

ATK Motorcycles

A 30th anniversary story of the launch of the ATK 604 and the fall of the Berlin Wall

Sunday noon, November 12th, 1989: I stumble upon the hot sand in the city of La Paz at the southern tip of Baja California in Mexico. Tumbleweed rolls through the dusty scene - the music of Ennio Morricone would fit perfectly.

I am a little hungover at the finish of the Baja 1000, the legendary off-road race through the Mexican desert between the Pacific and the Sea of Cortez. This race has taken place since 1967, making it the oldest desert race in the world: 1000 miles wide open racing all in one stretch by day and night with several riders alternating on the bike. The race starts in Ensenada on the border with California and ends in La Paz in the south of the peninsula.

Our ATK factory team almost won the race, beaten by the Kawasaki and KTM factory teams by about twenty minutes after more than eighteen dusty hours of battle. Disappointment spreads after weeks of meticulous preparation of the twelve factory bikes in the workshop in Los Angeles. But above all, the enchantment remains after two weeks of bike-testing and preparation in one of the world's most beautiful deserts.

Walking around town I come across a newsstand in a little wooden shack with a Los Angeles Times newspaper from November 10th.

"East Germany opens border. Wall has no more meaning."

WHAT????!!!!
I clench the newspaper, hold it up and run through the streets yelling: no one cares and I remain alone with this historical side note!

During the next two days, on the way back to Los Angeles with the huge truck and the race bikes on the trailer, it's just me with magnificent sunsets and sunrises and one single music cassette: "Amigos" by Santana with the significant title "Europa-Earth's Cry Heaven's Smile".

The world is being turned upside down in Germany and I am not there!

Instead, I am in Los Angeles, California and have been since March 1989 as a student trainee at ATK

Motorcycles.

America and especially California were the hub of the motocross world in the Eighties: the best riders came from the West Coast and all Japanese motorcycle companies had R&D departments in the Los Angeles area. The best motocross equipment of companies like Fox, JT Racing, Answer, BELL and others came from the "Golden State"; yet I was German and with original Fox gear and a BELL MOTO 3 on a German motocross track in the early Eighties you were the coolest guy!

I was very familiar with the dirt bike scene in California thanks to the American magazine "Motocross Action" that I managed to snatch occasionally from one of my best friends. While riding my Zündapp 100 through the cold mud near my hometown Eschwege, close to the inner German border, I knew exactly what I had to do - I needed to go to California, where the sun always shines and where motocross has been taken to absolute perfection by the Yankees!

Horst Leitner, the founder and head of ATK Motorcycles had replied positively to my application letter - if I was in the possession of a work-permit. With just 400 German marks in my pocket, quite naive and speaking just some school-English, the new owner and managing director Ken Wilkes stares at me in disbelief and asks - "What do YOU want HERE?".

Leitner had just left the company without telling anybody about our agreement. So Wilkes just states - "Show me what you can do".
First off I got the chance to work my way up, together with refugees from Mexico and Vietnam, in the preassembly line, mounting tyres and preparing parts. It was hard work, with no safety net, just doing it, for the minimum wage of five dollars per hour.

Soon, everybody notes that I am a typical "Kraut" - focused and used to hard work thanks to the typical German virtues. Willie, from Austria, with ATK almost since the beginning, has contributed significantly to the development of the bikes

and is in charge of the four-stroke production. He pulls me aside to get involved in some actual bike assembly and I notice his giant Snap-On toolbox is as big as a closet and almost a sacred object. I am astonished that every mechanic in America must bring his own tools and there is serious trouble ahead for me if I forget to put the tools back in the right position!

With some leftovers I succeed in putting together my own small, personal Snap-On box. There's not many tools necessary for the ATKs as the bikes are surprisingly simple and easy to work on. I am almost disappointed because I expected something more "high tech". Instead there's just a simple and very well engineered design.

The quality standard is quite good for such a small production facility. The double-cradle Chromemoly frames with integrated oil tank are supplied together with the Chromemoly swingarms by the legendary Californian frame manufacturer C&J.

A very special feature of the ATKs is the Chain Torque Eliminator (CTE) system with two sprockets above and below the swingarm pivot bolt that guide the chain parallel to the swingarm in order to avoid the effect of the chain force on the rear suspension. Another innovative detail is the rear brake with the brake rotor mounted directly on the drivetrain sprocket and the brake lever anchored in the front to avoid bending in the berms or clogging up with bushes while riding in the forest.

The single rear shock (supplied by White Power from Holland as well as the front fork) is directly connected to the swingarm on the left side of the bike without a progressive linkage.

The Rotax engine comes from Austria as do the wheels and some smaller components from KTM whereas plastic parts like fuel tanks and numberplates come from local suppliers in California. The rest is taken from the spare parts catalogue of Japanese motorcycle manufacturers.

Together with Willie we assemble between three and



Klaus with his ATK back in Germany.

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five bikes a week, depending on the availability of the components. Further jobs include maintenance of the race bikes or service of customer bikes or preparation of parts in the preassembly area.

After the departure of Horst Leitner, the mood in the company was somewhat irritable. Willie had the technical know-how, but was suspiciously watched by the new owners and the American colleagues who dealt with the production of the 250cc and 406cc two-stroke machines. Right in the middle of it all I sometimes feel like I'm on a minefield, when I have to steal parts off the finished two-stroke bikes late in the evening to meet the production targets for our four-strokes the next morning.

About twenty people worked in the company in 1989, half of them in production, the rest in administration. There were no major developments in that year, the production of the new 604 with the electric starter and the 250cc and 406cc two-stroke bikes



having just commenced. The annual production target was around a thousand bikes.

A serious shoulder injury after a mountain bike crash put my desire to ride in the desert at the time on hold for a few months. The night in the emergency room of the state hospital in downtown Los Angeles remains a horror experience. The stoned radiologist showed me the pictures with the exploded joint ball in my right shoulder, hangs my arm back in

the loop and says that everything will be fine by itself. With lots of luck I can finally have surgery in a small and private hospital near San Diego for the cost of 6,000 dollars, obviously sliding through my credit card before entering the operating room! Sick pay? No way! Five days after the surgery



I start my new job: one-armed in the office at the reception for six weeks. Unbelievable, so many chances in life!

During the 4th of July weekend I finally manage to throw my leg over an ATK 604 during a long dirt bike weekend with new friends in the mountains of the



when stopping at the viewpoint on top of the Sierra Nevada with bear tracks. Vibrations are reduced by the balancer-shaft and only the loud exhaust noise of the Supertrapp silencer seemed a bit annoying in this natural paradise, but it certainly helped in keeping the bears away.

I became good friends with two European 'immigrants', and together with our three ATKs we become the nightmare of the two-stroke gangs on Honda CR500s and KTM 550s on the hillclimbs of the Mojave desert (about 200 km north of Los Angeles). Hardly anyone manages to ride a bike up as high as we do. Our four-strokes roar a beautiful concert into the steel-blue desert sky on



Sunday mornings under full load at the hillclimbs with apt names like "The Wall", "Butterball" or "The Ditch of Doom". The three of us are soon known like desperados of the Wild West - "Hermann the German", "Helli the Terrorist" and "Klausburgermachinery".

The plan is always the same, to see who manages to climb up the highest over rocks and sand on the steep slopes. The ingeniously simple concept of the ATKs with the air-cooled engine plays off its strengths to the full as the reliable engine never misses a beat when racing almost vertically for long moments at full throttle. If a climbing attempt has to be aborted, simply put the bike on the ground, slide it around and line it up for the descent. There's no radiators to break if the ATK crashes over the rocks and the rear wheel brake sits well protected on the engine.

The spring of the rear shock absorber, mounted directly to the swingarm, has a heavier preload than on other bikes to prevent the rear suspension from deflecting under heavy acceleration. This setup is due to the CTE system and may not be the best compromise when riding over technically difficult terrain, but it does work in fast passages over endless whoop-de-doo sections when the rear suspension can work almost free of chain-torque and with a lower unsprung mass due to the rear brake mounted on the sprocket. Impressive speeds are possible with this 'heavy' four-stroke dirt bike. The motocross

version with electric start and battery weighs a real 120 kg empty and is thus about 10-15



kg lighter than the competition, which at the time typically didn't have electric starters.

The ATK is extremely easy to maintain. You can leave it on the trailer in the garage on Sunday evening and pull it out again on Friday afternoon without any major maintenance work. It's a real workhorse that doesn't need a high-pressure cleaner as it hardly ever rains in the Californian desert. Our ATKs therefore look a bit shabby and after weeks of hard work in the desert they will certainly not win a beauty contest any more, but the technology is undemanding, robust and always ready for use.

The CTE sprockets cost



some power and may be critical under wet conditions when the swingarm area clogs up with mud. Under the dry conditions of the California desert though, bearings and sprockets easily endure the life of a secondary drive chain.

Somewhat critical in terms of dosage and heat resistance is the rear brake on the countershaft sprocket as the brake rotor rotates three times the speed of a normal rear wheel brake rotor and is lacking a cooling air flow at low speeds in the position right on the engine and close to the exhaust system.

With the kickstarter on the left side of the bike (secondary drive on the right side) some practice is necessary to kickstart the bike, but the starting behaviour is without blame once you are used to the unusual ergonomics.

So, since the northern autumn of 1989 I can say that I knew the bikes inside and out with all the secrets, including engine rebuilds and preparation of the race bikes for the Baja 1000 and the desert classic Barstow to Vegas.

After the fall of the Berlin

Wall, America is enthusiastic, indeed more than I would have expected and my favourite radio station "KLSX 97.1-Classical Rock" raffles off pieces of the Berlin Wall as "Pieces of Classic Rock" and continuously plays "Wind of Change" by the Scorpions and in the evening the whole album "The Wall" by Pink Floyd without interruption.

The atmosphere of optimism spills over into California, as

here, on the West Coast of the USA, a completely different movie of boundless freedom is running while the three of us plunge into the vastness of the desert on our ATKs.

Not quite the life of a rockstar, rather that of a movie star! Steve McQueen had died of cancer nine years earlier under mysterious circumstances in a private Mexican clinic. Bruce Brown's legendary motorcycle film "On Any Sunday"



Chernobyl and smog are forgotten for a moment and people share the joy about the changes in my homeland, even if very few understand what it's really about. Simple Minds' political songs like "Mandela Day" or "Biko" make even a trainee like me thoughtful. Every stop at the news stand

features him together with Malcolm Smith and Mert Lawwill, exemplifying the romantic dream of carefree riding on dirt bikes together with your best friends until a state of childlike innocence is reached.

Time is running out for me before I need to go back to



Captions: 1. On the ATK production line. 2. The ATK team. 3. Achtung! 4. The 1989 Baja bikes in the workshop. 5. The camper at the wall. 6. Down at Baja. 7. Cactus trail. 8. Funky Cold War transporter. 9. Klaus down the rockface. 10. Simple and well-designed, but definitely different, that's ATK.

becomes a discovery trip, such as when Nelson Mandela is released at the end of the year and Ceausescu is killed in Romania. Europe is changing completely but

University in Germany and every weekend there's still so many hills to conquer in the Mojave desert! The Eagles continue to play their California sound in the stereo

system on our way along the freeway back to L.A. with the ATKs on the trailer. I watch the



last sunset before returning to Europe in mid-February 1990, to the 'old world', which now has become the 'new world'! I take an ATK with me back to Germany and explore the areas near Eichsfeld and Thuringia after the border opening, finding another off road paradise for a couple of years.

Now, thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, blossoming landscapes have not grown everywhere as promised and many political issues are still open with people preferring to look backwards instead, to times when 'everything was better'. I am lucky, it only took me ten years to overcome the romantic 'Californian trauma' of total freedom in the desert, riding the best four-stroke off-road bike of that time together with my hero friends.

By the way, the Eagles were right with their song "Hotel California" and the line "...you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave...". I had