

Private Affair

By John Fuller

When I was invited to evaluate the TM250MX motocrosser at the Spencer family's private track on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia it took little thought to answer yes. Jimmy Spencer bought a TM and graciously put it up for a short-term *Canadian Biker* thrashing. I mean testing before receiving its race mods.

When we met up with 21-year-old Jimmy he mentioned that the track was gnarly, as they had been working at making it harder to help him prepare for the opening round of the Canadian National Motocross series in Nanaimo. Ron Spencer, Jimmy's father and track designer said the track would change configuration according to the race season. In the winter, they tighten it up to familiarize themselves for a motocross.

Dan Barker, TM's Canadian importer, was on hand for questions, as was the mechanic for Vancouver Island's TM dealer, John Svoboda, for adjustments and technical advice.

The track looked gnarly all right, offering standard MX fare. Laid-out in a small valley with a selection of natural terrain, rolling hills mixed with excavator-made killer whoops, tabletops and the token triple jump. The ground was loose dry soil with a high dust factor, making it hard to see for more than one rider circulating at a time. The day was hot and it didn't take long for our parched bodies to find the shade during breaks in the riding.

TM is a small Italian company that has made its mark in the off-road world. The machines are state-of-the-art showpieces that perform at the upper level of off-road performance. But North American M/X and Supercross have not been as forgiving to the brand since high-flying demands are harder on the machines.

My first impressions while sitting atop the 250MX were



that of reasonable seat height, extremely narrow width between the midsection, and bars set at a comfortable level. At which point, I noticed the Reikon oversize style aluminum bar with degree indexing printed on the clamps. Sweet.

On the left side of the bike resides the hydraulic clutch master-cylinder and when squeezed its self-adjusting, effortless activation is felt.

On the right, the Nissin front brake master cylinder, Brembo caliper and large 270mm diameter disc add bite to the stopping and slowing scenario. Seat bounce suspension action seems above average from the Ohlins shock, and a quick brake stab and fork compress revealed little stiction from the Ohlins forks.

From my seated view, the front fender looked suspiciously like a Yamaha shape. Later it was learned that the rear fender comes from a Kawasaki mold and the engine sure looks very Honda-ish. Hey, plastic molds are expensive and this is a small company, so why waste time with plastic shapes and concentrate on more important issues like machining a large selection of the 250's parts from billet aluminum block.

The rear brake pedal belongs on a mantle, and the hubs and triple-clamps are gorgeous, easily qualifying as aluminum art. The rest of the bike parallels, all the edges are smoothed out and the welds are clean, most parts are polished; obviously manufactured and assembled by someone who cares about their work.

Some other nice touches are blue anodized Excel rims, a Regina gold chain and aluminum sprocket, and sand-cast engine cases. Did I mention the Ohlins suspension? Reasons to buy the bike at this point are looking good. The sum of the parts alone adds up to a bargain without even riding it.

Once riding the TM250MX I felt it had a feel not like anything I had ridden, except the last TM. On first impression the front forks felt soft and seemed to ride low in their stroke. While accelerating through a dip section on a slightly rutted straight, the handlebars exhibited some headshake on more than one occasion.

The chassis layout feels slightly short making deliberate rear weight transfer common. Perhaps this produces the light front end, but somehow heavier springs seem like the beginning of the solution. We are dealing with one of the top rated performance forks in the world, but even the best gear needs tuning.

The engine's power is clean and strong. Midrange to top end is the bike's sweet spot but, not surprisingly, the engine will chug up from idle revealing its enduro heritage. The two-stroker comes with an HGS expansion chamber, not common in Canada but highly-regarded in Italy.

Shifting was good and the clutch was a treat, no fade and with a consistent feel. I have read in other publications that the TM's don't handle sharply, but I beg to differ. This machine allows a rider to at least get a glimmering of what going fast through a berm is like.

The bike still had the original MT32 Pirelli knobbies with little wear, so I followed the rules of cornering—weight the outside peg, force the bike down, focus on the exit and hammer it—and I was rewarded with unbelievable cornering speed. The bike does prefer to be pushed in order for every-

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thing to perform properly, but when energy levels fall, reality sets in and mistakes happen.

The whoop section was peaks and valleys, and the TM250MX was doing a good rocking horse impression. Again, I couldn't help but wonder what stiffer suspension springs would do. Don't get me wrong, for mere mortals like me, suspension tuning through oil weight and levels and clicker adjustment would probably suffice, but not even Jimmy Spencer was launching into the whoops.

Slightly soft or not, the suspension's action was top notch with little to no stiction in the forks and good bottoming resistance. The rear shock behaved beautifully on stutter bumps, finding traction and hooking up in the loamy soil.

Footpeg-to-seat distance was a little cramped making sitting-to-standing transitions lethargic. That aside, the ergos were all good especially the flat seating position that allowed forward movement for cornering.

Brakes were fantastic with the front offering a strong progressive feel and the rear delivering almost too strong a grip; I stalled a couple times when I accidentally landed with my foot on the pedal.

Little gripes like a leaky gas cap or a broken pipe mount, which the bike suffered, don't compare to the overall picture: this motorcycle is a hand-made beauty capable of winning races.

