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DIRT
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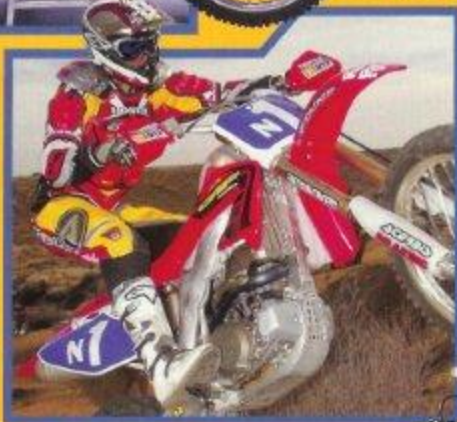
DIRT BIKE

MAY
2002



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THE WILD
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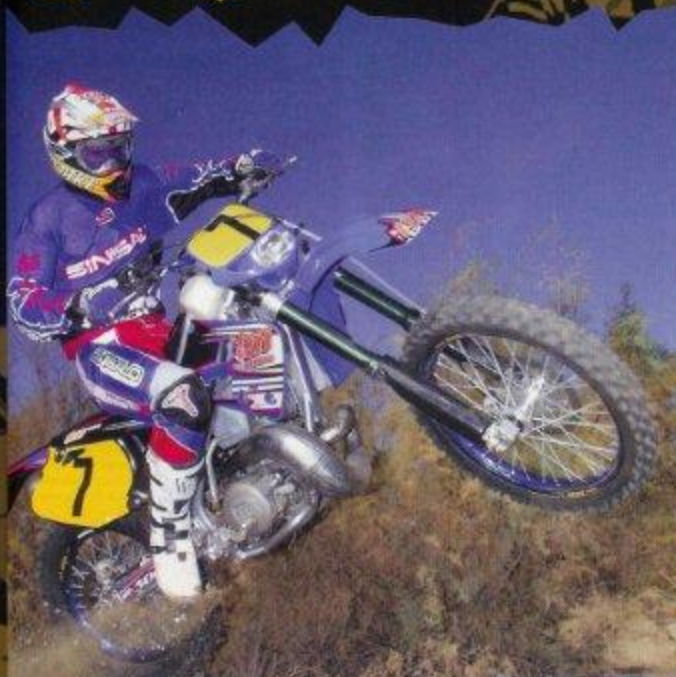
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Exotic Breed



Old World meets high tech

By the staff of DIRT BIKE

Jumps, turns and trails really haven't changed that much in the last few years. Neither has the formula for a successful off-road racer; the TM300 is built to that formula.

Face it, the motocross world might be going crazy with new technology and new ideas, but not the enduro world. Sure, there are new four-strokes with new ideas in the off-road market. Sure, there are electric starters and new models. But it's just not that big a deal. When it comes right down to winning enduros, hard-scramble and even hare and hounds, nothing beats an old-fashioned two-stroke. Off-road races are dominated by proven machines like KTM 300EXCs, Kawasaki KX500s and converted 250 two-stroke MXers.

That's why the TM 300E exists. It's an old-world enduro bike wrapped up in an exotic new-age package. The TM is a purpose-built machine with nothing on its agenda aside from winning off-road races. If there aren't many people who are so serious about off-road racing, that's fine. There aren't that many TMs. This is a very small Italian company pumping out less than 1000 bikes a year, worldwide. The TM is a hand-built bike for the elite, not a formula bike for the masses.



Surprise, surprise, the TM has the first Paioli fork we've tried that works as well as anything from Japan.

If you're looking for something to show off, the TM has a lot of pretty parts to look at. If it didn't work so well, it would be a shame to get it dirty.



NEW MEETS OLD

Actually, there's nothing old about the 300E. The engine was designed from scratch for last year's TM 250; it just gets a bigger piston and loo end. The engine cases are sand cast, just like works bikes used to be. When you're only going to manufacture a few hundred engines, die casts are too expensive. Besides, the rough finish gives the TM even more of an exotic look. The configuration of the engine is fairly conventional: fiber reed valve petals, Keihin PWM carb, ball-camp-driven powervalve, etc. But the hydraulic clutch and the unfinished pipe set the TM apart from the masses.

Before this year, the TM 300 was an explosive monster of a bike with a short, brutal powerband. The old engine looked vaguely similar to a Honda CR250 motor, and in fact many Honda parts fit right in. With the new motor, the bike gets a new personality. Now it's much more mellow. The power delivery is kind of soft on the bottom, progressing very smoothly and deliberately to a solid mid-range punch. Then it's done. The TM is no revver.

If that sounds familiar, then you've been reading KTM 300 tests. The TM is aimed at the same kind of riding that the classic KTM thrives on: muddy, rocky, ugly stuff that you can't wait to get out of but you'll travel across the state to find again. The people at TM know

your sickness and support it. The TM just grinds through slop and rocks, finding traction where there isn't any. And it positively won't stall or stop on an uphill unless you chop the throttle. The bike makes a little more power in the mid than a KTM, but doesn't rev as high. That's probably due to compression; TM doesn't mind using a lot of it. In fact, the Italians are oblivious to the fact that we can only get 91 octane out of the pumps at the corner gas station here in the US. The TM has a more sophisticated pallet. Race gas is best, but aviation fuel (100 low lead) or pump gas with a good octane booster will do. You can even get away with mixing it 50/50. Stock jetting on our bike was absolutely clean for our test conditions (65 degrees, 1500 feet). But the TM guys told us we might have to drop a size on the main jet for warmer days or higher altitude.

THAT'S WHERE MY MONEY GOES

When you spend \$6800 for a motorcycle, you expect good stuff. The TM has it. The perimeter frame is made of real chromoly. You won't break it. The hubs are spun out of billet and are comparable to Talons. The bars are oversize aluminum Reikons comparable to Answers. The rims, tubes and chain are all good stuff—way better than you find on Japanese bikes. But you will find good Japanese parts like the Nissin rear brake. The front has a Nissin master cylinder hooked up

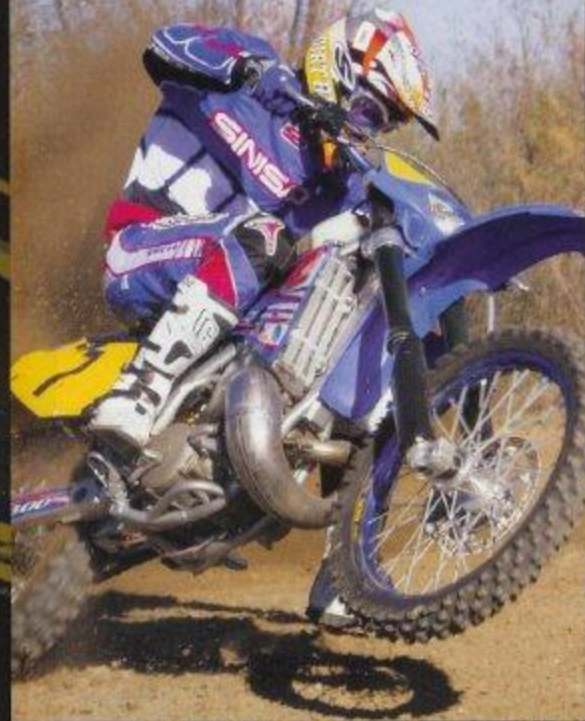
to a Brembo caliper (ward but true).

The fork is a little bit weird too. It's a Paioli/Kayaba. We don't know exactly what's made by Kayaba and what's made by Paioli. In the past, we've come to believe the less Paioli the better. But in this case, we have to confess. The fork is good; not just good for a Paioli, but really good. This is quite a breakthrough. Even though Paioli is one of the largest suspension manufacturers in the world, the company is fairly new to competition dirt bikes. Most of its previous work can be found on Mopeds and trials bikes. Paioli's first conventional forks were good, but even with the help of Kayaba, they just couldn't get the hang of inverted cartridge forks. They would deflect on anything larger than a discarded tear-off. Until now. The TM 300 has great front suspension for medium speed-trail riding and even novice-level motocross. It's a little soft for full-fledged jumping, but then it should be. It's an enduro bike. We would even rank the Paioli a little higher than the current crop of WP forks on KTMs and Husabergs.

The rear has never been a problem for TM. Right from the start the bikes have had Ohlins suspension with linkage. Being small has its advantages. TM has never been afraid to copy what works, so while KTM has been trying to rewrite the laws of suspension with the no-link PDS system, TM just found a linkage that

Exotic Breed

Do Italian bikes turn? If you want them to turn, yes. Otherwise, no.



It's a challenge to get a powerful motor to be smooth. The 300 does it, but the hit might be a little too soft for the MX-bred rider.



Sand cast cases give the TM a kind of works look. Actually, even modern works bikes don't look this much like a factory racer.

worked and used it. We're too lazy to see if Honda linkage would bolt right in place, but we wouldn't be surprised.

Overall, the rear of the TM is well-matched to the front. It isn't as soft as some enduro bikes, but then it's certainly not as stiff as a full-on motocrosser. The big test for enduro suspension is to be as versatile as possible; off-road riding can have anything from smooth fire roads to monster drop-offs. The TM suspension passes the do-it-all test with a fairly high grade.

THE REST

For some reason, people claim that Italian bikes don't turn. That's not true at all. They just don't turn like Hondas. The TM will go around a corner just as fast as any bike, but you have to be aggressive. Open the throttle early and power your way through the turn. Actually, that's the best way to turn any bike. It's just that the TM wants that kind of treatment all the time, even when you aren't in a hurry. The top of the TM's seat is surprisingly flat, so don't be afraid to shift your weight forward for the turns. Yes, there's a big nub on the top of the fuel tank, but you won't hit it. It just looks scary.

At speed, the bike goes very straight. You pick a line and go for it. That isn't to say that it's completely free of headshake. The front of the TM can shiver like a cold dog. But it's not much more than that; just a shiver. The bike still holds true to its line.

There are some other things on the TM that make you go "huh?" The first thing that every test rider said was "man, it sure vibrates." Invariably, a rider would get off and check the engine mount bolts. They were always tight. We would love to rebalance the crank and see what that does. And not many riders were thrilled with the tight distance between the seat and the footpegs. If you're tall, you'll have a hard time hoisting yourself into the standing position. On the other hand, if you're short, you might like the reasonable seat height and the fact that the footpegs are high and out of harm's way. The TM has much more ground clearance than the average enduro bike.

All that's fine. Even if you have to raise the seat or rebalance the crank, the TM is still an impressive piece of hardware. Everything on the bike is handmade and beautiful. Look at it this way: people spend ridiculous amounts of money to have a Harley in the garage that only gets ridden once a month. It's a pride of ownership thing. In the case of the TM you have all the same emotions: the same beauty and the same pride, the same thrill when you look in the garage. But the TM can do more than just look good. It can win races, too.