

Gentlemen, Start Your Engines—If You Can

□ It was a good-looking motorcycle, chained to a tree up near the start line with a store-bought FOR SALE sign duct-taped to the seat. It had too much motor for me, 390cc, fine if you have good eyesight, perfect reflexes, Blue Cross, and a seven-foot pain threshold.

Week after week, seven enduros in three different states, and the 390 still sat near the start line chained to a tree. Out of curiosity I looked it over and couldn't believe the price; it was almost a gift. The fork legs weren't tweaked and the frame had original paint with no telltale flaking to indicate a bad twist. And I couldn't see or feel any heliarc scars on the crankcase. For a minute I thought it might have a close-ratio gearbox, but such was not the case; it had the wide ratio needed for enduros.

Mel Downs came lumbering by as I was looking the bike over.

"Hey, Mel, did you see what they're asking for this piece?" I asked.

"Yeah, I know all about it," he said, and he said it like he knew all about it.

"I can't believe they've been trying to sell it for seven weeks," I told him.

"They haven't," Mel said.

"Say what, Mel?"

"In the last seven weeks," Mel explained, "that thing has had seven different owners."

"Is this the one . . . ?" I asked.

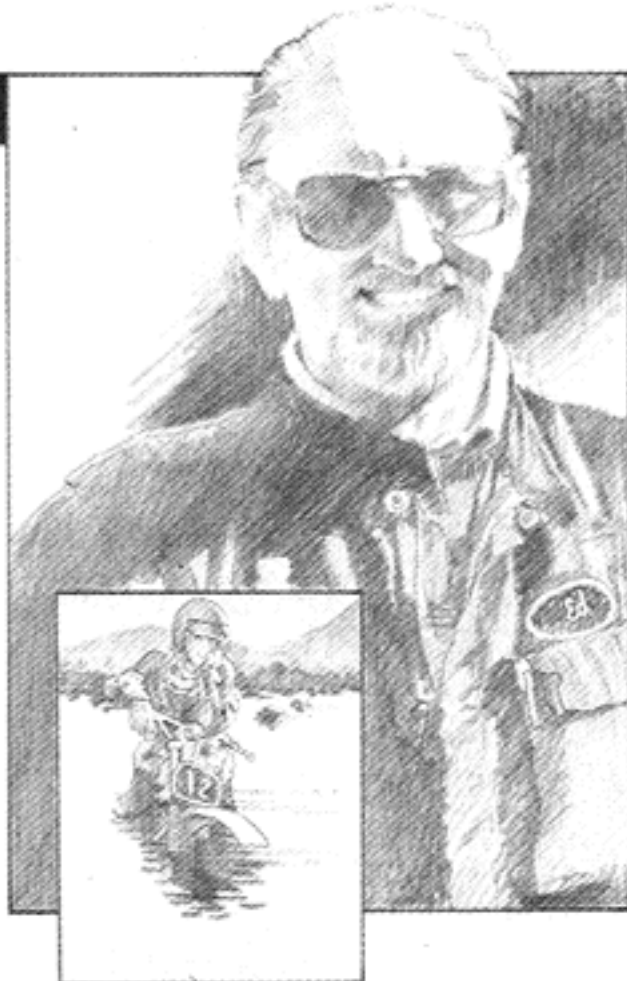
"That's the one," Mel said.

This was the notorious mid-year variant that did everything—except start.

The brand always had a left-side starter pedal, not what you call your ideal location to begin with, especially if you stall on a two-foot-wide ridge with nothing on each side but air. There were some additional glitches on this model. The manufacturer had just increased the suspension travel, which raised the motorcycle, and the kickstarter was so high you almost needed a ladder to reach the thing. They also cramped the pedal "throw" to about 30 degrees before it hit the footpeg and, most important, the internal gearing was such that each kick barely turned the engine over.

There was no way a normal kick would spin the engine to life; riders had to give it a ferocious boot, starting three feet away. If the engine was warmed up and the motorcycle aligned properly with the earth's magnetic waves it would SOMETIMES fire up. Cold start was a matter of wearing out three teams of pushers or shoving the thing to the nearest stop sign and grabbing hold of a truck. It wasn't an Edsel, but it was close.

Actually the model was never all that popular to begin with and they were



quite rare; basically because they didn't have enough range to cover the 45 miles between gas stops. They were expensive and blazingly fast, which meant those rich enough to buy one were old enough to be too scared to ride it.

Another motorcycle that didn't catch on all that well because of a starting problem was the Rokon, with its pull-start snowmobile engine—a 340cc Rotax, as I remember. Its automatic transmission made it, supposedly, stall-proof. However, there isn't an ignition system yet that will survive the solid wall of water thrown by a 260-pound Heavyweight B rider falling off right alongside at a creek crossing. And, to the best of my knowledge, no company yet makes a carburetor that won't confuse itself when the motorcycle's wheels are higher than the gas tank. Any C rider could start a Rokon that stalled in the first 75 miles of an enduro. A little further into it, say 100 miles, and it would take an exceptionally fit rider to get one to fire up. Ed Fletcher stalled his once when he crested a steep 55-foot climb with too much speed and found himself looking at 55 feet of DOWN. Not one of the competitors who stopped for Ed's body blocks had enough strength in his grip even to pull his starter ONCE.

Another difficult starter that fell by the trailside was the Greeves. At first glance the model I remember appeared to be wonderfully designed to allow long starter pedal travel. The right-side footpeg could be folded up against the frame well out of the way. The peg was held up by a seemingly foolproof steel ring. However, the top of your boot would frequently lift the ring on the return stroke, the peg would drop, and the next kick would jar your goggles halfway down your nose.

I remember riding one of these back from a checkpoint for a competitor who was having a warranty problem with his

collarbone. It was a hot day; I was wearing shorts, tennis shoes, an ounce and a half of MAN TAN, and a ten-second burst of OFF. Not wishing to wrap my featherweight shoe around the starter, I checked the latch after every kick as I was cranking it up. I know the ring was over the peg just before I gave the beast a particularly vicious stomp but, as the pedal bottomed, my shin exploded and all my life passed before my eyes. I still have the scar.

Later I realized the back of the motorcycle had dropped as the rear springs compressed, and the footpeg had pulled out from under the ring.

The all-time worst-starting motorcycle I ever came across was a Rickman with a BSA 500 single engine. These were rather rare machines made by the Rickman brothers; a pair of excellent British motocross riders who began by making their own frames, probably out of desperation. These were marvelous things of lightweight tubing, the welds ground smooth and the whole thing nickel plated. Even in the muddiest conditions there was no mistaking a Rickman—it would be out front with its frame shining like, well, a new nickel.

The Rickman frame looked good enough to marry, handled better, and would take any engine smaller than a Chrysler Hemi. From the factory they came with Montesa, BSA, Sachs, Bultaco and Triumph mills, and from the backyards of America they came with everything else. Jim Weatherhead always claimed there was a live frog inside the engine of his Rickman the first time he opened it up, and he told the story so many times he had begun to believe it himself.

Jim got his Rickman from a South Jersey Enduro Rider club member who had missed 60 degrees of bog dike and "hydraulicked" the engine in 40 inches of watery muck that the Pineys describe as "too thick to drink and too thin to plow." The water-glop treatment had transformed the engine into a low-compression frog trap and the best he could do with it was make an ashtray out of the piston and give it to the SJER guy to use for recalling fond memories.

Or as a reminder to improve his mathematics.

The last engine Weatherhead put into the Rickman was the BSA 500 single, a beast that came with a low-compression plate between the cylinder and case. This plate may well have been an engineering error but the factory would never admit it. The advertising for this model suggested you learn to ride the machine

(Continued on page 80)

Duct Tapes *Continued from page 14*

extremely well before removing the plate because the increase in performance was phenomenal. No one ever came right out and said it, but the implication was that anyone running this engine in its high-compression mode had better have large, preferably three, glandular appendages.

I don't think anyone really knew what the compression ratio was with the plate removed, but I tried one once and when the piston started packing the fuel mixture it felt as if someone had suddenly shoved a cinder block under the start pedal. The longest anyone ever rode one plateless was two weeks, which proves that the macho image is a fine thing but it's not worth having to spend the rest of your life unable to cut your own toenails because your back is out of line in two directions. Weatherhead claimed the BSA-Rickman was a sweet runner without the plate and if he could just catch and train a 300-pound grasshopper to start the thing he would leave it out.

When he put the plate back in, I noticed, he put three extra gaskets on top of it.

And two underneath. ■