

COMPETITION TEST: KAWASAKI KDX175



ZEROING IN ON PERFECTION

Does it or doesn't it? Dirt exponent IAN SMITH took a purported-to-be-serious enduro weapon into its natural habitat to find the answer.

If the 1970s saw massive Japanese development of the off-road motorcycle with the accent on trials and motocross then the 1980s sees the spin-off — off-the-shelf enduro motorcycles capable of winning gold medals.

Europe has always had such machines, built to a slightly different philosophy, however. First build a quality machine, then put a price on it. Hence, all the Europeans ever expected and all they ever got was a limited market. Particularly in Australia where the purchase of such a machine invariably put you at the mercy of an importer who used to stamp "sucker" on your head when you walked in to get spare parts. Thus it was the Japanese who eventually introduced trail

riding to the masses and created an accessories market of "performance" equipment which had been unnecessary with the European motorcycles.

Japan's recent motocross developments have now been handed down to the long-suffering enduro minority in the form of potential gold medal-winning bikes. While the Yamaha (T range) and the Suzuki (PE range) are established, Kawasaki is a relative newcomer on the scene. In fact, the street legal version of the KDX175 has been available for less than a year.

Through the courtesy of Kawasaki Motors Australia in general, and Roger Young in particular, I tested the 175 in the hurly-burly of a two day enduro in the hinterland of Woolgoolga, near Coffs Harbour. As Young

commented: "We are tired of seeing bikes evaluated by being ridden for a couple of hours around the local quarry when they really need to be tested in the complete environment they were designed for."

First up, the KDX175 looked good. In the showroom it looked the part. After loading it on to the trailer I was handed the owner's manual. It is supplied with the view that enduro-trail riders tend to work on their motorcycles. If that is its aim it succeeds admirably. Basics such as sprocket wear, where to use an oil can and a disassembly chart are well illustrated and easy to comprehend.

Resplendent with blinkers, battery and mirror (with an over-long stalk), it was the only motorcycle that carried



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The Uni-Trak rear-end tracks well over rough terrain.



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full street legal gear at Woolgoolga, starting point of the enduro. To pass scrutineering, you have to kick the motor over. First problem — it refused to start. Since it was my initial effort at this exercise I would normally disregard it, but it was to occur again. Suffice it to say, it did eventually respond.

Now we come to one of the two essential considerations — riding the motorcycle. Swinging my leg over was not the painful experience it had been on other machines. At 940 mm, the seat height was within the limits of acceptability and it is pleasing to see manufacturers conscious of this point in the '80s.

It fired easily at start time on this occasion as we conveyed out to the start proper before the first competitive section. Clocking through the control, at last the tyres bit dirt and I have to echo here what every tester has written over the years. If we're getting serious about competition machinery, as distinct from dual purpose bikes, how about serious rubber? Bridgestones and IRCs get you there and aren't bad, but there are better.

Through the banana plantation and up a moderate climb to the lookout control. The Green Meanie stormed

up with ease, indicating ample power. It was an impression I retained throughout the test. After the lookout, a couple of downhills. Tight, log-ridden, designed to catch the unwary. By this time the 28 degree rake angle had let me know the steering was light. And though I feared a front wheel tuck-in at any time, it was not to be. At all times directional control was easily maintained and for a trial the like of Coff's it made for easy going on the single-track trails.

This was borne out in real terms because I happened to be in the 350 class (to allow our club team to be legal as we all had 175s). In the tight sections I was able to make up time on some of the larger machines that disappeared in open going.

We had been forewarned by rumour of a steep climb that would trap some (and it did). That the Kawasaki climbed it with ease was partly attributable to the rear suspension tracking well over bumpy surfaces. The Uni-Trak, through its angle of suspension, tends to keep the nose down and the only problem with climbing was the gap between first and second gear. From 2.692 (35/13) to 1.687 (27/16) should be closed up to allow continuous acceleration as the power band tends to lapse in the mid

range. To compensate, the overdrive gears at the upper end of the range could be scaled down slightly.

At the fourth control the chain cover had almost fallen off. Removing it revealed some of the few weaknesses in design. If you were unlucky enough to throw a chain, a rare event in these days of sophisticated guides and tensioners, be prepared for worse problems as it jams on to your gear lever. It really should have been designed better.

Back to the trail again, and the machine continues to impress with its good trail manners, being a safe bike for any class of rider. At the fuel dump its fuel consumption parallels that of its rivals.

As dusk falls at the end of Day One it is nice to reflect that I have had no spills. Except for a misadventure on a greasy 10 metre slope, I would have been clean on trail time. But that is no reflection on the motorcycle, just its tyres.

Sunday dawns, another perfect day, and riders leave the beachside park at the rate of two a minute. The bikes are required to pass a cold start test and the Kawasaki just scrapes through in the 60 seconds allotted time. Today is the championship round. Some tall poppies,

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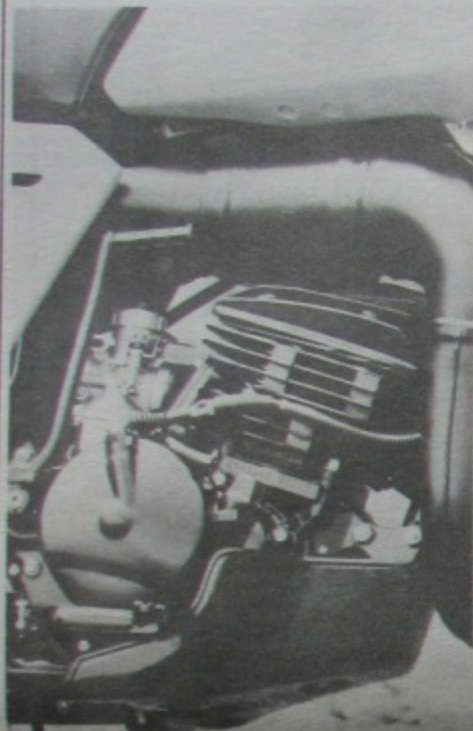
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including Phil Lovett, are already out and there are many others, who had entered but didn't see Day One through, just watching.

Everything proceeds smoothly and I'm even getting the hang of not stalling the motor, a legacy of a long stroke (50mm) and good compression combining to produce this effect when under brakes, strong, incidentally, at both ends.



The engine comes into its own during special tests. Note the big bash plate.



Out on the trail and having fun; with a number on the front it is a potential enduro gold medal winner.

By the last competitive section I'm starting to get that invincible feeling that comes from confidence. A narrow shaded animal track threading its way through rainforest undergrowth provides an exhilarating ride and, suddenly, a shocking conclusion to my euphoria. A log, no more than 40 centimetres in diameter, is directly in my path. What's worse, it sits half a metre above the earth and is solid. What's worse still is that I'm going too fast for effective log hopping!

In a flash, basic training floods my conscious and I lift the front wheel, only to be immediately catapulted over the bars as the rear slams into the log and pitches skyward. The shock of landing heavily on my spine and sliding five metres down the trail momentarily paralyses me before I stagger to my feet. Alas, the bike has suffered from a right side landing. Both blinkers have

been demolished. Amazingly, however, there is no ding in the rear rim and no spokes loose, testimony to their strength.

The crash has put a small damper on an otherwise excellent weekend but there is some compensation when the motocross special test comes around. Though 350 class winner Trevor Ingold finishes a comfortable first in my heat, the KDX manages to beat home the other two contestants, one a Husqvarna 250 and the other a PE 250, which again reflects the handling and in particular the front air forks, hitched up to the 21 inch front wheel via a leading axle.

With the event over we qualified for a silver medal, which would have been gold except for my Day One miscalculations. We were also members of the second placed (of 14) club teams, so the Green Meanie was right in there at the finish.

The following weekend I went trailriding with two Yamaha IT 175 owners. The main object for me was a water test. A delightful creek I know provides the right depth with variation of bed surfaces from sand to solid rock. The Kawasaki passed with flying colours. The CDI ignition kept the plug firing the 66 mm piston, while the 33 centimetres of ground clearance proved adequate for rock hopping.

So to the second essential — maintenance. As we have come to expect from Japanese off road motorcycles, all the things you need to get at are readily accessible, especially the air filter (a one nut operation). But there is one small problem — Phillips head screws instead of Allen heads. For on-trail work periods, or just speedy maintenance, these must be changed.

Summing up is probably best epitomized in two statements. One from the manager of the rider who narrowly won the NSW 175 State title on an opposition brand: "I still think the Kawasaki is the best 175 available." The other from myself. When asked by a number of people whether I would buy one, I had no hesitation in answering "yes".

It is a bike whose motor performs to the standard of the others but needs a refinement of gearing. In handling, a reflection of every other moving part of the bike, it scores very high marks and appears to be the pick of its class. In attention to detail — Phillips head screws aside — it has almost arrived and, to top it, it looks the best. The state of the art? No, but awfully close.

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