well.

The atrocious test conditions showed one or two weaknesses in the Maico's design which really should be sorted out. The saddle is smooth and of a very flat shape, in order to aid rider mobility. Unfortunately, with a liberal layer of slime between the saddle and the rider's bottom, a trifle too much mobility occurs — much of it unintentional. A more pronounced rise at the very rear of the saddle would give more stability under adverse conditions without any detriment to rider comfort in the dry.

The footrests were really dreadful for a bike of this calibre. In fact, they were shocking for any dirt bike. Although the machine was brand new, they had already begun to sag downwards. Martin's mechanic had already identified the problem and modifications were imminent. The cleats on the rests themselves were small and rounded and gave an unfortunate sense of insecurity. Making a new set of footrests



The engine is almost the same as on last year's model, but the piston now has a single Dykes ring and a 36mm Bing carburettor.

is only a minor job for a competition rider but what a shame that they shouldn't come perfectly designed from a factory as experienced as this and whose product sells for a not insubstantial £1095 plus VAT.

And that price tag indicates both the Maico's strengths and weaknesses. Nearly £1200 is a lot of money to pay for a single cylinder two stroke with points ignition and petroil lubrication. But the money does buy you a genuine potential GP winner. You won't get the magnesium fork yokes the works bikes have but these apart, your 400 Maico and the ones used by Noyce and Weil in the '76 Grands Prix will be brothers. Not identical twins perhaps but born within an hour, nevertheless. And if you can ride, the Maico will earn you a living in professional moto cross and that really sums up the bike.

