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SUPER BIKE

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PLUS

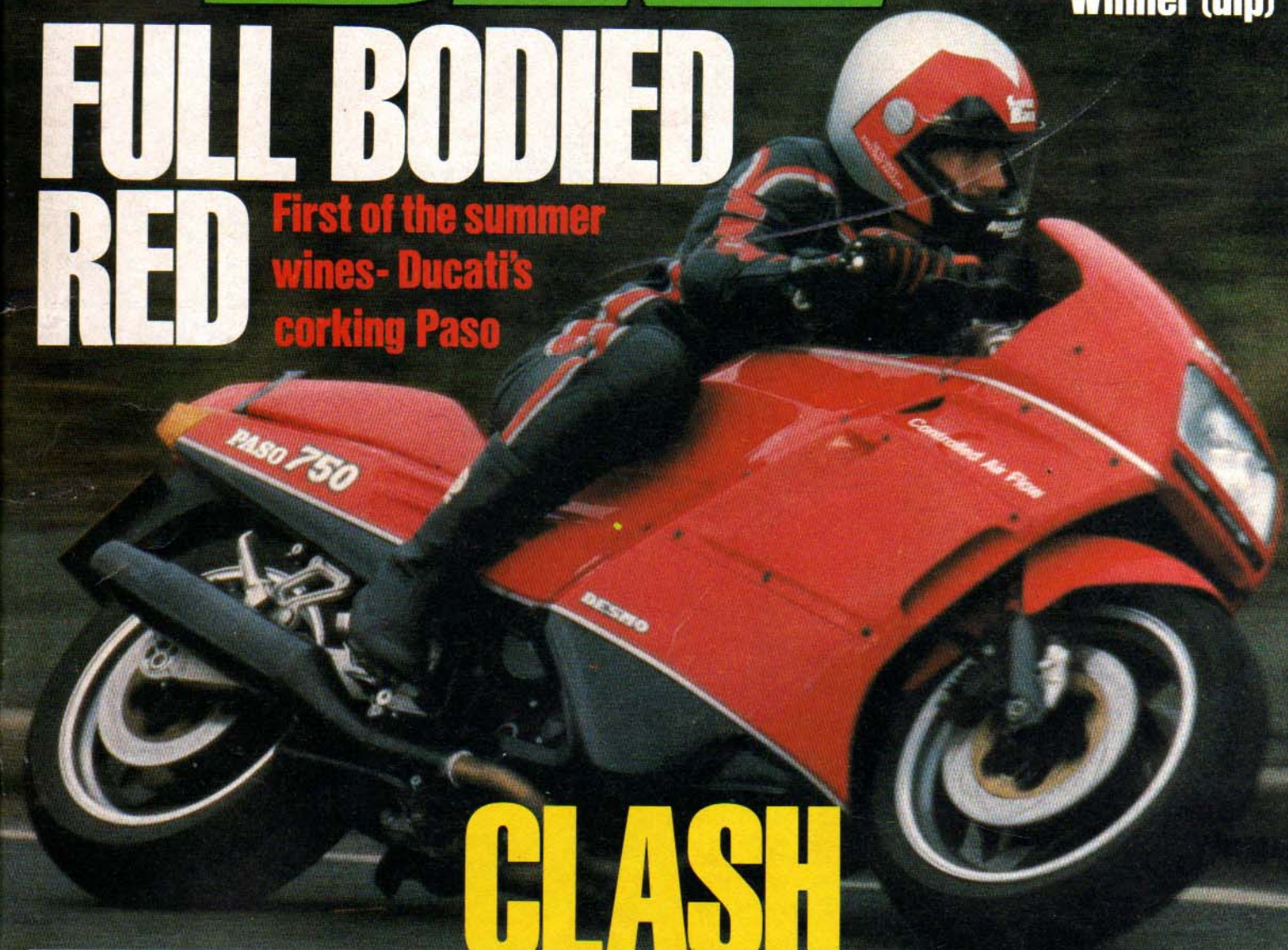
World's Quickest Ducati?

300mph Jammer Custom (eh?)

Triumph's Oriental Winner (ulp)

FULL BODIED RED

First of the summer wines- Ducati's corking Paso



CLASH OF THE HYPED ONES

Titanic Tests: Honda CBR1000 v Yamaha FZR1000

PLUS Honda CBR600, Transalp, Yamaha FZX750, TZR250...we ride 'em all!

FULL BODIED RED

Ducati Paso 750

TM gets drunk with power on the new Bologna vintage

Il Nostro Passato Ha Un Grande Futuro. I didn't do Italian at school, but I reckon my interpretation of this sentiment on Ducati's 750 Paso sales leaflet will probably agree with yours. The Cagiva/Ducati concern, and by extension their agents in this country, Moto Vecchia, are pinning high hopes on this interesting new model. I went up to Brian Capper's Sports Equipe in Northwich, Cheshire, to have a brief scoot about on the first "British" Paso.

In evolving the Paso's distinctive all-enclosing bodywork, Ducati were actually ahead of the game, launching the bike several months before Honda revealed their new CBRs. Making motorcycles more like cars is the most obvious way of reducing mechanical noise, and noise reduction has to be the top priority for any bike manufacturer serious about still being in business in the 1990s. Total enclosure

can have an effect on a bike's aerodynamic efficiency, but so long as the rider's bod continues to stick out all over the place, such streamlining effects as might be gained are more coincidental than anything else. As slogans go, though, "Controlled Air Flow" sounds a lot better to a prospective owner than "Controlled Noise Emission".

Whether you like the Paso's shape or not is a matter of personal taste. I went up to Cheshire with no real feelings on the subject, which in itself is a kind of negative reaction because Ducatis have always had a positive effect on me in the past (to look at, that is; and to ride — when they're running). Pictures of the bike I'd seen had left me stone cold. I thought the "screen" was too high and oddly shaped, and the whole machine seemed rather gentrified for a Ducati, as if a Laverda-style decision had been made to chase after the BMW market.

This impression was reinforced when I heard about Moto Vecchia's plan to interest affluent City types in the idea of lease-purchasing Pasos, I suppose previous Dukes have had a sort of "gentleman's conveyance" cachet about them, but it would require a considerable act of faith on the part of a busy businessman with a knowledge of motorcycles to place his trust in the ability of a Bologna product to get him to his next crucial meeting.

To be fair though, the Pantah engine has ushered in a new era of comparative realiability for Ducati. The 750cc version lurking beneath the Paso's panelling is rated at 74bhp at 7900rpm by the factory; the only differences between this motor and that of the F1 750 (other than the use of a reversed rear cylinder head à la Elefant) are the adoption of a central, car-type twin-choke downdraught Weber 44 DCNF 107 carb, and a new exhaust system.

It's in the cycle parts department where most changes have taken place. For a start there's the new frame, which is actually a fairly conventional box-section steel cradle. That's suspended from 42mm forks with anti-dive (on one leg only) and fork brace built into the mudguard, and a new rising-rate Pro Link-style Ohlins monoshock rear end, multi-adjustable for preload, compression and rebound damping. Wheels are 16-inchers, with really wide rubber — 130/60 up front, and 160/60 on the back. Braking is by fixed disc, double 280mm and single 270mm, with single-piston Brembo calipers. Dry weight is quoted as a not especially light 195kg (438lb), fuel capacity 22 litres (4.8 gallons). The wheelbase, at 1450mm (57.1in), is long compared to the F1's stubby 55.1in, but short by traditional Ducati standards. There was no information on the Paso's steering head angle, but it looks and feels more akin to that of a typical Japanese sports bike.

My first impression on swinging the gammy old Editorial leg over was "cor, innit compact and chunky?" Compared to the spare and lean F1, anyway. The amount of glass fibre/plastic between your knees puts you in mind of a low, squat version of Honda's VFR750, while the beautifully clean layout of the red-figured instruments is distinctly Ferrari-ish. The next thing you notice is how deeply sculptured the seat is; for the first few miles I resented its insistence on my bum staying in one place and one place only, but as Brian Capper predicted, that resentment soon gave way to a surprising comfort.

Engine noise is certainly well supressed by the bodywork, but the ungainly-looking silencers don't rob the 750 twin of all its character. Whether or not this Paso had a particularly good motor or not is a question which will only be answered when we get the chance to ride other examples of the model, but Sports Equipe's machine was the smoothest 750 I've ridden thus far, even at the kind of high revs which highlight the shortcomings of big, heavy pistons.

The gears seemed a lot easier to find too. In fact, I was seriously beginning to wonder if I wasn't on a Japanese bike by the time I'd reached the end of the road outside Sports Equipe, the whole bike felt so together. Most remarkable of all was the suspension. It actually *worked!* The bloody forks were *working*, and the back end was too. I wondered if perhaps we were just on a smooth road, but no, it was standard English trunk road stuff. Checking the front and rear ends as we went along, the awful truth was confirmed: the wheels were going up and down, *but the bike wasn't.* Well, not so's you'd notice anyway.

The full import of this discovery, ie an Italian motorcycle with *working suspension* (sorry, I just can't get over it) was brought home a couple of miles further on, when our little convoy — me on the Paso, Brian on an F1, and Motor Vecchia's small but perfectly formed Richard Avent on a Cagiva Elefant — stopped at the site of a likely looking corner for photography. Somewhat querulously, I mentioned that the back end had felt a bit over-damped going over a fastish hump-backed bridge.

"No problem," announced Brian, hurling himself to his knees in front of me. I was just about to put him straight regarding more commonly accepted bribery techniques when I saw that he was adjusting the rebound damping knob on the Ohlins shock. To my amazement, the problem seemed to be cured by his five-second fiddle. The ride quality I found to be by far the best yet on any European road bike, with just the right mixture of softness and control. To be honest, I can't actually think of any road bike, Japs included, that beats the Paso in this respect. It really is marvellous.

Hacking round a nicely cambered corner on a Paso is the sort of activity I could happily indulge in for quite some considerable time, but I had to think of Richard and Brian, so I stopped early. "Did you have a beard when we started?" I asked Richard, while Brian dismantled the tent they'd set up by the side of the road. By that time I'd established that the exhaust collector box touched down on the left, nothing on the right other than the toe of one's boot. Although there is some "drop-in" on slow corners, the Paso otherwise steers with a precision and neutrality belying its 16 inch wheels. The chassis was unfazed by bumps that were upsetting Brian's F1, and despite a leanness in the Paso's carburation that sometimes left it gasping coming off a trailing throttle, the bike had no trouble at all keeping up with Capper's enthusiastically driven machine. Braking was sure and immediate, though I'm going to be a bit churlish now by criticising the anti-dive, which didn't seem to be functioning terribly well.

But let's not pop the rose-tinted bubble. I can't wait for the opportunity of taking the Paso away for a week or so in the spring, when I hope it will confirm my suspicions that this is the best-equipped Eurobike ever to take on the Japanese in the hotly contested 750 sports market. Pity it's priced in the luxury megabike market (£5495) — or am I being churlish again? **TM**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