

GIANT 4-STROKE ISSUE

WILD NEW MODELS FROM YAMAHA, HONDA & KTM

DIRT BIKE

WPS
3435

www.dirtbikemagazine.com

FEBRUARY
2001

**MORE DIRT
ON HONDA'S NEW RC450F**

FIRST TEST:

YZ250F

PLUS:

**COMPLETE AFTERMARKET
YZ250F BUYER'S GUIDE**

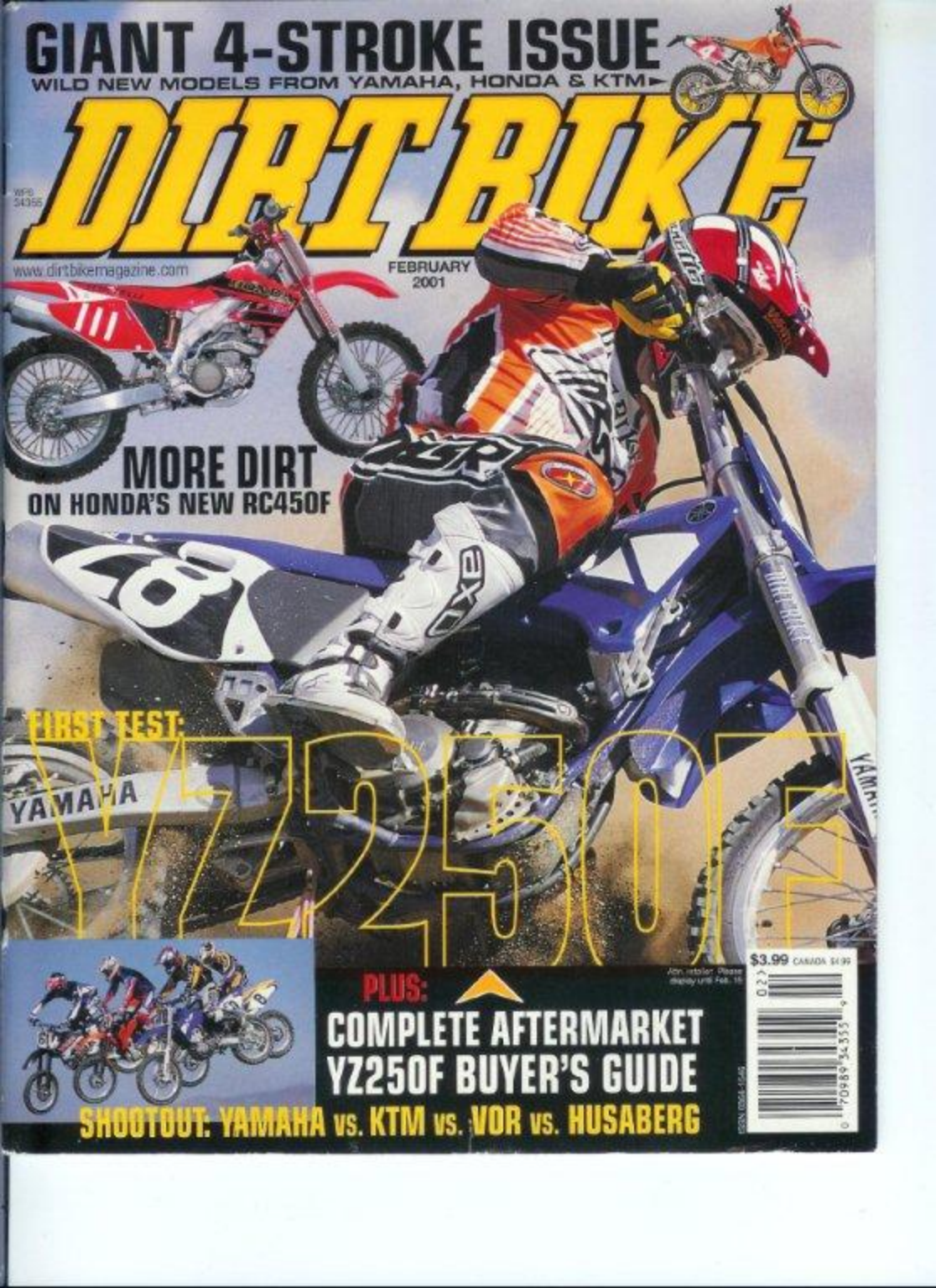
SHOOTOUT: YAMAHA vs. KTM vs. VOR vs. HUSABERG

\$3.99 CANADA \$4.99

Also, retailer. Please
display until Feb. 15.



ISSN 1548-1545



American spotter's guide

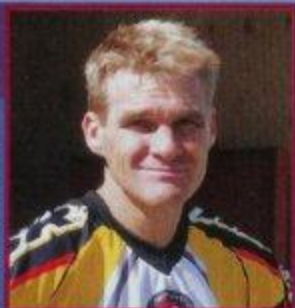
One of the wildest things about the ISDE is that it's a giant melting pot of nationalities. Where else can there be an Italian running over a Spaniard who's stuck on the footpeg of a Czech who's cursing at a Slovak? I had several different riding partners in the course of the ISDE this year. There were a few Italians and even a Japanese or two on minutes around me. After a while I could tell a rider's nationality by his riding style, look and behavior.

Japanese: They never stop smiling. It's a little spooky. There was a Japanese woman a few minutes in front of me and a young Japanese man a few minutes behind. She struggled and eventually hoisted out on day one, smiling the whole time. He struggled and pushed up the hills like everyone else, only with a huge grin. I think that riding areas are so rare in Japan that they are tickled just to be on a motorcycle, no matter what's happening.

British: The guy in the really ugly riding gear is always from the U.K. It's tradition for the British to wear a green helmet, just like Americans wear blue and white. It's also tradition for the helmet to have so many scars, nicks and dings that you really can't tell what color it was originally. Same goes for the riding gear. At one time it might have been ugly because it had eight different colors that don't go well together—you know, ugly by design. But eventually it becomes all brown.

I quickly learned another way to identify the Brits. They are the guys who go unbelievably fast in mud and pouring rain. They like that stuff, which explains why their riding gear always looks so bad. Whenever a Brit passed me in the slime, he would look back, probably expecting to see something wrong with my bike or maybe an obvious compound fracture.

Australian: They're the ones doing something weird. You wouldn't be surprised to see Kangaroo cars stuck to an Aussie's helmet. They also strike up the oddest conversations at the oddest times. In one bottleneck I was pushing my bike through the rocks alongside an Aussie. Out of the blue, he asks "So mate, what do ya think about that Gore fellow in your elections?" I picked up his bike and threw it up the hill. Maybe



that was his plan all along.

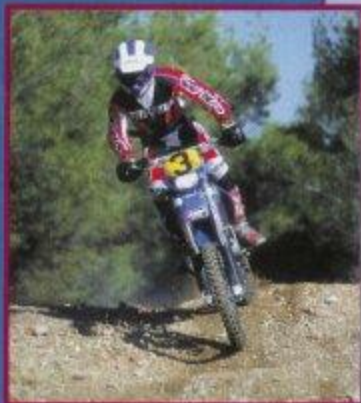
Italian: They just know things. If an Italian on your minute suddenly starts going really fast, you had better do likewise. The trail ahead is about to get nasty for some reason or another. I think they all have brain chips with a satellite link, so they always know what's up ahead. They also know all the rules and all the proper techniques and have their bikes with the right tires and the perfect gearing. If they wear Gore-Tex, the you can bet that it's going to rain. Local weather forecasters should just show up at the start and see what the Italians are wearing. I hate that. The problem is that almost all the Italians seem to be really fast, too. I hate that even more.

Spanish: There were, of course, a million Spanish entries who ran from one extreme to the other. Some were fast, some were slow. Some had distinctive riding styles, some didn't. And some would cheat like crazy. I was on a late minute in the 125 class—in fact, I was the very last 125 to leave the start. Yet when I arrived at the big uphill bottleneck that was the highlight of days one, two and five, the hill would be covered with Spanish 250 riders. To be fair, perhaps they all passed me before the hill when I wasn't looking. Or maybe that's what you get when it's your bat, your ball, your ball park and your stupid, rocky hill.

Mexican: Unlike the old days, there are some really great Mexican riders now. Once upon a time, the Mexican ISDE team was just a bunch of expatriated Americans—I think Berry Higgins was once top Mexican and top American at the same time. The funny thing about the Mexicans now is they are the most trusting riders in the event. They seem to think that everyone else knows more than they do. One

Mexican rider named Carlos on the minute behind me never figured out that he was faster than me. I would be struggling through some rocky section and he would be idling along behind, certain that I had some strategic reason for going slow. Whenever I got stuck, he would pass me with apprehension. Maybe he figured that I was faking it and would take some huge shortcut once he went by.

Czechs: When I first started coming to the ISDE years ago, the Czechs were the weirdest bunch. They usually won riding truly awful bikes like Jawas and MZs. You could hear some American whispering "Wow, those Jawas must be really good." Years later we all got to ride former Jawa works bikes. They were slow, heavy and made noises that made you think an alien spacecraft was following you. The Czechs also had a big tent in the impound area that made



everyone speculate that they were cheating like crazy. The truth is that the Czechs did well because they had, to all the riders were in the Army and if they didn't beat all the capitalist pigs, they would spend the next 10 years digging latrines. Now the Czechs ride normal bikes and dress and ride just like everyone else. Oh, yeah, they don't win anymore, either.

Americans: They are the oddest to spot of all. They are the ones with the new gear, the new bikes and a trophy team in sixth place. And they're the ones with magazine editors who make fun of everyone else. □

SPANISH FLIER

By Roo Lawson

It wasn't my idea. I'm much smarter than to attempt the ISDE on a 125. For one thing, I'm too big for a 125. For another, I knew that there would be mountains in Spain and *anyone* would have trouble getting a small-bore through that kind of terrain. There's no reason to take the world's hardest motorcycle event and make it harder.



An Italian bike, a Spanish race and an American fish out of water



Photos by Steve Berkner

Yet there I was, on the start line of the ISDE on an Italian-made TM 125E. I had originally planned on riding a prototype TM 250 four-stroke in the event. But about a week beforehand, the word came from Italy: no four-stroke. There were only two in existence, and they needed more development time. I was going to have to change classes and ride whatever they brought. That would be a 125.

What's a TM, you ask? Okay, let's buck up. TM is a little company that knows how to make horsepower. They dominate the world of kart racing with super fast engines. And they know what it takes to win the ISDE. Years ago, there was a class for full-size 80s in the Six-Days. It was dominated by TMs that made more power than some 125s. So I didn't doubt that the TM would be a fast bike. I just didn't know if I could ride it.

SPANISH FLIER



Getting through the rock sections was hard on the TM. Tail gearing and a narrow powerband aren't a great combi.

TOO PRETTY TO RACE

I had to admit the bike was gorgeous. Every machine that comes out of that tiny factory is hand built—that's why you almost never see one. There just aren't many of them. TM has actually resisted the urge to grow and expand. The people there would rather tinker along building a few hundred bikes a year than take on the pressure of trying to increase quantity and compete head to head with big corporations. They would rather have a milling machine pop out five or six brake pedals a day than invest in a die to cast thousands. So most parts are made as if the company only had to build one bike. The triple clamps, hubs, brake

pedal and pipe all look like expensive aftermarket parts. And the parts that are purchased outside Italy are all top-notch; the rear brake is a Nissin, the rims are Excels and the shock is an Ohlins. The fork is an Italian Paioli made with cooperation and assistance from Kayaba. The frame is vaguely similar to a Kawasaki KX125's but much prettier. It has a steel perimeter design with oval tubing.

But the bike is really unusual in the engine department. It has a bizarre cooling system. Coolant goes from the waterpump into the top end and then down into the cases before returning to the oversize radiators. The main bearings and crankcases actually are



Explosives indeed! Just light the fuse and presto! back.




The faster you ride a bike like the TM, the better it likes you. Special tests were always the most fun part of the race.

SPANISH FLIER

would be pretty tame. It wasn't. In absolutely stock trim with a huge silencer designed to meet strict ISDE noise standards, the bike had more power than most 125 motocrossers. It would positively blow away a Honda CR125. It would shred a KX125. It was fast. But to me, it seemed like a toggle switch. There was very little bottom end before the gates opened and a ton of horsepower was dropped into your lap. If you were idling along on a trail that suddenly turned uphill, you couldn't just open the throttle. The TM would bog down. You could try to slip the clutch, but in the long run, that wouldn't be a good idea. I've always believed that the way to save the engine over a period of six days is to avoid the clutch as much as possible. That meant I had to downshift in a hurry, and I wasn't sure if I could react that fast. In fact you had to shift all the time—always keeping the bike in the meat of the powerband, because you didn't know what was around the next corner.

Part of the problem was that I'm no 125 specialist. But also, this bike was designed by guys who make fast 80s. To them, the 125 had a meaty powerband that was a mile wide. They were also used to dealing with




Good fuel and a whole lot of power: that's a good combo.

liquid-cooled, just like the cylinder. This is nothing new to the kart world, but unique on a motorcycle of any kind. It makes perfect sense. Small engines like 125s turn higher revs and wear out more quickly than big engines, plus they have lower-end problems more often. Keeping things cooler can only help.

In Europe, 98-octane gasoline is common. So the TM runs higher compression than most bikes made for the U.S. market—and the swirl that comes out of our fuel pumps. In the U.S., the TM would need race gas or a steady diet of octane booster. And from the ahead-of-the-times file, TM was the first non-trials bike to come to the U.S. with a hydraulic clutch. It's still there, complete with Magura master cylinder. It's only a matter of time before Japan catches on.

DAY ONE

I'll admit it. After riding the bike for the first time before the event started, I was scared. Pretty or not, the bike was a handful. You would think that in enduro form, a 125 two-stroke



Spanish Flier was a hand-built bike by a 1980s manufacturer who...

SPANISH FLIER

lever are well-protected. Even the fork has less underhang below the axle than any other inverted forks, so rocks can't catch the front end and send you off the trail.

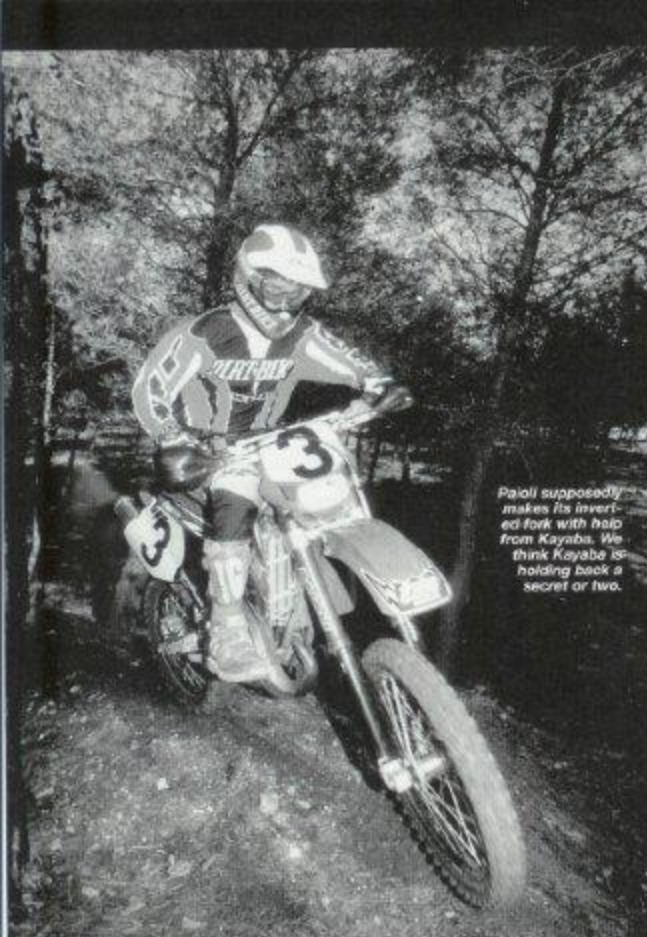
Halfway through day one, I was beginning to understand the bike a little better. All this time I was thinking in traditional ISDE terms: save the bike above all. But the TM really didn't need saving. I could ride it like a motocrosser and there wouldn't be trouble, I hoped.

In the special tests, I was on a much slower learning curve. Face it, Americans are not particularly good on grass tracks. We just don't have that type of racing in the U.S. The trick is to keep your momentum through all the turns, whether they're sweeping off-cambers or sharp hairpins. That was especially hard for me on the 125. I had ridden the qualifiers on four-strokes, so I always had enough power to come to a complete stop and blast out of the turns. The secret, once again, was to abuse the bike. Scream it hard, and slip the clutch coming out of the turns. The bike was so fast that when I did everything right, I doubt that a 250 could have done any better. But I had to trust the bike. It was a difficult act of faith.

DAY AFTER DAY

It was weird. After a few days, I stopped worrying about the bike. I burned the clutch without a thought. I screamed it like a weed-wacker. In fact, I began to enjoy the hard-hitting powerband. I remember passing a couple of 250s on one sandy hill—they were being lazy and thought they could torque their way to the top. I always kept the bike revving, so hills rarely caught me unprepared.

Some things, though, I never adjusted to. I was too big for the bike in every way. The seat/tank/footpeg relationship was pretty tight. The reason for this was a high footpeg location. I never smashed my feet on rocks or dug the pegs in ruts, but I had to do deep-knee bends to stand up on the pegs. Plus I was too heavy for the stock suspension. At over 180 pounds, I'm not prime 125 material. Both ends would bottom on a regular basis. The Paioli fork doesn't respond well to increased compression damping, either. Unless you keep the clickers backed almost all the way out, the front end deflects on hard edges. For



Paioli supposedly makes his inverted fork with help from Kayaba. We think Kayaba is holding back a secret or two.

the best riders in the world, ones who gladly trade bottom end for sheer speed. Unfortunately, I'm not in that category.

FIRST STOP, ROCK MOUNTAIN

So I started day one not knowing if I was up to the task of performing a week-long, high-rpm balancing act. The first real test was a rocky uphill bottleneck. At first I was way over my head. On top of having a high-rev powerband, the TM was geared tall. It was set up to keep up with highway traffic on the brief pavement sections, but that also meant it would do about 20 mph in first gear. There was simply

no way to baby the bike up that hill. The only way was to scream it and hammer the clutch like a madman. At this rate, I thought, there's no way the clutch would last to the top of the hill, much less to the end of the sixth day.

Surprise! After spending almost an hour on that hill, the clutch hadn't faded at all. The bike never boiled over and never even seemed to have any problems. There were several points where I just launched the bike forward and let it fall over without me. No problem. The bike was designed to crash and sustain very little damage. The hoses and the huge radiators are tucked away and the shifter and brake