



NOT WEIRD ENOUGH?

ATK becomes normal. For the most part

By the decidedly abnormal DIRT BIKE staff

Face it, the world is turning upside-down. There are Republicans in Congress and Democrats in the White House; we have basketball players playing baseball in a season when there is no baseball; we have world heavyweight boxing champions who are eligible for social security, and we have live murder trials on prime-time television. Ain't life funny? Thank heaven the motorcycle world never changes. Thank heaven you can still count on certain things like Harleys leaking oil, Kawasakis being green, Suzukis being yellow and ATKs being weird.

What's that? ATKs aren't that weird anymore? You say the new 250LQ doesn't have a rotary valve, a countershaft disc, a towering seat height, a snorkle for an airbox, a granite slab for a seat or a stack of marshmallows for suspension? You say it has a liquid-cooled engine that was designed *after* Columbus discovered the new world? You say that ATKs aren't even the most expensive bikes you can buy? In fact they are cheaper than Japanese bikes?

It's worse than we thought. The world might be coming to an end.

OKAY, JUST A LITTLE WEIRD

The new ATK 250 is, dare we say it, *normal*. Within the darkened catacombs of ATK cult society we are sure that this news will go over like the plague. It used to be that ATK actually marketed their product for an underground clique of motorcycle outcasts. The bikes were for the same guys who would call all over the world to find companies that still have denim motocross pants and vented nylon jerseys in stock. ATKs were sold because of their air-cooling, not despite it.

But in the last few years, ATK has

been making small steps toward the mainstream. This year, the company made a big step. The 250LQ's liquid-cooled, powervalve engine was designed in the late '80s by Rotax for several European companies. No, this isn't the same liquid-cooled Rotax engine that Can Am used in '84. It has never appeared in any U.S.-bound motorcycle before. Aprilia, Kramer-Italy, and Alfer all have used the motor, but only in Europe.

For the record, the motor uses roughly the same bore and stroke as a Suzuki RM250, a nikasil-coated cylinder, a Mikuni TMS carb and case-reed induction. Sounds terribly mainstream, doesn't it? But hard-core oddity addicts take heart; the motor parts company with the bulk of other motorcycle engines in several other ways.

- Vacuum-operated powervalve. This can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on your point of view. Back in the mid-'80s, several European companies experimented with these. The powervalve opens when the exhaust gases flowing through the manifold reach a certain velocity. The advantage is simplicity; there are no ball/ramp mechanisms or linkages to worry about when you work on the top end. The disadvantage is imprecise operation. Or so we were told in the late '80s.

- Counterbalancer. Okay, if you want weird, this is it. In order to squelch vibration, there's a shaft with an off-center weight spinning around behind the crankcase. The only other two-stroke engines that use counterbalancers are in ATVs and in the Italian TM 250 motorcycle (another bike that causes a pretty big blip on the weird scope).

- Built-in thermostat. KTM's use automotive-style thermostats to let the engine warm up quickly. The Rotax uses a very small thermostat that sits in the head to do the same thing.

- Six-speed transmission. Okay, this isn't all that strange, but it's certainly not normal on a 250. We know you ATK cult members will grasp onto anything slightly out of the ordinary for your oddness fix.

- Monstrous radiators. There's nothing wrong with this. The ATK has radiators that would be big on a 500.

HOW STRANGE IS THY STEED?

As for the rest of the bike, the only non-mainstream thing you will find is the lack of linkage on the rear shock. The rear suspension system consists of the following: White Power shock absorber, one each. This has the advantage of allowing a direct connection between the carb and the airbox and eliminating about four moving joints (that would require maintenance). The shock is also quite easy to access. The White Power fork is pretty normal with one exception: The right leg doesn't have much in the way of compression valving. All of the low-speed compression damping is adjusted on the left fork leg. So if you see an LQ rider with one fork leg set to position number four and the other on number seven, don't laugh at him. Well, you could if want, but that's the way the bike is set up stock.

The bike has an impressive list of goodies that usually cost a lot of money after the fact.

- The handlebar is an Answer Pro taper, which is probably the toughest bar available.

- The hubs are made by Talon in England and are absolutely beautiful.

- The tripleclamps are made by someone in Utah who probably doesn't charge nearly enough for his work. They, too, are works of art.

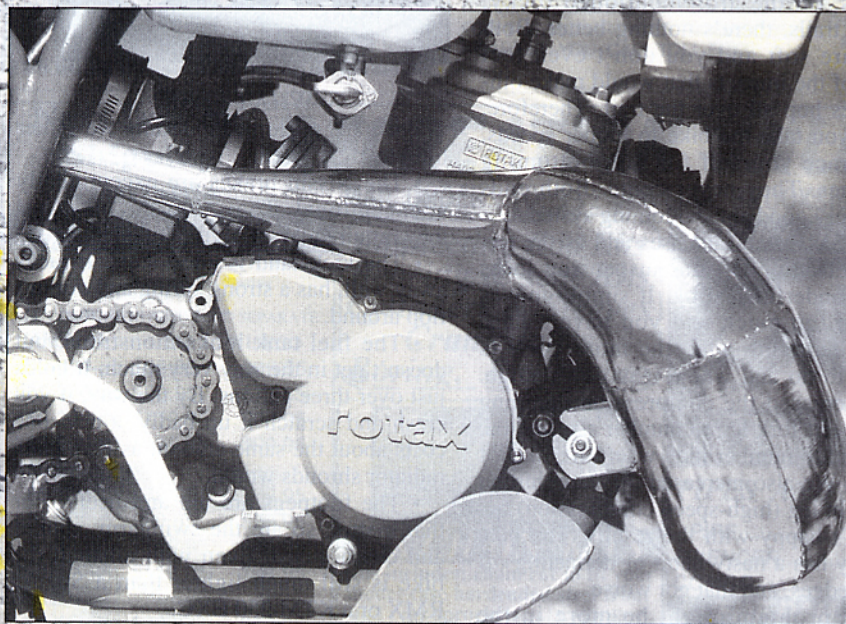
- The exhaust pipe is nickel-plated.

- The seat is made by Ceet, and has reasonably comfortable foam.

Most of the detailing on the bike is good. It no longer has that made-in-the-back-yard look. There are a few items that

◀ *What does the ATK do best? This. Anything gnarly, ugly, and nasty. Ron loved the bike in the slow stuff.*




ATK 250LQ

Engine type	Liquid-cooled, case-reed, powervalue two-stroke
Displacement	250cc
Bore & stroke	67.5mm x 69.8mm
Carburetion	38mm Mikuni TMS
Fuel tank capacity	3.1 gal.
Gearing	14/52
Lighting coil	Yes
Spark arrester	Optional
EPA legal	No
Running weight with no fuel	229 lb.
Wheelbase	58.8 in.
Rake/trail	27.0°/4.6°
Ground clearance	13.5" (341mm)
Seat height	37.2 in. (945mm)
Tire size and type:	
Front	90/90-21 Michelin
Rear	120/80-18 Michelin
Suspension	
Front	White Power inverted cartridge, adj. reb./comp., 11.8 in. (300mm) travel
Rear	White Power aluminum piggyback, adj. reb./comp./preld., 13.6 in. (346mm) travel
Country of origin	USA
Suggested retail price	\$5145
Distributor/manufacture:	
	ATK America, Inc. 1164 West 850 North Centerville, UT 84014 (801) 298-8288

▲ **Good motor:** It doesn't have as much of a low-end burst as the average MXer, but man, does it rev. This Rotax motor has been around for a few years, but we haven't seen it in any U.S.-bound motor-cycles until now.

◀ **What does the ATK like least?** This. Anything faintly resembling motocross is best tackled on something else.

are pretty hokey, though. The rear brake lever is flimsy, under designed and down-right dainty. The steel shifter is chunky, over-designed and crude. The kickstarter is short enough to be a shifter and it's on

the wrong (left) side. There are strange little compartments and covers on the engine that hold nothing and do nothing. The front brake and clutch lever have old-style Magura bends and are horrible.

DOES IT HOWL AT THE MOON?

No, but it shrieks in the woods. It's hard not to like the new motor. For one thing it's pretty fast. For another, it's really smooth. In the past, the word "smooth" was a magazine code word for "slow." On the other hand, if a test said that a bike was outrageously fast, it meant outrageously abrupt. The old ATK 406 broke

all the rules in this area by being both slow and abrupt. The new ATK makes up for it by being smooth and fast.

The bike isn't fast in the same way that a Yamaha WR250 is fast, though. Where the Yamaha hits hard and revs quick, the ATK just builds power and revs higher and higher. You start getting some torque way down low, at rpm levels where the WR or any 250 MX bike would stall. Then the power gradually builds. When it gets to about 5000 rpm, where most other 250s really start pulling hard, the ATK is picking up power briskly, nothing more.



◀ The ATK 250LQ is the only bike we've ever tested that was lighter than the manufacturer claimed. The Incredible DB Scale puts the LQ at 229 pounds; ATK says it weighs 230.

These radiators are large enough to cool Three Mile Island. We think you could boil-over an air-cooled ATK more easily. ▶



At 8000 rpm where you usually start looking for the shifter, the ATK is still building and making good power. To ride the bike fast, you have to rev it high. That's okay, though, because the motor doesn't vibrate or do anything nasty at high rpm. But you don't *have* to ride it fast if you don't want to. You can go any speed you want and be happy. Like we said, it's hard not to like the new motor.

On the nastiest, ugliest, most horrible trails, the ATK motor goes from being pretty good to great. It's easy to regulate your speed at any rpm and get traction where even a four-stroke would be spinning out. The gear ratios are a little odd; first gear is low and second gear is only a little taller than first gear on most motocross bikes. You can get away with letting the bike rev a little high in first, which is usually a no-no on rocks and slippery roots. But the power is smooth enough to let you get away with murder.

The clutch seems able to withstand abuse on gnarly trails, but on the other hand, it never works that well in the first place. The throw is enormous; it starts to disengage in the first half inch of movement, and still drags when you get it all the way in. It actually seems to disengage better when the engine is hot. Figure that out.

On the other hand, the transmission never really works good anywhere. Actually, that's not true. It would work well if you took it back to 1970. In order to shift, you have to roll the throttle all the way off and pull up like you are trying to yank your foot out of a mud bog. And forget about finding neutral while the engine is running. Even Yamaha riders will be disappointed. At least it never misses shifts.

DOES IT LEAP FOR JOY?

We predict that riders will either love the ATK's suspension or hate it. At slow speeds, on the aforementioned rocky, gnarly trails, there's nothing better. Both ends are soft and you don't even feel some of the impacts that would make other bikes hop all over the trail. Therefore, when you take the bike to higher speeds, you brace yourself for big, bottoming crunches. They never come. Both ends have very good anti-bottoming systems.

Still, as speed increases and as the terrain gets rougher, the suspension loses that wonderful feeling. It simply moves around too much and you have a hard time predicting what the motorcycle is going to do and where it is going to go. We increased the compression damping on the left fork leg to number six, and the rebound to number nine where we liked it better. We also increased the damping on the right leg (high-speed compression) but weren't happy with the results. The bike already has a nasty habit of deflecting off sharp edges, and that got worse.

The problem might be more in the steering geometry than in the suspension. The front of the bike doesn't head shake, but it does wander around. This is especially bad at high speeds over sharp-edge holes and bumps. Sometimes the bike will just take off in a random direction (gee, that's a nice feature). At low-speed, on the other hand, the steering is great. The front end feels very light.

What does all that translate to? Simple: Keep the bike as far away from motocross tracks as possible. Keep it in tight woods and on difficult trails. This is a specialty bike. It is made for eastern enduros; tough eastern enduros. In that setting, the ATK is better than almost anything.

WHAT ELSE?

Here are some more details we either liked or didn't like:

- The Nissin brakes are exceptionally unexceptional. They stop the bike, but they require a lot of lever pressure.
- The kickstand is good stuff. It tucks away well, has a strong spring and doesn't flop around.
- The fuel tank looks monstrous, but doesn't get in the way very much. It holds just over three gallons. By the way, if you crash and scratch it up badly, a new one costs about the same amount as Kawasaki radiator shrouds would.
- The footpegs are big and beefy. For that matter, so are the swingarm, spokes and chain guard. Even with all that, the bike is still much lighter than a Suzuki RMX or a KTM 250 EXC.
- The ignition has a very powerful lighting coil. Okay, okay, so it's not hooked up to anything, but it could power a small stadium.

When you think about all that, with all the bike's strengths and weaknesses, it begins to sound like the ATK isn't such a mainstream bike after all. It's still an unusual bike. In some ways, it's particular brand of unusual-essence is disappointing; in other ways, it's great. Just think of it as the most specialized enduro bike on the market. What it does, it does better than anything.

And what it doesn't do ... well, spare yourself the experience and don't try. □