

Notes From A Non-Donk: Pabatco, Oregon Trail Riding and the 250 Thunderpooch



By Dale Boller

• BY VIRTUE OF 13 YEARS EXPERIENCE IN THE DIRT and no cactus spines permanently embedded in my body, I am not a Dirt Donk. By definition Cycle's Donks are those members of the staff whose expertise is restricted to street bikes. Their off-road encounters serve mainly to inspire entertaining stories of the dirt from a neophyte's point of view. It is usually my job to Scoutmaster their outings—a task complicated by the Donk's zeal for cliffs, tree roots, rain ruts, rock piles, getting lost and fits of crying. The Northwest Passage was especially fun for me because Hodaka provided guardians for the Donks and I was free to romp on an incredible set of trails even New England would envy.

I was also able to satisfy a career-long curiosity about Pabatco, a mysterious acronym relating to some kind of liquid fertilizer company that also distributes Hodaka motorcycles. If you ask someone what Pabatco stands for and he replies, "Pacific Basin Trading Company," you've located an expert who will also find it easy to identify such obscurities as H.R.D., AJS, Dot and Sir Thomas Browne. The fact that Pabatco is located in Athena, Oregon, thoroughly confounds any at-

tempt to visualize the operation. Athena, you see, can't be found on anything but a county map. To get there you fly to Portland, catch a Ford Tri-Motor to Pendleton and then drive west for 15 miles to a road sign that indicates Athena is somewhere to the left. Sure enough, a small hollow in the middle of huge wheat orchards and pea vines sequesters a tiny town with tree-lined streets and a Tru-Value hardware store. A huge grain elevator shadows the quonset shaped building that houses the Hodaka homefront. More than likely, half of the agri-residents in Athena don't realize a cornerstone of the motorcycle industry is planted next to their winter wheat.

Hodaka truly is a cornerstone of modern motorcycling. I saw my first Ace 90 at Charlie Hockies shop in Gardena, California, in the summer of 1964. Since then Hodakas have hung in there with fun trail bikes that have grown to 100cc, 125cc, and now 250cc. Besides amusing names for their models, such as Dirt Squirt, Road Toad and the upcoming 360 Spitfire Prune Pit, Hodaka built the first non-street-legal, non-motocrosser dirt bike (the Dirt Squirt). The concept has since

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been duplicated by the MR Honda series, KD Kawasaki series and numerous European models.

The parent company of Pabatco was founded in 1949 by Athena resident Ed Miley to sell fertilizer and other agricultural chemicals to farmers. In 1959 Miley established a trade agreement with Japan that for special economic reasons involved no money. He simply swapped Oregon wheat for Japanese industrial goods—specifically Yamaguchi motorcycles. The tiny lightweights were marketed profitably by the trading arms of Miley's fertilizer company until the Japanese factory went bankrupt in 1963. At this point Miley had 480 U.S. dealers and a good demand for motorcycles. Rather than let his business be picked up by bankruptcy in Japan, he approached Yamaguchi's engine supplier—a company called Hodaka—and proposed that they manufacture complete motorcycles. The first Ace 90 was produced in 1964.

Pabatco is the exclusive world-wide marketing agent for Hodakas. They have established 12 distributors in America.

and one each in Canada and Australia, who sell the bikes to 1200 dealers. Pabatco shares R & D and testing chores jointly with the factory, but handles all advertising and marketing from Athena. Sales are up 249 percent this year.

Several years ago Shell Oil Company bought Pabatco to get the farm chemical business. Hodaka motorcycles came along with the deal but Shell's involvement with the bikes is nil. The Athena Toad Squirts are free to build whatever they want.

Learning all this history once and for all generated a tear on my eyeball. Ed Chestnut even explained Hodaka's novel method of gear shifting, and it is one which has eluded my comprehension for years. Instead of dogs and pawls and forks and grinding noises, a hollow main-shaft full of holes contains four moveable ball bearings, which lock the gears to the shaft by passing half-way through the holes and engaging pockets in the gear hubs. Now you understand why I had to see it to get the slightest inkling of how it worked. Hodaka transmissions have shifted so well for all these years that I wanted to understand why. And now I do.

Even with Marvin Foster's laid-back schedule, it was soon time for the Donks to fulfill their obligation and me to photograph the antics therein. It was incredibly frustrating to have to stop to take pictures—especially knowing only a hair dozen out of 200 would be published—because each shot represents removing a Bell MotoStar, pulling off gloves and unhitching the Nikon from its leathers. The scenery was so spectacular that we stopped every mile for more shots—a regimen the Donks didn't mind because it postponed the next crash, but one which had me foiled. The trail was there but I wasn't really experiencing it because of photo stops and Donk speeds.

Oregon trails are a mixture of beauty, terror, heaven and miraculous excavation. They are strung along the side of large mountains above a river which is guarded from falling motorcycles by rock outcroppings, trees and beds of shale. Occasionally air space alone divides the water from the trail—about 500 feet of it. Narrowness is the main characteristic. Rarely is there room to pass and sometimes the width reaches less than a foot. Trees, cliffs, dropoffs and brush crowd you on both sides. An uncovered arm would quickly be in tatters from scraping branches and bushes—a living, bleeding handlebar steamer.

A few places are first-gear slip-the-clutch tacky because of rocks or tricky uphills, but in general the trails are simply very narrow and twisty. An expert would rate them moderately difficult and exquisite to ride. For a Donk they were nightmarish, and our crew did great. Their tribulations occurred from natural ability and desire conflicting with simple inexperience. Given time all of them would come to love this natural scaffolding which skirts the Oregon mountains. There's no question that our Donks know precisely what trail-riding entails, because the gnarly paths in Pabatco's back yard are genuine TRAILS. To get from one trail

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section to another there are logging roads and occasional stretches of pavement. Uphill trails lead to lovely rounded mountain tops with panoramic views, such as the crest of Ryan's Grade. But most of our ride was a twisting, turning balancing act.

Since much of Pabatco's R & D is conducted on these trails, it's easy to understand why Hodaka's are the way they are. The 250 for instance was relatively unimpressive on the 35 miles of pavement and gravel roads that lead to the trails, but once the going was tight and tough, the bike came into its own and performed far better than I had expected.

As an excuse to go fast, I told the Donks that I would go ahead, find a photo location and wait for them to pass. Scott Hudson didn't have a shred of discipline for going slow either. He was one of the Hodaka guides who also happened to be a three-time Gold Medalist in ISDT Qualifiers. Off we went on our stock 250s for an incredible romp at Gold Medal speeds, both seduced by how much fun a good trail can be.

The 250 Thunderdog is intended to be a playbike, not a motocrosser and not even a serious enduro bike. However, many top-rate features make it serious and effective as a weekend berm bouncer: D.I.D. rims, thick spokes, Preston Petty fenders, plastic tank, high breathing, Skyway spark arrester/silencer, full knobbies, power levers, etc.—

good stuff all around. Kayaba-built suspension delivers 7½ inches of travel in front and 7 inches in back. We never got going fast enough for long enough to see if the non-gas shocks would fade.

The engine is a standard piston-port two-stroke fed by a huge 36mm Mikuni carburetor. It has primary-drive starting, oil injection and CDI ignition. Moderate power is available in a beautifully smooth band from about 3000 to 7000 revs. There are no humps or great rushes, just nice torquey delivery throughout. A five-speed perfect-shifting gearbox with the hollow mainshaft and ball bearings adjusts ground speed. On the bike I rode, a slight air leak and an overheated CDI sapped engine revs, so an accurate evaluation of the motor was not possible. It's likely that steering characteristics would outshine the engine anyway since they are easily the most impressive performance quality of the motorcycle. Steering is always neutral and always accurate. The bike likes to stay upright and it saved both Scott and me more than once. Our mad dash ended when I slid out in a patch of sand and Scott fractured his bike's rear brake backing-plate on a tree root. Even experienced riders visit Donkdom on occasion, too, much to the glee of Neilson, Schilling and Jennings.

If you're a playrider and need a new bike, consider the Hodaka. It might lead you to the trail where it was built—and that's the best kind of riding there is. ●