

COMPARISON MINITEST:

Kawasaki KDX175-A3

The King meets the Suzuki PE175 in an enduro coup d'etat.

• Being King is no big deal. Year by year, motorcycles come and go in momentary flashes of brilliance, each of them vastly changed and incredibly improved. And each year the one that proves to be a little more improved than the rest is appointed to reign over its class until the next time around, when something younger and faster invariably wrestles the crown away.

It's remaining on top that's difficult, and that's what makes the Kawasaki KDX175 different. When it was released in 1980 it singlehandedly set all-new standards for 175cc enduro machinery, catching the other manufacturers asleep at the drawing board. A year later it still was a head and barrel above the crowd—and the amazing thing was that for the most part, it was *unchanged*.

But three years in the life of a modern moto-monarch is a long time, and now the KDX's reign is being seriously challenged. The Suzuki PE175Z is the golden boy of the newly launched age of serious 175cc competition machinery, and its eyes are set on the Kawasaki's crown.

The KDX defends its title with the same attributes as in previous years. The engine basically is unchanged. The intake port has been given a new shape and two bridges, and both the rod bearings are slightly wider. The only other engine change is the carburetor, which now has an oval venturi that Kawasaki claims is for quicker throttle response.

Throttle response always has been excellent on the KDX, especially down low. The Kawasaki's horsepower comes on lower, stronger and smoother than anything on the small side of a 250. A Yamaha IT175J comes close in torque, but the KDX will pull away in the midrange. Above that, the KDX's muscle begins to thin out. The PE Suzuki's power is the opposite, building from so-so low end to a healthy high-rpm punch, making it a machine for a different type of riding.

Situations where the rider has no idea what to expect next favor the KDX's power curve. When you come around a quick bend and there's a sudden uphill that gives you no time to think about downshifting, and just barely enough time to grab a handful of throttle, the KDX will jump at the opportunity to show what it can do. The revs can go much lower than any seasoned 175 rider would willingly let them drop, but the KDX will keep running well after the point where it has a good excuse to stop. It won't produce gobs of horsepower down there, but it *will* keep going.

The PE will be able to power its way through the same section, but the rider will have to work harder. A sudden drop in speed doesn't cramp the PE's style *too* much, but the no-run point will come earlier than on the KDX, so the rider had better be ready to slip the clutch to maintain his pace.

Terrain that holds fewer surprises but just as much difficulty is where the KDX loses its advantage. The PE rider will be able to use a sizable top-end advantage to outride the Kawasaki pilot. Horsepower has always been a hard act to beat, and the Suzuki has a wide

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In its third year, the KDX175 remains a top contender in the 200cc enduro class

But time and Suzuki have caught up, so it's no longer a one-bike show.

margin on the Kawasaki.

Kawasaki handling, though, gives nothing away. A long wheelbase gives the KDX a good helping of stability. Narrow trails with piles of softball-size rocks can throw any bike/rider combination off balance, but the KDX can correct most of the trouble, whether it was caused by the terrain or the rider. The wheelbase is only partly responsible for the KDX's ability to hold a line—the PE is much less stable but only an inch shorter. One other factor is the Kawasaki's overall riding position, which is relatively far forward, putting most

KAWASAKI KDX175

Importer: Kawasaki Motors Corporation
2009 East Edinger Avenue
Santa Ana, California 92711

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| Category | enduro |
| Suggested retail price | \$1549 |
| Engine type | two-stroke vertical single |
| Port arrangement | one reed-valve-controlled intake, four transfers, one booster transfer, one exhaust |
| Bore and stroke | 66.0mm x 50.6mm |
| Displacement | 173.1cc |
| Compression ratio (corrected) | 7.6:1 |
| Carburetion | one 34mm Mikuni oval-venturi slide/needle |
| Gearbox | 6-speed |
| Front fork/wheel travel | Kayaba air-spring, 36mm stanchion tube diameter/9.6 in. (244mm) |
| Rear shocks/wheel travel | single Kayaba shock, 12mm spring preload adj./10.5 in. (267mm) |
| Wheelbase | 57.6 in. to 58.8 in. (1463mm to 1494mm) |
| Seat height | 36.8 in. (935mm) |
| Weight | 227 lbs. (103kg) |
| Top speed (observed) | 75 mph (121 kph) |
| Warranty | 90 days |
| Available color | green only |

of the rider's weight on the front wheel. That keeps the front of the machine going straight, and the back never strays far out of line.

Through turns the KDX doesn't handle quite like anything else. It steers quickly enough to initiate an instant direction change, but the rider must learn how to make the rear end follow. A dab on the rear brake or a blip of the throttle will accomplish the task, but coasting through the turn just doesn't feel secure. Once the right technique is learned, the Kawasaki is a quick and easy machine to maneuver through twisty sections.

Like the KDX, the PE is a top-rate turner, although it doesn't require as much time to learn. Both machines will come out of the tight stuff dead-even, but when the going gets rough, the Kawasaki must take a back seat to the Suzuki. The Uni-Trak is identical to the 1980 version, which was the first year for any vertically mounted single-shock rear-suspension design. And while it was a leap forward two years ago, time has a way of steamrolling all technological advances and flattening them into obsolescence. The Uni-Trak is far from obsolete, but the more advanced rising-rate design of the Suzuki has eclipsed *everything* in the enduro realm. The KDX will buck in rapid successions of whoops, as if packing down from either a spring rate that is too low, or from too much rebound damping. Also, the forward-mounted pegs on the KDX mean the rider must compensate by taking up an exaggerated rearward riding stance to keep the ma-



The handling and power of the KDX and PE are at opposite ends of the enduro scale

But both machines are tuned to the same trophy-winning frequency.

chine going straight. Widely spaced bumps and landings from tall jumps are no trouble for the Uni-Trak. But the KDX occasionally will bottom with a harsh clunk when the terrain gets too rough.

The PE can take on the same ground as the Kawasaki, but goes on to take whoops and really rough terrain more smoothly. And when the PE bottoms, it's never with the noticeable impact of the KDX.

Both machines work well up front. Kawasaki uses the same Kayaba fork that came on the machine in 1980, the only difference being the aircaps that were added last year.

The fork works smoothly on all types of terrain and will carry you through any enduro without a hint of flex while delivering a smooth ride all the way.

The top-rate fork combines with the KDX's stability and low-end grunt to show how it has remained on top of the small-bore enduro empire through '80 and '81. But 1982 has no respect for former rulers, and with the advent of the PE, that's what the KDX has become. No doubt Kawasaki still will rule over many trail rides, but when it comes to winning enduros, the Suzuki is King.

—Ron Lawson

