SCRAMBLING ON A SLIGHTLY SMALLER SCALE

BULTACO'S SHERPA S

There's increasing evidence that the makers of two-wheeled machines are keeping their collective ears turned closer and closer to what American off-road riders have to say about their machinery. A few years ago there was basically two types of motorcycles for off-road racing or romping; underpowered 90cc streesters with knobby tires, and fire-belching super scramblers with 250 or more cubits. If you could cope with the sudden surge of power from the two-strokes or the terrific torque of the big twins, you could safely assume you had the makings of a future moto-cross master. If you tried to push the early trailbikes over 35mph on smooth dirt roads, or over 5mph in off-road conditions, you went on your head; short, soft suspensions and wee wheelbases were too much for any knobby tire to overcome.

With the wisdom of hindsight it is obvious that 100cc engines should have been fitted to the superior suspensions of the larger displacement off-road machines. The result of such a combination would have been a machine like the Bultaco Sherpa S and its competitors; a sophisticated sample of engineering that not only helps the rider from flipping on his head in hurried dirt riding, but nearly tells him what to do to go even faster. In short, a machine with a whole lot of handling and just enough power to keep up speed without instilling a fear of instant slides or wheelies.

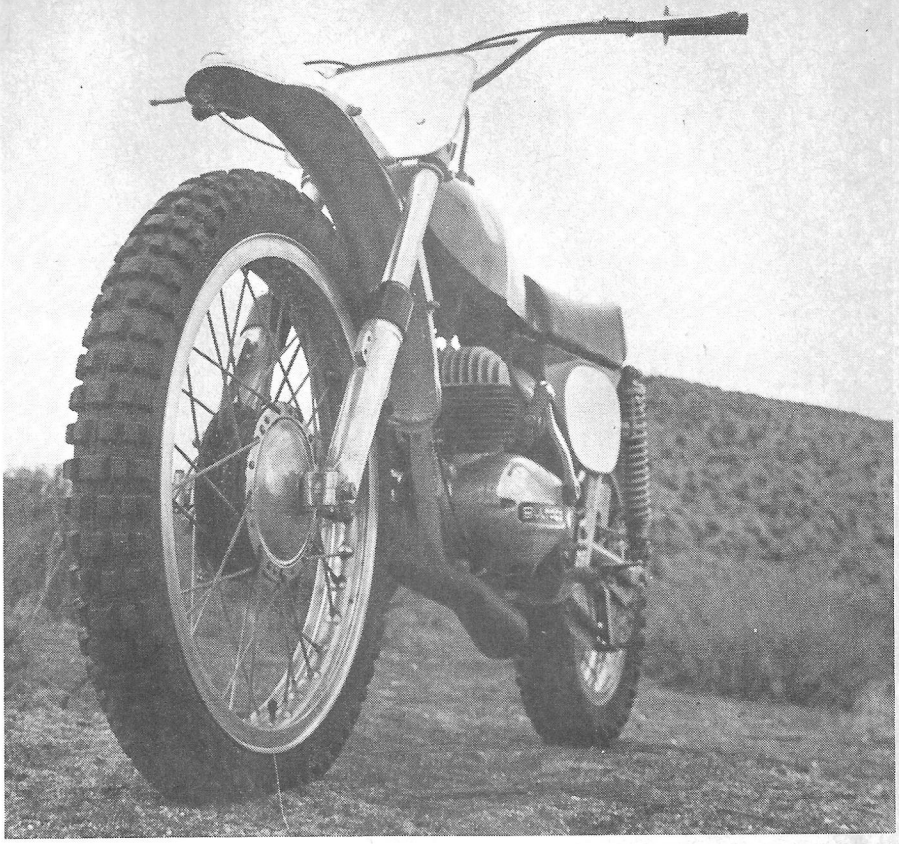
Much of the mystery of how the 125cc Sherpa S can outhandle most of its competitors in this displacement class is resolved when one realizes that the majority of this machine is identical to the 175cc and 200cc Bultaco dirt racers. The Sherpa S goes its larger brothers one better in that the 125cc machine is fully ready for moto-cross racing when it's lifted from the crate. The small seat, placed as close to the ground as possible for better corner control, is well out of the rider's way for the standup riding position. The footpeg location, handlebar shape, and seat setup are all in tune with one another to instill a confidence of control in the rider's mind that makes high speed travel just that much easier. Fortunately, the rest of the machine has what's needed for the fastest possible travel off the road. Whether a 125cc or a 360cc engine rests in the frame has little effect on how fast the downhill sections or corners of a moto-cross course can be negotiated – long wheelbase, six inches or more of front fork travel, superior fork and rear shock absorber dampening, and ample wheel and tire sizes are a necessity for a moto-cross mount of any displacement. The 125cc Sherpa S specifications read almost like the 360cc Bultaco Bandido in these areas.

The Betor front forks are made by Bultaco and are of a size and function nearly identical to these used on the

largest of the firm's line. Unexpected rocks, ruts, and other such front wheel wreckers were so effectively absorbed by the Sherpa's front suspension units that we wondered just why a front wheel first landing was so important to control. We know, of course, but even with nearly all of the machine's weight on the front, the forks forgave us by taking up the landing at the prescribed slow rate, then recoiling just quickly enough to give us a chance to get the rear wheel back to earth. No, front wheel first landings are not recommended as the hot tip for handling a Sherpa, or any other machine for that matter, it's simply reassuring to know that the forks will do their part to help reduce rider error rather than magnify it.

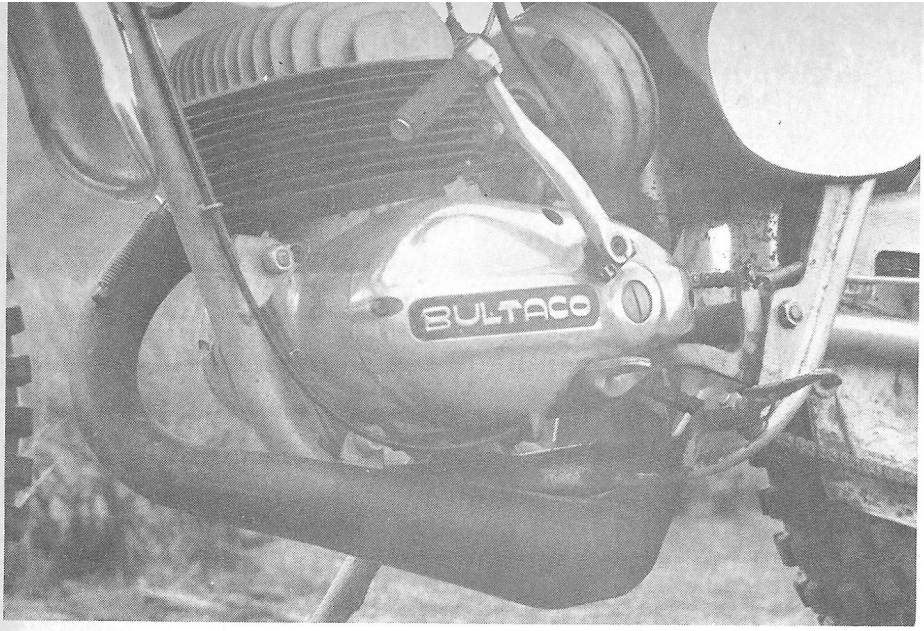
The 3.00x21 front tire and 4.00x18 rear contributed to the Bultaco's excellent maneuvering manners as well. Again, both sizes are the accepted standard for large displacement motocross machinery but far too rare on machines in the trailbike class.

The rear shock/spring units were just as effective in their own way as the front forks. Had this superior set of tires and suspension been tied to a suple and/or short wheelbase frame, none could have done their job well. The Sherpa's 54 inch stretch is just enough to give the rider room to get his weight away from the front wheel and still be over the rear. It's just right for the turns and jumps of a motocross circuit and more than adequate for enduros or cross country racing, if the seat was enlarged a bunch.



3.00x21 front tire is mounted on an alloy rim. Forks are the Spanish Betor super-shock absorbers.

Sherpa S profile defines machine's purpose as an all-out scrambles or moto-cross machine.



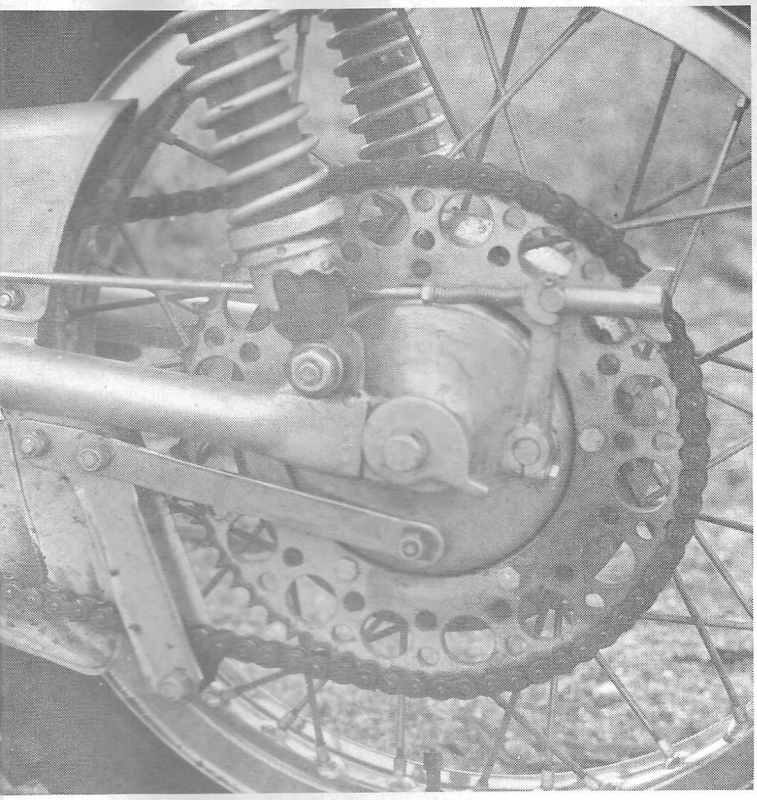
The 125cc engine shares its cases and transmissions with the bigger Bultacos. Exhaust is strictly dirt track.

A look at the machine's detail fittings is enough to confirm that this is truly a racer prepared by people who've found out the hard way what's needed to hold the whole effort together race after race with as little as possible to maintain, and that maintenance accomplished as quickly as possible. The rear brake rod, for one example, has a giant wing nut rather than those hard to grasp knurled knobs. A cam at each end of the rear axle is turned to ease chain adjustment. The top of the primary chaincase is cut away for access whenever chain or a primary gear change is required. The gas tank has a vent tube beside the filler cap so a flipped bike won't result in spilled fuel. Said tank is lightweight fiberglass; removable by unbolting a single aircraft lock nut. All of the vibration-prone nuts on the machine are of the self-locking type. Mud-fending fenders are just adequate without adding unnecessary weight. Both are beaded at their edges to withstand dozens of dings and re-straightenings without ripping the aluminum. The super-strong and light alloy wheel rims are another too rare touch on a 125cc machine where weight saving is all important.

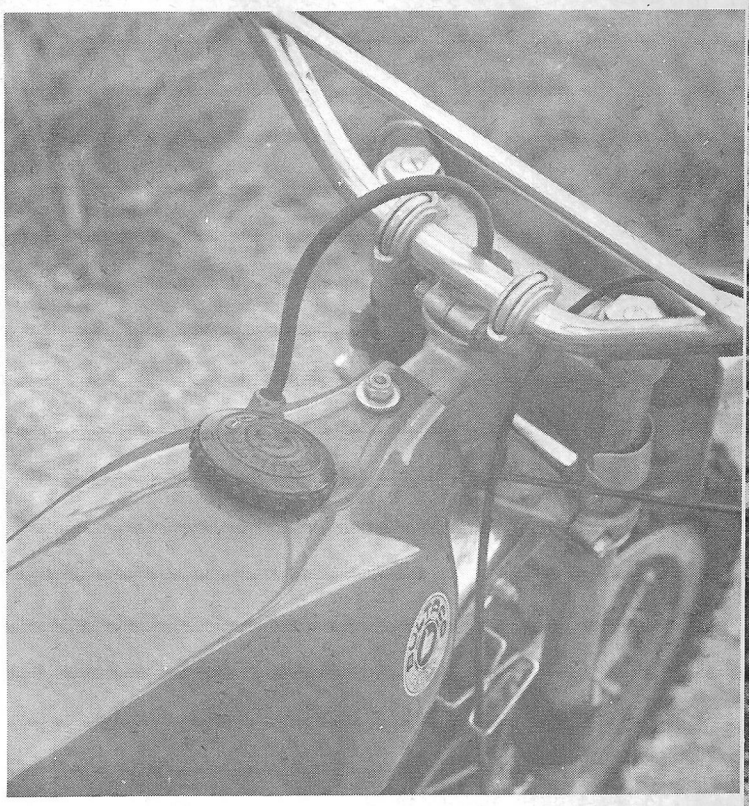
The Sherpa S engine has all the top-of-the-rev-range power you could want; just be sure you keep it on the pipe. The combination of wild porting, expansion chamber size, and 26mm carburetor that make the machine at least as fast as anything in its class also give a fair share of starting and slow speed problems. We'll grant that the Sherpa S is designed to be a racer and as such shouldn't need to run at slow speeds or restarted very often but, if you do slow below the power producing band of the engine and/or kill it you can count on a long wait before the power comes back. For the racer this should be no problem. For the just-for-fun off-road rider, however, we'd recommend either a smaller carburetor or purchase of the slightly less powerful enduro version (with lights); the 125cc Lobito.

If you really want to race motocross or scrambles events without the super skill required in the 250cc and larger classes, you couldn't pick a better bike than the new Bultaco 125cc Sherpa S. There is simply no area of weakness in power, suspension, or handling as long as the machine is kept turning at racing speeds. If anything less than all-out racing is in your mind though, pick the Lobito version and have all of the suspension and handling advantages with an engine that is willing to pull from the lowest range and start with relative ease. The $725 Sherpa S is strictly for racers.

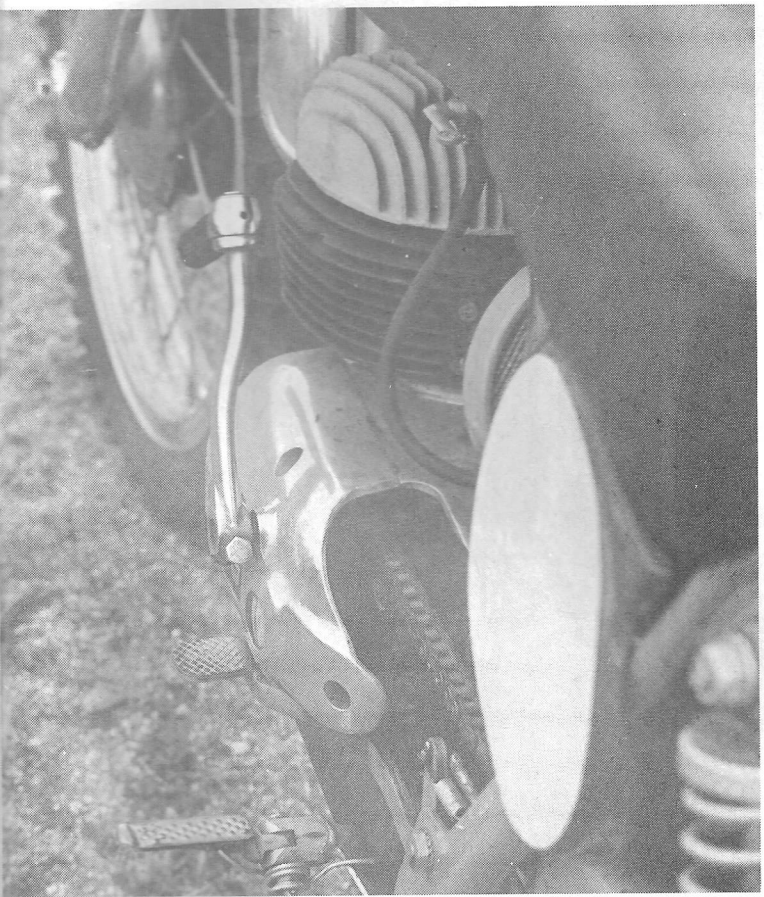
Petite seat is tucked in low to keep center of gravity down for seat-of-the-pants corners.



Lightened sprocket, thumb-screw brake adjuster, cam-actuated wheel/chain adjustment, and chain guide are found on other brands as well, but few have all four.



It would seem that no detail item has been overlooked as evidenced by the no-spill tank vent and one-bolt tank mount.



Kickstart lever is angled forward where rider's legs never touch. Cut-away case allows easy gear changes.

Seat position, peg location, and handlebar shape automatically place rider's weight in correct position for maximum control.