

# BORN IN THE USA

## ATK 450 Cross Country

Story and photos by Karel Kramer and Jimmy Lewis



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**I**f it has been a while since you have checked up on the doings at ATK, you might think the Utah-based company is still selling air-cooled, Rotax-powered time machines. Not so. The demise of American brand Cannondale offered ATK a unique opportunity to take a mega-jump in technology. The current ATK is the Cannondale—make no mistake about it, even if it is a much refined and more reliable one. On the plus side, that means the ATK is a liquid-cooled, EFI four-stroke with an aluminum perimeter-type frame and premium Öhlins suspension components. Those acquainted with Cannondale will recall that the machine had some substantial faults and weaknesses. Rather than be happy with a far more competitive motorcycle than what it had, ATK made arrangements with the original suppliers to ensure a lasting parts pipeline, then proceeded to re-engineer the machine. Among the claimed

improvements is an increase to a full 449cc displacement.

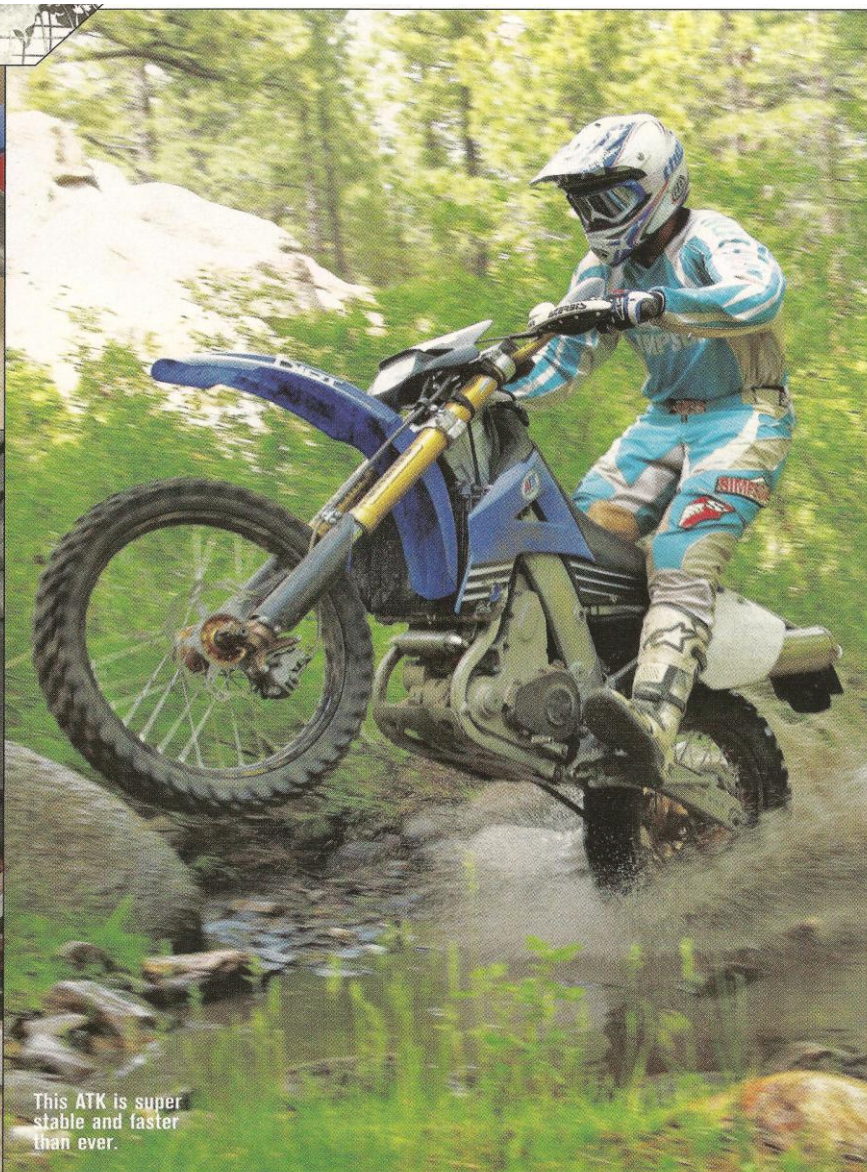
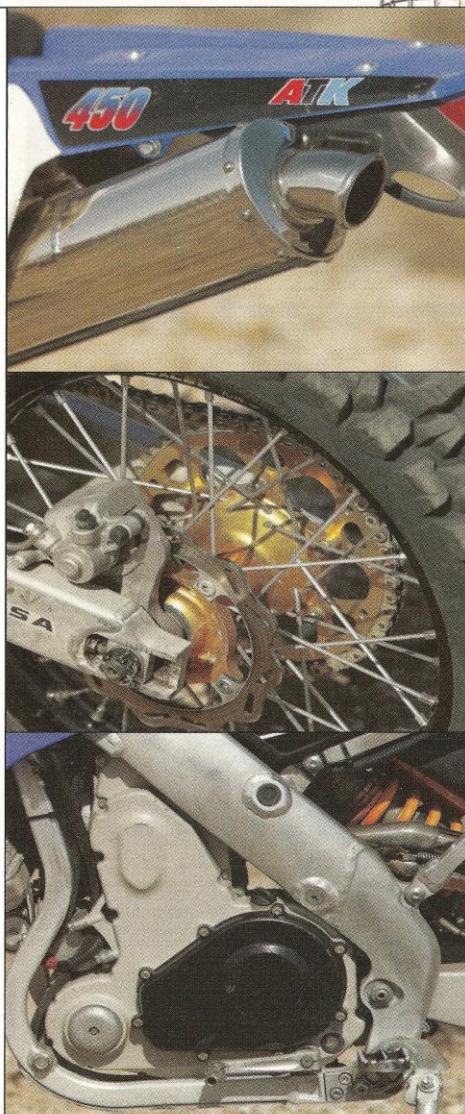
The size is arrived via a new Teflon-coated piston, a cylinder liner with revised materials to enhance durability and increase the bore 2mm and a new, rebuildable crankshaft with correct balance factors. A search for increased reliability led to new transmission gears, a revised (quieter) clutch hub, new EFI system, engine cases modified for better engine oil flow, a better flowing cylinder head, new exhaust camshaft, new corrosion-resistant aluminum valve cover, new engine sidecases, an aluminum coolant impeller (was previously plastic) and a revised shift drum (was modified for smoother shifting). To keep all the new and updated parts happy, new engine hardware aids correct torque settings. ATK claimed the bike we tested had several hundred hours as a test mule for 2008 improvements. We aren't sure of its true

hours, but the bike was obviously well-ridden with apparent boot wear and evidence of many a wash session. In spite of its miles, the bike felt tight—as aluminum frames are prone to feel—with increased performance compared to Cannondale or ATK units we have sampled in the past.

The chassis has a feel that shows you how far four-strokes and the aluminum frame have come in the last five years. It feels wide and a bit heavy. The tight turning ability isn't even comparable to today's bikes. It is sluggish but very predictable. The one thing the ATK has is the stability (and plenty of it) of an old Husky. Even with suspension that was (for some) a little on the mushy side, the bike never went anything but straight. The Öhlins suspension proved stout for tight, rocky trails but calm in faster whoops and chop. Control on fast roads is quite good.

The chassis geometry, gearing and suspension





This ATK is super stable and faster than ever.

settings all made the machine we tested best suited for open riding. In fact, ATK's Frank White uses this very machine for desert racing. As long as the terrain allowed a moderate pace, the engine remained happy and FI performance was very good. The mechanical noise coming out of the side of the motor is distracting if you are not used to it. Throttle response can be a bit strange, especially since companies like Gas Gas and Sherco have stuck seamless FI systems on four-stroke singles. There is still the occasional flame-out when the computer can't figure out what you are trying to get done with the throttle, but the bike usually fires right back up, even though the starter motor doesn't seem to spin the engine fast enough. The torque off of idle, and even at idle, is phenomenal and above that it is always pulling strong through a

very deceiving rev range. It feels fast in the open, yet sluggish in the tight stuff, which is a better combination than most riders think, especially with an engine blessed with the solid torque this one has.

When we got in sustained high-altitude riding on steep, tight trails with low ground speed, the engine got hot enough to boil over. When the engine temperature grew extreme, the EFI got finicky and low-rpm response was fluffy.

The company is claiming routine engine life of more than 200 hours, and nothing we experienced led us to doubt that. We did see a few remaining issues: The exhaust note is too barky for the current off-road climate. Also, it needs to be quieter—less mechanical sound from the powerplant is needed. If you require more fuel than the stock 2.0 gallons, gas tank options are limited to a 2.6-gallon accessory.

Cannondale was set up for a full production line, and it needed to produce and sell big numbers to survive. ATK has more realistic goals and needs, and as a result, bikes may be built to order. Options include displacement kits up to 490cc, on-the-fly fuel injection mapping, personalized suspension settings and spring rates, choice of tires, an auto-clutch and a dual-sport kit. In a head-to-head shootout with current off-landers, the \$7895 ATK would suffer. The ATK is a bit loud—hard-edged like a V-8 musclecar—and the newer designs are like high-output sport compacts. But there are still guys paying big green for musclecars. If you crave a fast, stable American ride or simply dare to be different, ATK ([www.atkusa.com](http://www.atkusa.com)) has a powerful and distinctive bike in both off-road and MX trim. And you can have it your way.