

Duc/Suz Comparison



Fourteen years ago an Englishman named Paul Smart won a 200-mile motorcycle race in the Italian town of Imola. He was riding a hotted-up version of Ducati's then new 750 twin. Ducati's race workshop celebrated by building 25 replicas for sale to the public in road-legal form.

The bikes were simply called "Super Sport's", and continued in limited production largely unchanged for ten years. Though never sold in great numbers, the Ducati 750SS and 900SS were the definitive cafe racers of the Seventies, setting performance and handling standards for the next decade and winning fully deserved legendary status.

The Super Sports is a legend because it was built to perform very well at high speeds, with virtually no concessions made to practicality or general ability.

It is also a legend because most other bikes sold around that time were either flat-out doing the ton (160 km/h) or had highly suspect ton-up handling, steering, braking and suspension. The SS had few equals and those were all expensive European sportsters.

The Japanese manufacturers just weren't in the same race. Though each was good in its own way. Yamaha's 650 twin and air-cooled RD 350, Suzuki's various two strokes, Honda's 750 four and Kawasaki's 900 four and 750 triple simply couldn't come within cooee of a 750SS on high-speed Sunday morning run. The Ducati was a Ferrari Dino in a sea of souped-up EH Holdens.

Suzuki set an early example to the other Japanese makers with its GS 750 and GS1000 fours. Honda tried a bit harder with its 900 Bol D'Or and CBS1000 six. Yamaha developed the SJ series fours; and Kawasaki finally dropped its evil 750 two stroke to concentrate on getting big four-strokes to handle.

Then development got serious. Yamaha liquid-cooled its little strokers, Suzuki gambled on its radical Katanas, and Honda released the classic CB1100R. Meanwhile, Ducati concentrated on its more approachable bikes, the 900 Darmah and the new Pantah range. The 900SS, virtually unchanged from the 1972 Imola Replica, hadn't won a race of consequence in a long time, yet it somehow remained the bike to beat along the unofficial racetracks dotted around Australia, particularly where the roads were smooth and the speeds high.

Suddenly, the pendulum swung. The big manufacturers, searching for a bigger slice of a

smaller pie, concentrated on specialized models for particular market segments. They started to build super-tourers, super-cruisers and super-sportsters. Kawasaki redefined in-line fours with its GPZ900R, Honda introduced its VF series 750 and 1000 V-Fours, Yamaha and Suzuki produced their own race replicas, the RZ500 and RG500 two-strokes. Power was up, weight was down and, most important, these new sportsters handled; really handled.

The Ducati Super Sport, now in 1000 Hailwood Replica guise, was starting to show its age. The big Hailwood was, and is, a truly brilliant bike in a small number of important areas, but it had grown a bit fat and soft around the edge and only the quickest Ducati punters could show a clean pair of Michelins to the faster riders on Japanese bikes. The Pantahs, sweet as they are, simply lacked the grunt and Ducati's superiority and the Sunday Morning Blaster was in serious trouble.

GETTING EVEN

Ducati hit back hard. The factory (and some notable privateers) had had some success with racing Pantah engines slung in light, Verlicchi-designed frames. Ducati whacked a battery in the back, a light on the front, detuned the motor and released it as a 750F1. In our July '85 test of the F1, we concluded it to be the finest pure-sporting four-stroke motorcycle generally available. Bob Guntrip dubbed it "rude, crude, impractical, anti-social and bloody uncomfortable...a jewel beyond price."

Then, in August 1985, we tested the new 100-horsepower rocketships from Japan, the Yamaha FZ750 and the Suzuki GSX-R750. The broad ability of the FZ earned it our 1985 Bike of the Year Award, while the GSX-R had rewritten the performance parameters of "hard-edge" four-stroke 750cc motorcycles. Seemingly designed from the ground up as a Production racer, it made one hell of a sporting road bike.

Ducati is now a part of the enterprising Cagiva group, but that doesn't mean Ducati is dead. The new owners have obviously decided to keep both the name and the spirit of Ducati very much alive in the new 1986-1987 750F1. The only changes to the 1985 model are for the better - new suspension, improved ancillary items, a better finish, and more



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