

PROTOTYPE RIDE

MAICO LIVES!

ATK brings back a legend

By Ron Lawson





The ATK 700 (or 620, or 500) will be an internet bike—you design it on-line and take the order to the nearest dealer.

» "It's a Maico," said Pete. "I don't believe it. Look at the linkage! Look at the frame!"

I looked at the frame and linkage but it didn't mean a darn thing to me. It looked just like any other motorcycle—except, perhaps, an ATK. But Pete Murray was probably the last American to actually ride a Maico in a supercross. If anyone could sniff out Maico parts, it would be him.

The bike certainly didn't say Maico anywhere. It was a prototype ATK 700—said so right on the tank. Frank White of ATK had brought it down from planet Utah to do some testing in Southern California where the snow was less of an obstacle. While he was in our neighborhood, we found him and the bike. Frank didn't know quite what to make of the motorcycle himself. "Right now we're planning on importing all these parts and then assembling them in Utah. But we haven't settled on anything. We could make the displacement 500, 620 or 680cc, depending on which runs best."

A 680cc two-stroke? In a twisted way, it made sense. Last year Honda and Kawasaki each sold about 1000 500cc two-strokes apiece. Those numbers were barely enough to keep Kawasaki interested and, evidently, not enough to keep Honda entertained. But those figures would be great for tiny ATK. So now that the CR500 is gone and Kawasaki is not planning on doubling its KX500 production, there's a little gap to fill. "That's what we do," said Frank. "We fill little gaps."



MAICO LIVES



Turn out the lights when you leave. Pete Murray was the last rider to actually race a Maico in supercross. For a period in the '80s, the bikes were known as M-Stars.

A LITTLE HISTORY

No matter what dirt bike you ride today, it has a little Maico in it. Back in the '70s, the German factory influenced everyone. It was Maico that first used offset fork axles, and they were the first to develop long travel suspension. Maico set the standard in handling and power delivery that all the other manufacturers used as a yardstick. By the '80s, the rest of the MX world had caught up and internal problems brought the company down. For a period, Maicos were brought into America under the name M-Star.

It was in that period that Pete struggled to keep them in the limelight. "It must have been about 1985 or so that I was waiting in line for tech inspection at the L.A. Coliseum. The AMA guy started giving me a hard time because of the production rule. He said I couldn't race it, like it was some kind of works bike or something. I said if he could find one guy in the stadium who was worried about me and my Maico and he would publicly admit it, I'd pack up and go home. I got to race."

Ronnie Smith in Georgia became the official U.S. Maico guy through a turbulent period of now-they're-in-business, now-they-aren't in the '90s. The Maico tooling and designs eventually were purchased by a Dutch company, and many of the parts found their way into a sidecar motor known as a Zabel. The Dutch Maicos were kind of a disaster and quality control was sketchy.

ATK, in the meantime, wrote the book on micro marketing. First it was electric start four-stroke dirt bikes in a time when those were rare. Then it was exotic dual-sport bikes, then dirt trackers. "The Maico motors are now being made in Germany, and the frames are made in Holland," says White. "We think we can put them together here with much better quality control. We'll use most of the same parts that we use on our big four-strokes; WP suspension, Brembo brakes, Pro Taper bars and



Kawasaki and Honda sold about 1000 500s apiece last year. Now that the Honda is gone, there's a little gap to be filled.

Talon hubs. We'll import the motor parts and, initially at least, the frame."

BUT A 700?

Yeah, that's what we said. There must be a reason no one has ever made a 680cc two-stroke, right? We figured that some must have been built over the past 30 years, but nobody could actually start one. Frank amazed us all by firing up the big bike with a couple of kicks. Then he pushed the kill button and handed it to me. First kick—nothing. I had kicked it for all I was worth and the piston maybe moved an inch or so within the cylinder. Second kick—nothing. On the third kick, the bike fired and simultaneously something in my neck snapped. It felt like someone had hooked jumper cables to my spinal cord. I think the combination of the superkick and the sheer surprise of hearing the bike come to life shocked my neck, back and shoulders into a complete seizure.

"See, that wasn't so bad," said Frank.

"Gaaaa."

WHAT A GREAT AIRPLANE MOTOR

For the rest of the day, I didn't move my neck. And whenever it came time to start the 700, I just handed it to Frank. But the bike was fun anyway. It was like nothing I had ever ridden. It's kind of hard to describe, but just imagine having all kinds of power without any rpm. The motor would pull hard, but when you opened the throttle for a big hill it wouldn't necessarily do anything different. It would just keep droning along at the same rpm regardless of throttle position, engine load, uphill or downhill. In order to accelerate, you would just upshift. Downshifts were strictly optional.

"The 680 motor is actually kind of mild," said Frank. "It's very

MAICO LIVES



easy to ride, but it doesn't rev much. The 500 has less torque, but it revs. The 620 does both. It's a brute. That's the one to have if you want to go racing." The most impressive part about the ATK/Maico was how civil it was. There was very little vibration, not much engine noise, the clutch had an easy pull and the shifting was fine. "Maico had all the stuff figured out in the '80s," said Pete. "Especially on the Open bike. On the 250 we struggled with the power and the suspension."

I was surprised at how effective the bike was. Two months ago, I rode a KX500 for the first time in years. I figured it was going to be an outdated, raspy, ill-mannered beast. It was. But it was a loveable outdated, raspy, ill-mannered beast. It did some things so well that it made up for the vibration, the jetting, the weird ergos. The 700 was the same way. Sure, motorcycles have come a long way in some areas, but the truth is that you can have just as much fun on an Open-class two-stroke today as you did in 1990. On some tracks, an old-fashion Open bike can go just as fast as a modern 450cc four-stroke.

In the case of the ATK, there were some prototype issues to be ironed out. The kick-starter and shifter eventually bent and the rear spring rate was way too soft. "These bikes had a really high leverage ratio," said Pete. "You had to install really stiff springs—I still have all the specs somewhere." Pete promised to call Frank with his numbers.

"We're going to give the consumer a lot of options with this bike," said Frank at the end of the day. "We're hoping that the rider will be able to design his own bike on our website and then take the order to a dealer. He'll be able to pick his own suspension options and whether or not he wants a GPR steering



All the tooling for the Maico motor is back in Germany and the frames are made in Holland. All the parts will be put together in Utah.

dampers. All of them will come with basic things like the five-speed gearbox and the Keihin carb, but we're even thinking of letting the consumer design his own graphics. The price should be around \$7000."

The ATK plan made sense to us. They aren't trying to sell thousands of bikes. Maybe not even hundreds. But there is a small number of riders out there who want to buy an old-fashion big two-stroke. And there's probably a big number who just like knowing that they can. □