

"FAST AND FUN"

Kawasaki 650 Owners
Report on Their
Record-Holding Bike

COMPILED BY
PATTI CARPENTER

Title: Jerry Tatum
Title photo: Dave Bush



Back in February, 1980, when *Road Rider* published Owner Survey form number 36, I had no idea we would be dealing with a famous motorcycle! But the very first completed form that arrived in the mail came from Robert Runyard of Costa Mesa, California. Robert's report qualified as the most unusual we've ever received.

He wrote, "The first time I ever rode a KZ650 was the day before the annual six-hour endurance road race at Ontario, California, in April, 1979."

The report went on to explain that Robert and two teammates — Roger Hagie and Frans Vandenbroek — rode the Kawasaki to a win in the 750-cc class! As Robert put it, "On the day of the race, our Kawasaki 650 outran and outlasted all the 750s in the six hours of racing. The cylinder head has never even been

removed. The only real changes we made were: Kerker exhaust, Dunlop tires, S&W shocks, new carb jets (but stock carbs), Tsubaki chain." Robert's surprising report was accompanied by the photo I've used for this survey's title illustration. It was taken by Dave Bush and it shows Roger Hagie taking a turn on the Kawasaki 650 during the Ontario endurance run.

That's not all . . . I later found out that this same machine, the Kawasaki 650 Four, also had won this same six-hour event in 1978 — and set a new 24-hour record in the 750-cc class at Daytona in March, 1977 (2,811.006 miles at an average speed of 117.125 mph — a record which still stands!).

Now all this superfast racing information still might not be a good reason to put it in an Owner Survey in *Road Rider*,

let alone use a photo like that at the beginning of the article . . . if it weren't for three *other* reasons . . .

. . . the owners voted handling, quickness and reliability as the three Best Features of their Kawasaki 650s. I guess there isn't a better way to emphasize handling, quickness and reliability than by winning an endurance race — or, as Scottsdale, Arizona owner Jerry Tatum summed it up, "My Kawasaki 650 is fast and fun and I never have to worry about anything coming loose." (And now you know where the title came from . . . thanks, Jerry.)

Although the total number of reports on the Kawasaki 650 Fours was small compared to our usual return (only 72 KZ650 owners responded to the questionnaire), the report was very specific about

"Its 'Best Feature' is that there is no one feature you can point out and say 'This is the Best Feature.'"

Barry Martin
Renton, Washington



"Would prefer a bigger, heavier bike for touring."

David A. Langham
Rowland Heights, California

"A willing engine is like riding a thoroughbred horse. You may not give her the reins, but it's exciting to know she is chomping on the bit, raring to go."

David M. Swanson
Tempe, Arizona



the things those six dozen riders considered to be the good traits of the machine.

Excellent handling led the list of Best Features. Susan Mountain, who lives in Denver, Colorado (where else?) was one of the 25% who reported good handling as a Best Feature. Susan wrote, "Low center of gravity (apparent), low seat height, overall frame geometry, smooth engine characteristics permit ease of handling at both in-town and Interstate speeds." Richard S. Vogler, a reporter from Naples, New York, is apparently a fellow hill rider — he stated, "I live and ride in hill country and require this type of quick response and handling." "This is my eighth bike," said Las Vegas, Nevada KZ650 owner Ray Landry, who then added, "this bike will outhandle them all."

The owners divided the second-place Best Feature — power — into two general categories: quick acceleration and oomph for touring. "The acceleration of this relatively light machine is so sharp and crisp it's hard to believe it's only a 650," was how Dana Jon Keech of Denver, Colorado put it. Berndie R. Lunsford sent in his report from Blairs, Virginia, claiming, "Most touring power for the fewest ccs — I like the power, but I also like less ccs so my insurance is less."

With 36,544 miles on his 1977 KZ650's odometer, Carson, California biker Allen Bidwell reported, "I've owned 17 motorcycles, including BMW, Norton, H-D — and no machine has been as dependable and cheap to own as my KZ650." Allen's comment introduces the third Best Feature as cited by the owners: reliability. Dennis J. Hostetler of Anaheim, California listed his total mileage as 35,000 and was able to report, "I have never had a major problem with this bike." The high-mileage machine was the 1977 KZ650 belonging to G.R. Goucho Kluckman of Crystal, Minnesota. G.R. reported, "She's a gem — 40,000 miles without any problems — no major difficulties encountered."

In the Worst Features part of the survey form, the owners seemed to have a hard time establishing many definite trends. However, three areas of concern finally developed, though they were not nearly so clear-cut as the Best Feature category.

Cold starting and long warmup time ended up with 22% of the Worst Feature votes — and also appeared as the leading Particular Difficulty, so it seems to be the biggest bugaboo of KZ650 ownership. Most owners were careful not to blame their machines for this trait, but referred often to "government requirements," or

"EPA standards," etc.

"It's a hassle having to let the bike warm up for a long time," explained Kurt Lehner of Wolfeboro, New Hampshire after listing "Lean EPA carbs" in the Worst Feature space. Canoga Park, California reporter Joseph D. Morrison said, "You have to let it warm up at least five minutes or cough-cough, sputter-sputter!" Joyce Wood wrote from Kansas City, Kansas to describe a variation on the theme — wet contacts. "It's hard to start in damp and wet weather," said Joyce. "Moisture forms in the points — the cover has to be taken off and the points dried out." For those who live in areas of high humidity, this might be something you could check out the next time the bike is reluctant about starting.

Fifteen percent of the smallish sample (that's only 11 owners) said their seats were uncomfortable . . . the Kawasaki 650 seats, that is. "The seat doesn't have enough padding in it," stated LaVista, Nebraska owner Gary D. Watson. Les Baird of Anchorage, Alaska assigned co-Worst Feature status to fatiguing noise level and the seat which he said was "like a concrete slab . . . produces numb butt!" James B. Hodges of Albany, Oregon agreed with that assessment, reporting, "The seat is not comfortable on long trips . . . anything over 50 miles."

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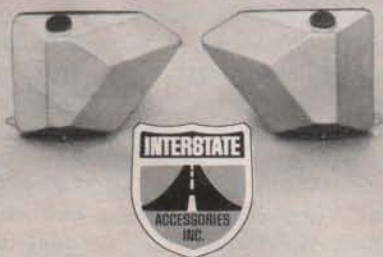
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"Very cold-blooded; takes too much time to warm up, especially on cold mornings."

Gordon Lunde
Milwaukee, Wisconsin



Only seven owners (just over 9%) had Worst words about their Kawasaki's chains — but it still ended up as the third most disappointing feature of the 650 Fours. "Worst Feature? Chain drive," said Ernest Werner of Enid, Oklahoma. Ernest went on to say, "Should be shaft driven — all street bikes should have this — it's neater and cleaner." Roger L. Smith of Wichita, Kansas calculated, "Chain, sprocket and lube money would pay for a drive shaft."

In the Particular Difficulties section, cold starting showed up again as a source of concern. Also, electrical problems — mostly associated with low output — and problems with the Kawasaki's fuel petcock were mentioned often enough to be checked out with Kawasaki Motor Corporation's service personnel.

As the owners noted, the cold starting and long warm-up times are a result of governmental emission regulations. Although Kawasaki and the other manufacturers are gradually coming to terms with the regulations and making improvements, there's very little that can be done to help the pre-1979 KZ650s in this area. If the starting problem worsens, it may be that the starter jets in the float bowls are plugging up. They can be cleaned out by spraying some contact cleaner into the orifice, then blowing them out with



"Like my previous Kawasaki, the Best Feature is, without a doubt the RELIABILITY of the product . . . they never seem to give trouble . . . tell that to your Harley and BMW readers!"

George C. Bales
New York, New York

compressed air. Other than that, the best thing is to keep the bike in a good state of tune and be patient while the machine warms up in the morning.

Electrical output complaints seemed to come mostly from the folks who had installed a lot of accessories which draw more juice than the Kawasaki was designed to put out. There is one modification that can help; but it's expensive. That is to install an alternator from a KZ1000. It is supposed to fit right in without much difficulty, but the Kawasaki service department said to be sure to remind people planning to make this change that they must also buy a KZ1000 regulator and condensers, etc., otherwise it won't work. It will cost about \$200 if you do all your own work and will result in about a 9% to 10% improvement.

Leaking fuel petcocks were acknowledged by Kawasaki's service representatives to be a problem all the way up to the 1980 models. The new 1980-model petcocks are not supposed to be subject to leakage and they are a direct replacement for all KZ650 models, so this may be the answer. Problems with the diaphragm inside the petcock reported by a few owners are suspected to be related to possible backfiring through the carburetors. If this happens, the pressure can rupture the membrane and cause erratic

"It has the power, the looks, and it's the right size."

Leon F. Moyer
Greensburg, Pennsylvania



fuel flow. Again, the answer may be a new replacement component.

For those who mentioned difficulty with adjusting the valves on the KZ650, the Kawasaki service people said the biggest problem is having a wide selection of different-sized shims on hand when the task is underway. Some folks said their dealers were reluctant to sell shop manuals or special tools, however — according to Kawasaki Motor Corporation — shop manuals and all tools for valve adjustment should be available — or can be ordered — through your dealer. So if your dealer won't perform this service for you, maybe you should see if another one will. One way to get around the shim problem is to take an accurate measurement of the valve gap, write it down, then go to the dealer and buy the specific shims required. That sounds bothersome, but not nearly as expensive as trying to stock a complete inventory of shims, most of which you'll probably never use.

Aside from a few other scattered difficulties mentioned by the owners, that was just about it for the Particular Difficulties segment this time around. The claimed reputation for dependability really stood up well in terms of the relatively small number of things the owners reported as going wrong with their KZ650s.



"Quick and responsive — it handles well and is comfortable to ride."

David Cameron
Salem, Oregon

On my averaging sheet there were a few extra things that should be talked about. Reliability got yet another vote of confidence from the average annual upkeep figures which worked out to only \$112.60 per year — quite a bit below the average amount on most other Owner Surveys. (I didn't add in one \$1,175 repair bill which resulted from one owner's accident, since it would have been an unfair average-raiser in terms of "ordinary" yearly expenses and maintenance.)

Longest trip taken on a Kawasaki 650 was Allen Bidwell's 7,000-mile, 18-state voyage, a trip which required three weeks and proved that the KZ650 can be used as a touring bike — even without the "usual" accessories. Allen said, "A luggage rack and crash bars are a full dresser to me — fairings and saddlebags do nothing but clutter." Also I should mention another "trip" — the one which got this report off to such a strange start. The team of Runyard, Hagie and Vandenbroek rode just over 400 miles in six hours . . . even though they never got very far from their starting point — and the scenery stayed pretty much the same!

Seventy-eight percent of the owner sample said they'd buy the KZ650 again. Those who said "no" weren't mad, most of them just had visions of moving up.

Gas mileage was a positive factor. The

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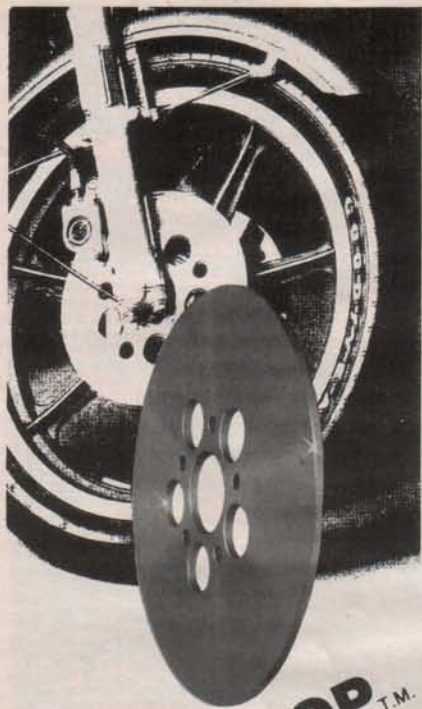
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OWNER SURVEY KAWASAKI KZ650 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

| ITEM | AVERAGE |
|---|-----------------------|
| AGE OF RIDER | 37.4 years |
| YEARS OF EXPERIENCE | 8.9 years |
| AGE OF MOTORCYCLE | 2.3 years |
| PERCENT PURCHASED NEW | 94% |
| TOTAL MILEAGE (odometer reading) | 12,723.6 miles |
| ANNUAL MILEAGE (projected estimate) | 7,442.6 miles |
| COMFORTABLE CRUISING SPEED | 61.4 mph indicated |
| GAS CONSUMPTION | 46.1 miles per gallon |
| AVERAGE TRIP - MILES | 1,345.6 miles |
| AVERAGE TRIP - DAYS | 4.6 days |
| DEALER RELATIONSHIP | |
| "Excellent" 32%, "Good" 47%, "Fair" 8%, "Poor" 13% (9% not reporting) | |
| AVERAGE COST PER YEAR (Excluding gas, oil, insurance) | \$112.60 |

POINT SCORE

(A rating of 10 indicates near perfect, 5 is average, 1 is poor)

| | |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| OVERALL RELIABILITY | 9.1 |
| BRAKING ABILITY (dry weather) | 9.1 |
| ACCELERATION (relative) | 9.0 |
| TOP SPEED (relative) | 8.9 |
| CORNERING ABILITY | 8.7 |
| STRAIGHT-AHEAD STABILITY | 8.5 |
| AVAILABILITY OF PARTS | 8.1 |
| PAINT | 7.9 |
| LOW-SPEED HANDLING | 7.8 |
| CHROME | 7.7 |
| EASE OF MAINTENANCE | 7.5 |
| COMFORT AT LEGAL CRUISING SPEED | 7.4 |
| SERVICE FROM DEALERS | 7.2 |
| BRAKING ABILITY (wet weather) | 6.6 |
| LIGHTING EQUIPMENT | 6.4 |

overall average of the 72 reports worked out to 46.1 miles per gallon. And the total mileage racked up by the six dozen 650 owners averaged out to 12,723.6 miles.

In the category of "random owner comments I liked" (a new category I just thought up), I liked these:

"So far I love the bike. I hope more women get into the enjoyment of riding!"
Julie A. Fuller - Fillmore, California.

"A very docile bike - peppy and easy to handle." *Tootsie D. Noble - Hayward, California.*

"The kids' imaginations have put far more miles on the bike sitting in the driveway than I probably ever will in real life."
James Cline - Tooele, Utah.

"I am a librarian who usually does a lot

of consumer research before buying anything major. No research on the Kawi 650 - it was love at first sight." *Jane Molumby - Madison, Wisconsin.*

"It's just a really fine mo'sickle!"
Peter Riepnicks - Kennett Square, Pennsylvania.

So it looks like the Kawasaki 650 Fours have proven to be pretty darn good motorcycles. Both on the road and on the track, the machine's handling, power and reliability have paid off - in a series of recognized world records and - more importantly - in owner pride and satisfaction.

[RR]