

It looks like
their 400, but
don't let that
scare you

Exclusive test **SUZUKI** **125** **MX**



By the Staff of DIRT BIKE

Suzuki's third attempt at building a competitive box-stock motocrosser at a price an errand boy can afford finally proves that the bargain-basement route to racing is a valid concept. Yes, a freshly uncrated TM-125K Challenger is good enough to do the job: it's among the three quickest bikes in its class; it is certainly among the most reliable; it costs a mere pittance to maintain; and most importantly, it handles.

All for a measly \$639.

No fooling, buster. For less than \$700 you can cart home a whiz-bang scooter and give your buddies on their substantially more expensive European finery a downright bad time.

There is a subtle catch, though: to go fast, this bike calls for your undivided attention. If you aren't an accomplished rider, the Challenger is going to have you all over the track. Tsk, tsk. What is priced as the perfect beginner's bike turns out to be a handful for all but the thoroughly initiated.

The Suzuki TM-125 is very light

at 198 pounds soaking wet; this makes for an inherently busy and very responsive motorcycle. Then the wheelbase is slightly abbreviated at 52-53 inches (depending on the current chain adjustment); this makes things want to happen even more quickly. Finally, the Suzuki's stock out-of-the-crate showroom power is dynamite — in every sense of the word. The band is strong and frantic, as is necessary in heavy-duty 125-class racing.

As a result, the Challenger is very fast or very squirrely, depending on who throws a leg over the thing.

Suzuki obviously intended this bike for mid-teens. The control layout and overall proportions are such that anyone 6 feet or so will get in his own way, thanks to narrow bars, high footpegs, and overall diminutive size. For a 135-pounder or less, the layout is as good as one could expect. The Challenger is light and slender, like straddling a broom handle.

Starting procedures are quick and painless, with a single fondle of the

26mm Mikuni's enricher and a half-hearted boot bringing the motor to life with a yelp.

Getting the machine underway is another matter, though; there's simply no power off idle. Just like a CZ, obtaining that first 5 mph is a matter of either noisily fanning the throttle and clutch in unison, or unceremoniously winding things up to about nine grand and dropping the hammer.

Once you get going, the Suzook is much easier to deal with . . . until it comes on the pipe. Lordy-mama! It feels like Luther Lassiter's cue ball. It's quick enough to leave you with no excuse for getting outthustled from one corner to another. That motor with stock gearing is good enough for fifth-gear wheelies, tricks like that.

Although the motor is by all means pipey, the actual powerband is rangey. You can wind and wind on up to, oh, past 10,000, when the Suzuki finally indicates it's time for a shift by a gentle signing off. Of course, this shift will result in yet



another frantic lurch forward.

Gear ratios are appropriately huddled close together, and Suzuki's typically smart-shifting tranny makes for few goofs, clutch or not. The close-ratio five-speed does have a potentially serious limitation: With stock gearing the motor will get peaked in fifth too early in the game.

For example, we were play-racing (and consequently waxing) a slower 125 on the Dunes' International course. The Suzuki would enter both straightaways with a shift into fifth, while the other bike, at the same ground speed, still had a healthy portion of fourth gear left. By the end of the straight, the Suzuki would get blown off because the less power-

ful bike had taller gearing.

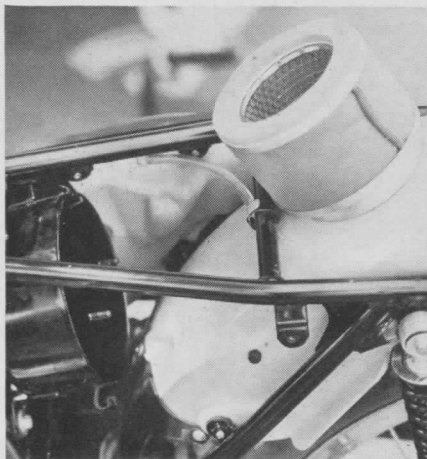
We tried changing the stock 15-tooth countershaft sprocket for a 16, which helped, but gearing could be made even steeper. Of course, this would diminish the Challenger's hard-to-beat hole-shot talent. Either you gear for tremendous stump-pulling or eye-blurring top end. Can't have both. The Challenger could use a six-speed, much as we hate to quibble about it.

Getting the Suzuki 125 in and out of a corner is a snap. Just point the bike where you want to go and give it all the power you dare. It's like riding a housefly; it darts and flits about so quickly that other riders, no matter what size bike they're

on, will be downright annoyed with your existence.

While the bike is fast and highly maneuverable, the actual quality of handling is still short of the mark set by Penton, Monark, Bultaco, DKW and others. The rear shocks work well, with our sole complaint being that the damping and springing rates are imprecise for the demands of the chassis.

As for the forks . . . well, at this writing there are many enterprising individuals trying to figure out how to get the things to work. Thus far Ceriani springs, trick boosters, and enough oil to kill all the seagulls on Catalina Island have been pumped in the TM-125's fork tubes; thus far



Air cleaner accessibility is awkward, but unit is efficient.



21-inch front wheel plus plastic everything make the Suzuki ready for fast riding and occasional crashing.

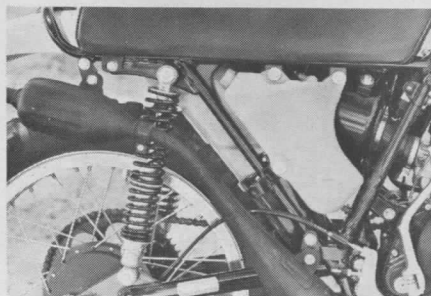


we have yet to see the answer.

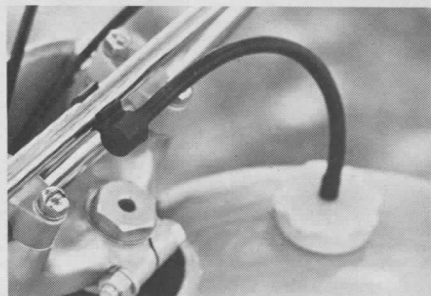
Ah, yes, as for the forks. Not bad under most conditions, actually. They work dandy over mild crevulations, stick reasonably well on swoopy bends, and stay accurate during slides. But when you really need the forks—say, when you stuff the Suzuki way deep into a corner, grab the brakes hard enough to stretch your goggles, and suddenly have the front wheel drop into a pot-hole—the force will cause a loud radical bottoming while your shoulder blades fold and crunch into each other and you and your bike get sent sprawling in three different directions—none of them the intended one. The forks on our test bike bottomed with 180-pounders and bottomed with 130-pounders, and often did so unexpectedly. A rider can do well without such shenanigans.

One more less-than-ideal accoutrement: the rear tire. It comes with the knobs already half-gone, and is about as gnarly as an eel's back. More than likely, the inclusion of this tire was Suzuki's way of getting the bike into your van dirt-cheap.

Despite forks and rear tire, you can toss the Challenger into a turn like a frisbee, fling it sideways while strangling the throttle, and exit on the rear wheel with lots of style and flash. The light weight and short wheelbase make the bike want to bozo even on smooth corners but



Oil bag spout is in clumsy location, but holds plenty.



Cute little overflow vent clip is very clever and not found on \$15,000 Grand Prix bikes.



the chassis and shocks take care of most of the work. For the dozen-or-so tanks of gas we put through the TM-125, we only dropped it twice, a very good record. When you do reach that ragged point, the Suzuki will let go in a great and blinding rush, as one would expect of a short and musclebound bike like this.

Frankly, we wonder why they

Cont'd. on page 82

SUZUKI TM125K CHALLENGER

PRICE: Suggested retail, approx. \$636
ENGINE TYPE: Single cylinder piston-port air-cooled two-stroke

DISPLACEMENT: 123cc

BORE & STROKE: 56mm x 50mm

COMPRESSION RATIO: 7.5:1

CARBURETION: 26mm Mikuni

HP @ RPM: (claimed) 18 @ 10,000

CLUTCH: Wet, multi-plate

PRIMARY DRIVE: Gear, 16T/57T (3.56:1)

FINAL DRIVE: Chain, 15T/61T (4.07:1)

GEAR RATIOS: 1. 2.14:1

2. 1.59:1

3. 1.25:1

4. 1.05:1

5. 0.91:1

AIR FILTRATION: Oiled foam

ELECTRICAL SYSTEM: Pointless Electronic

LUBRICATION: CCI

RECOMMENDED FUEL: Premium

RECOMMENDED OIL: Castrol R, Golden Spectro

FUEL CAPACITY: 1.3 gallons

FRAME: Single downtube tubular steel full cradle

SUSPENSION:

(Front) Suzuki hydraulic forks

(Rear) Suzuki 5-way adjustable hydraulic shocks

TIRES: Front: 3.00x21 IRC knobby

Rear: 3.50x18 IRC knobby

WHEELS: Front: Akront alloy

Rear: Akront alloy

DIMENSIONS: Wheelbase: 52.6 inches

Ground Clearance: 7.9 inches

Weight: (claimed) 189 (dry)

(actual) 197 (w/full tank)

On front wheel: 55.8 percent

On rear wheel: 44.2 percent

BRAKES: Front: Single leading shoe, internal expanding

Rear: Single leading shoe, internal expanding

INSTRUMENTS: None

SILENCER: Yes

PRIMARY KICK: Yes

SUZUKI 125

PARTS PRICES

(Items subject to frequent replacement through wear or breakage)

Suggested retail:

PISTON: \$5.36

RINGS: \$3.11

CLUTCH CABLE: \$2.84

THROTTLE CABLE: \$2.20

BRAKE SHOES: \$1.44/pr., w/springs

CYLINDER: \$51.40

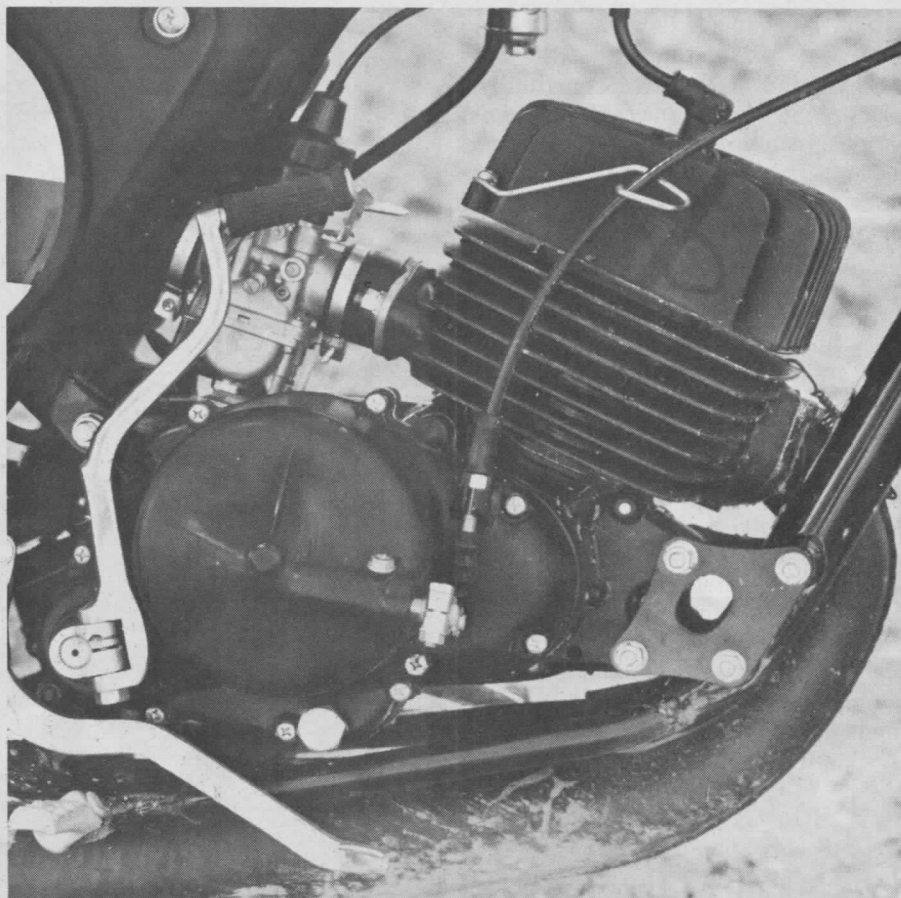
CYLINDER LINER: N/A

SHIFT LEVER: \$3.76

REAR BRAKE PEDAL: \$3.73

FRONT BRAKE LEVER: \$1.70

CLUTCH LEVER: \$1.70



Motor is basic business black; brake pedal is a shabby affair.

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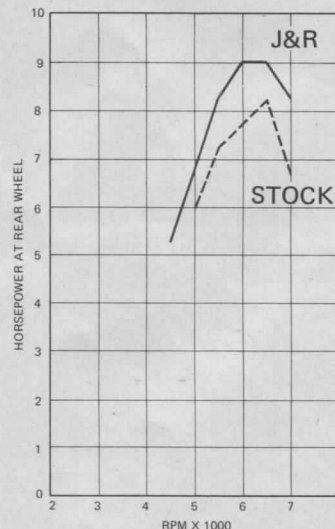
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125 SUZUKI *Cont'd. from page 72*
 chose to go for shortness; 125s have been traditionally short because they have been down on power—that is, there were previously not enough beans on tap to shove it around a corner, so you make 'em handle like bicycles.

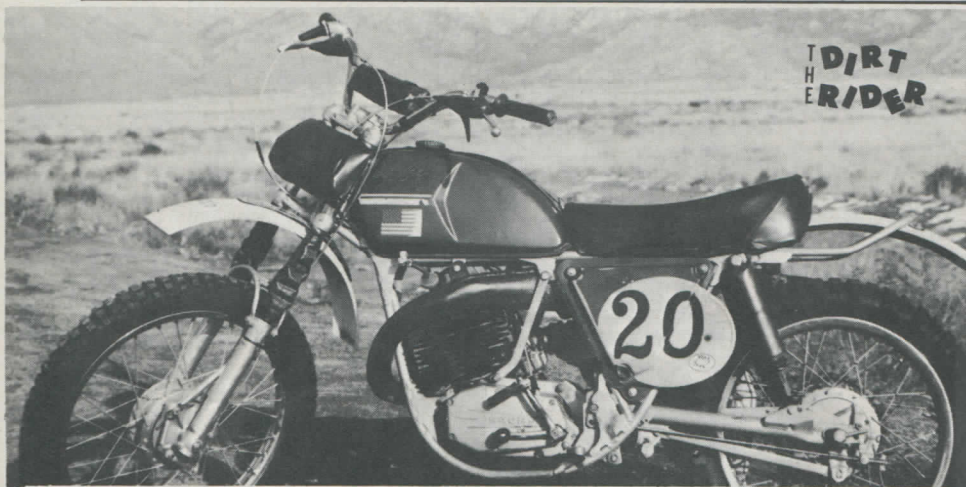
Not anymore. One-two-bits like the Suzuki (and Penton and Bultaco and DKW and . . .) develop so much muscle now that they can afford to stretch the bike out an inch or two without sacrificing cornering ability, and be that much more forgiving as a consequence. Lots of Suzuki's customers will be adding

some metal to the swingarm, we suspect.

The secret to riding the Suzuki is in the closing of the throttle: don't. There is only one proper gear for any occasion, and that's the one that keeps the motor shrieking. If you let the motor fall off the pipe, it won't just fall off—it'll plummet. You'll have to go back down to first and start all over again.

In the meantime, let the Suzook's rear end slither and slide all over the place. The frame wants to work that way.

Naturally, the shortness will have its effect on high-speed handling.

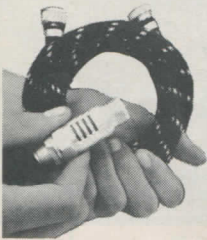


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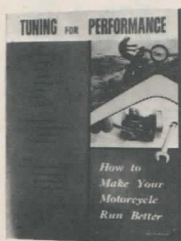
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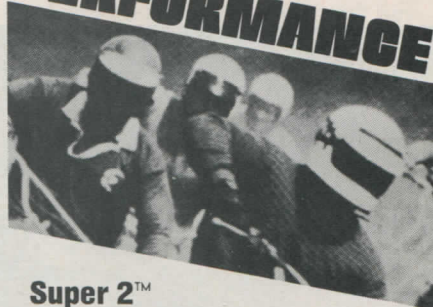
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While the light front end does make the Challenger stable enough for most high-speed motocross work, a cross-country bike it ain't. Don't even consider it for a playbike. It is a motocrosser or TTer, and that's it.

Brakes on the Challenger are another example of Suzuki's cost-cutting technique. They come from the Duster, its trailbike brother, but are painted black. The cable-operated rear brake offers little feedback, so lockups are too common. The more important front brake was only slightly better in feel and didn't

work as well as it should. Then again, we rode a couple of other TM-125s and both brakes were somewhat better, so ours might be a fluke. Or theirs.

Sure, Suzuki did try extra hard to keep the costs down on the bike. Even though it's light, there are no exotic metals and structures. The frame is just tubular steel with the usual Suzuki melted-licorice welding.

But all the motocross stuff is there: light Akront rims; good air cleaner with light plastic box and oiled foam

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element; good footpegs; plastic fenders; usable number plates; well-adjusted controls and layout; and a general absence of non-essential items, with the exception of the oil injector. Not to mention some clever doodads never before seen on any other motorcycle.

At \$639 a shot, the TM-125K is the motocross bargain of the century. Unfortunately, the neophytes who will hungrily scoop them up will have a hard time getting sense out of the bike. And you can't help but wonder how trick the bike would

have been if Suzuki wanted to charge \$800.

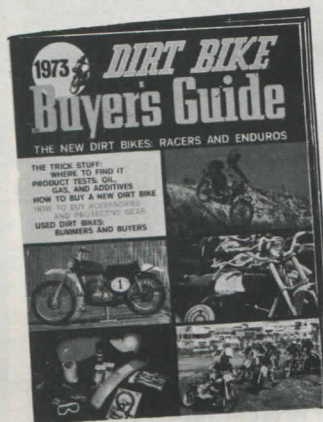
BITS AND PIECES

Access to the air cleaner is something like this: Remove two bolts holding on seat, remove three bolts and six washers holding on plastic left side panel, unclip canister clips, remove two wing nuts holding in element, service element, fumble trying to get wing nuts and washers back into place for a while, remove element again to recover canister clip that has fallen inside of air box,

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etc., etc. There must be a better way. Plastic fenders are A-1 top-quality first-rate hoo-hah stuff. We backed the Suzuki into a snow fence at speed and folded the rear fender like a taco shell. It popped right back into place. Suzuki is baffled when it comes to silencer design. The stock one should be replaced with a weld-on or something—the result will be a quieter bike with a bit more mid-range. Clever doo-dads: an overflow hose clip that attaches to the cross-brace; a vibration-free rubber mounting for

the rear fender; lightweight plastic number plates/side covers; a rubber shroud for the Mikuni; very sanitary alloy triple clamps; a kill button mounted on the proper side (so far Suzuki and Yamaha are the only J-models able to master this). Footpegs are pretty good. Grips are good or poor, depending on your own personal hands. Clutch pull was light, and the clutch itself, like every other Suzuki clutch we've met, could take a brutal beating. Gas tank holds 1.4 gallons, enough

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for one hour at 8-10,000 rpm. The tank itself is slender, foxy to look at, and will be a classic someday.

For such an inexpensive bike, there were few signs of shabbiness. Just the rear tire, sloppy welds and a poorly fabricated brake pedal. It works, but looks ragamuffin.

We rode a TM-125 with higher and wider bars. Much better.

Look at the parts prices on this bike. You can rebuild the top end on the Suzuki for the price of other bikes' base gaskets.

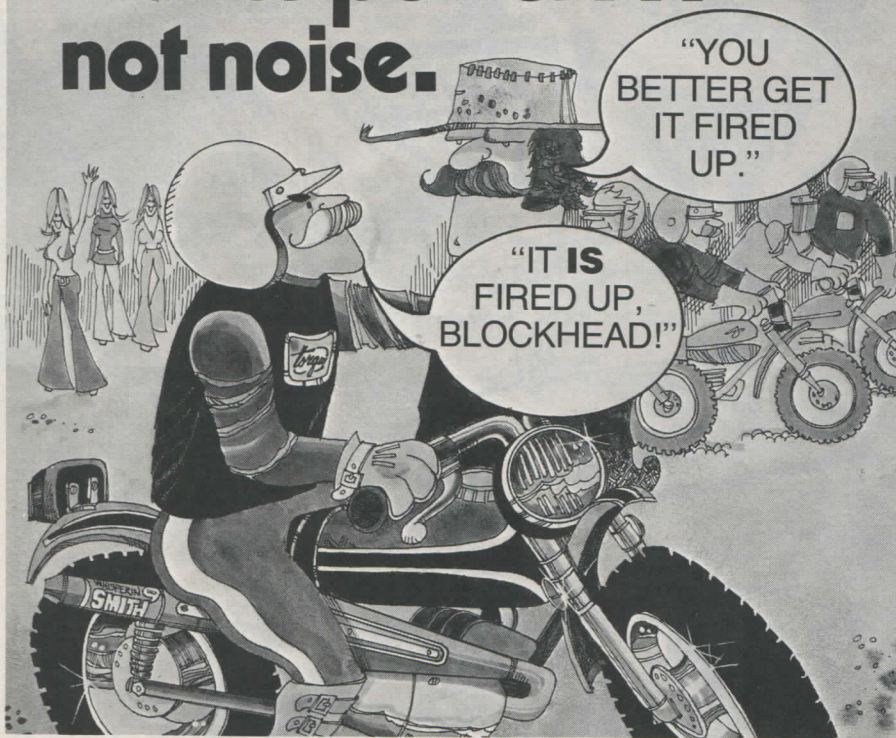
Considering the weight and over-

all performance, this bike is probably more like Joel's than any other production Suzuki.

Spark on our bike was always clean and crisp, thanks to the spot-on jetting and Pointless Electronic Ignition. Suzuki's PEI appeared to be the hot setup.

The oil reservoir is generous, but very sloppy for servicing. Removing the oil injector is not all that simple, either, since the pump delivers oil directly to the crankcase as well as the top end. Suzuki has sent a bulletin to their dealers that the lower

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end isn't getting enough oil. The cure is to swap the two hoses leading to the cylinder or crankcase, and run a 32:1 mixture in the tank. This negates the convenience of the injector. Sigh.

Seat is light and thin enough for most acrobatics.

Chain guard has a rubber roller thingie which helps keep the chain on the right track. The chain itself appears to be made of a substance somewhat more rugged than the string cheese versions we've seen in the past.

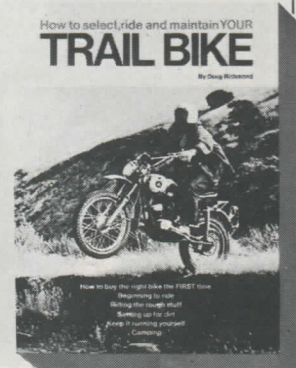
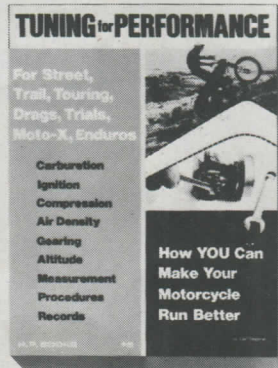
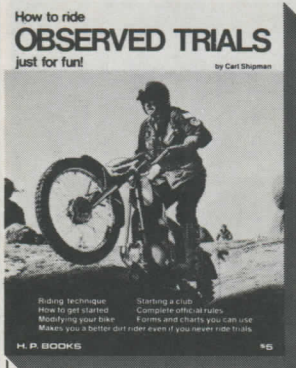
Suzuki recommends burning Castrol R, by the way. One of the best-smelling bikes around, as a result.

SUMMARY

It's not enough to say the TM-125K Challenger is Suzuki's best motocrosser to date, nor is it enough to say the Yamaha AT3-MX, the Suzuki's price-wise competition, is a joke by comparison.

Beginners won't be able to ride the Suzuki anywhere near its potential. Experts will want to refine the handling and maybe even stuff some

These books make YOU the expert



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JACKRABBIT 100
Cont'd. from page 32

up ritual, then unloaded for practice. It was still cold and the Maico took some time to warm up. It wasn't necessary to change jetting from what I had been running back home.

The smoke bomb was already lit showing riders the direction to take. You were allowed to make a run out to the bomb, but not beyond.

Funny thing. The flat ground on the way out was covered with foot-peg-deep grass. And the ground underneath was like concrete. And that concrete wasn't smooth. Nope.

This guy stays up nights.

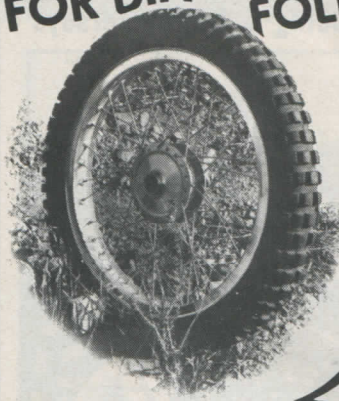


He stays up nights welding expansion chambers (quiet pipes)! He is on the Bassani night shift. "Sure we could buy a big machine that just stamps them out . . . like some manufacturers. And we could produce a half dozen body styles & just change the head pipe to fit each bike . . . but we don't! Each pipe is designed for an individual machine and each is hand welded by craftsmen who take pride in their work. BASSANI-QUALITY WITHOUT COMPROMISE.

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