

DUCATI'S V-TWINS

. . . Continued

We were now in the prototype section. The Ducati 350 vee-twin was just being fired up by works test-rider and up-and-coming Italian racer Giovanni Marianinni. Nothing sounds more lovely than a short-stroke Italian four-stroke being warmed up inside a workshop!

"Listen to that," said Dr. Taglioni. "the only noise you hear is the exhaust."

And there it was, fitted out provisionally with tank and seat from the 500 vertical twin, with rearsets, clip-ons and PZ Michelins racing tires. Open Aermacchi Mettisse type frame with the vee-twin underslung. Then I saw the covers of the cam-drive belts instead of the familiar tubes for the shafts, and finally I noticed that the swinging arm is hinged from the crankcase, Cosworth-Norton style. The crankcases are much narrower than those of the 864cc twin and the Motoplat electric starter is much more discreetly tucked away.

Marianinni wheeled the bike out onto the test track and I started putting on helmet and gloves. This was going to be fun! "You can rev till it doesn't make power. The track is too short to feel more than the acceleration...but you'll see."

I have always been a believer in first impressions and my first impression of the 350 desmo was "WOW!"

The engine, only 350 mind you, pulled cleanly from 3,500 rpm and it would accept sudden full throttle without fumbling at 4,000 revs. The bike is so low and light that it is reminiscent of a 350 Aermacchi road racer. But while the Aermacchi single shakes and vibrates like a pneumatic drill; the 90-degree twin is velvet smooth. It sounded strange at first and I couldn't figure out why, and then I realized the old gear whine was gone! With tight clearances on the desmo rockers and a toothed belt to drive the cams the mechanical noise had virtually ceased. At speeds the only sound is the wind and the beat of the exhaust.

Ducati have a very slick gearbox on the big twins although the switch over to a left side change has added a few clicks and clunks where there were none before.

But this five-speed box is perfect -- very precise and with a short throw.

The Veglia mechanical rev-counter told the story. Good pulling power from around 3,500 with peak power at 8,500 and peak torque seeming to lurk around the 5,000 to 5,500 mark. Changing up I never thought of using the clutch because the bike just feels like a racer. Coming down the box was effortless and although in a 15 minute blast I didn't miss a single gear, it is nevertheless comforting when changing at nearly 10,000 rpms to know that even if a shift should be missed, the desmo gear will keep the valves from floating, from crossing or from smacking a piston.

I was finally racing around flat on the tank and having a lovely time on that tiny little track when I had a scary wobble over some ripples. I saw 10,000 three times down the straight and finally pulled off the track truly impressed with the handling and performance of this 350 which feels like a very light 500.

Dr. Taglioni was smiling, eyes twinkling, behind his sunglasses. "The 500 has 50 bhp in the same frame," was all he said.

Later, back in the prototypes workshop, he added; "These heads have 60 degree valve angles and of course we can make cams with greater duration to please riders who want really fast motors." Then the topic shifted to racing.

"I'd like to go racing tomorrow," said Taglioni. "But the problem is not money, it is manpower and time. We simply cannot take our best people off the prototypes to work on racing engines. As it is we are building 20 complete endurance racers for next season and 20 spare motors."

"We have these 350 and 500 90 degree twins to get into production. I'd think they'd be in the showrooms by the end of '78 or the very beginning of '79."

After a few bad years, some internal strife and some unpopular styling experiments, Ducati Meccanica seem to be coming back strongly. At the Milan show Ducati will unveil their new middleweights. If these bikes can be as competitive in price as they are in performance then it will truly be "V for Victory" at Ducati. ☐

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