



ATK Returns

American Off-Road Manufacturer Ramps Up

by Clark Emery

Editor's note:

Plenty of media attention gets focused on the Japanese Big Four OEMs and the American-made machines like Harley-Davidson and Indian, but sometimes the other players in the market get overlooked. From Avenger and CCM to MZ and Vertemati, there are a host of motorcycle manufacturers looking to do business with dealers. In February we launched an ongoing look at this market segment with the Italian-made VOR. Since then we've covered Gas Gas, Husaberg, KTM, LEM, MZ and TM. This month we take a look at America's ATK.

ATK was founded by Austrian-born engineer Horst Leitner in 1984. The name "ATK" is actually what Leitner called his patented device to eliminate chain torque for improved handling. Known later as the A-Trax, Horst originally called the device Anti-Tension Kettenantreib: ATK.

In 1987, a series of frame kits utilizing the A-Trax system were designed around Honda XR engines, as Leitner looked to become an OEM. This same year, ATK secured an agreement with Rotax to produce 4-stroke engines for an upcoming ATK brand name off-road motorcycle. In 1988, ATK's first motorcycle (serial # 1) won its class in the classic Barstow-to-Vegas race.

In '89, an electric start option was added, as were new 2-stroke 406 and 250 air-cooled Rotax engines. ATK, now a *bona fide* manufacturer of four American dirtbike models, was looking good to investors — so good that Ken Wilkes acquired ownership and moved the facility to Commerce, California. Mechanical engineer Mike Dougherty was hired to develop the first fuel-injected off-road motorcycle.

This bike was unveiled with nickel-plated frames, and in 1991, Ty Davis won the coveted White Brothers World Four-Stroke Championship aboard a 604MX.

In '92, Frank White and his father, Dale — both Utah motorcycle enthusiasts and businessmen — began to assist operations. Dual exhausts and disc brakes were added to the bikes, in addition to a countershaft disc. Refinements in '93 saw engine displacement grow from 560cc to 590cc. The Whites eventually acquired ownership of ATK and moved the factory to Centerville, Utah.

In 1995, Frank sold the company to a management group that ran it for owner Sen. Robert Bennett of Utah. "He is back in Washington, and I am good friends with him and his attorney," says Frank. "They were getting hosed by the management group that was running the business, so in 1999, I was contacted by the senator's attorney to see if I would consider coming back to run the company. In December of '99, I got back involved and ran the company until 2000. In 2001, we reacquired ATK."

ATK didn't build many bikes for the 2000-'02 seasons,

but it's looking to come on strong in 2003. "We had a lot of inventory to deal with," says White, "and I wanted to get rid of the dealers who weren't loyal to the brand. We made about 100-200 bikes last year. I wanted to let the demand catch back up to the existing dealers we had." White says the firm is currently in the process of developing some new vehicles for various markets. "All kinds of neat things," he teases.

Part dirt tracker, part motard, ATK's new 600 DTM offers the best of both worlds.





The neat things include the new 600 DTM, which is basically a one-size-fits-all sort of bike. The "DT" stands for "Dirt Tracker," while the "M" stands for "Motard." Although the 600 DTM is based on ATK's purpose-built dirt track racer, it comes with smaller wheels (17" instead of 19") to mimic today's motard machines. It also has front and rear lighting so that it complies with the licensing requirements of most states.

Even so, the 600 DTM is said to be easily converted back to a dirt tracker with the addition of an optional set of 19" dirt track wheels and the removal of the lights.

You might also bag some government sales because several law enforcement agencies have contracted with ATK to bolster their homeland defense strategy with DTM-based bikes. Finally, for customers who already own a 4-stroke ATK and wish to "motardize" it, the company offers retro-fittable motard kits, which come with complete wheel assemblies, an electronic speedometer and a cut-down front fender.

Dealer Development

"I am much more picky about it than we were before," says White. "There are good dealers who just can't sell our motorcycles, and I realize that. It has to be the right type of dealer. Typically, we don't sell well in the big Japanese dealerships." White feels ATK does better in small shops, but the firm has also found some floor space in Harley-Davidson dealerships looking to sell American off-road bikes along with their Milwaukee V-Twins. "Several higher-ups at H-D personally own an ATK," claims White.

Currently, ATK has 80 dealers nationwide. "We average four dealer inquiries each week," indicates White. "But until we get more products, I'm slowing the expansion way down. It's hard for me to go out and get new dealers when I don't have enough products to sell to our existing ones. In 2003, however, we are unveiling some completely new products, which have already attracted the interest of a variety of dealers." Rumors of a proprietary motor and a high-performance race quad have also turned heads, but it isn't just dealers that are curious.

"What has been interesting is that we have been getting calls from Polaris and Arctic Cat dealers," continues White. "Because they are American and don't make off-road motorcycles, it's a nice fit." White feels ATK will sell well in the North, where "they really support the 'Buy American' theme."

First American

Although some would argue that Can-Am, Rokon or perhaps Hodaka was the first "American" manufacturer to offer serious off-road and motocross bikes in the '70s,



White is quite clear about his feelings on the matter. "Nothing irritates me more than when I see Cannondale release ads saying it's the first American-made motocross bike. Ty Davis won a world title in 1992 and '93, and Greg Zitterkopf did so before that. I mean, we've been winning national races on ATKs. Cannondale comes out with the first fuel-injected off-road motorcycle? Well, no, we discontinued that in '93. This is the 20th year that we have been building motorcycles, which is a milestone for us. Pretty soon, the 5,000th bike will come off the assembly line here in Utah."

After a few years of being run solely by investors, ATK is again poised for growth with the return of CEO/racer Frank White.

ATK America, Inc.

1163 W. 850 N.

Centerville, UT 84014

(801) 298-8288

FAX (801) 299-0710

www.atkusa.com

2-Stroke Vs. 4-Stroke

ATK CEO Frank White brings up some eyebrow-raising thoughts: "I have been dealing with the EPA and the OMB," he says.

"They are considering enforcing the strict California 2-stroke emissions nationwide. I am not sure how many years it will last, but I think that small, American-owned motorcycle companies will be exempt from this standard. If so, we plan to exploit the 2-stroke hold over the Japanese companies, as they are all starting to move away from the engines.

"There are a lot of riders who just prefer 2-strokes, regardless of how good 4-strokes get," continues White. "'Give 'em what they want' is my attitude. The government doesn't want us little guys going out of business. They have even considered helping us develop some lightweight 4-stroke engines. There are some funds available for this sort of thing, so who knows what could come of it." By 2004, the firm expects to offer its own proprietary 4-stroke powerplant with the help of former Husaberg managing director Niklas Olsson. — C. Emery ➡