

Paco's Progeny

The life and times of Bultaco's TSS

Few heads of a growing and successful motorcycle factory can ever have been as dedicated an enthusiast of on or off-road sport as Don Francisco 'Paco' Bulto was throughout Bultaco's quarter-century of existence. Indeed, that was why he founded the company in the first place. Previously associated with the rival Montesa firm, it was its decision to withdraw from 125 GP racing in 1958 that led Bulto to form his own company, with racing as the principal means of establishing the fledgling marque's name and reputation. Together with another former Montesa employee, works rider Juan Garcia (who, in deference to his Gibraltarian background, raced under the name of John Grace), Bulto embarked on a programme of sporting involvement, not just in road racing but in motocross and of course trials, too.

But road racing was his first love, and beginning with an air-cooled 125cc prototype which debuted in Grace's hands in 1960, Bultaco developed a range of production racers which provided cheap, reliable and by no means uncompetitive racing over the next decade for their many customers all over the world.

The customer version of that first 125 was swiftly marketed under the TSS label (a possibly apocryphal story holds that Don Pam was a fan of the Velocette KSS, hence the acronym!), and in 1962 gave

rise to a 250 class entry, obtained by boring out the 51.5 x 60mm longstroke engine to 64.5mm, giving 196cc. This carried Dan Shorey to sixth place in the IoM TT against the might of Japan Inc, as well as to the British title, so for the following season a full 250cc version was produced with even more oversquare dimensions of 72 x 60mm.

The TSS250 received water cooling by the time it reached the marketplace in time for the 1965 season, though an air-cooled version, known as the Metralla, was built for the street with an eye on production racing.

This was successfully marketed in the USA, as well as acquiring a giant-killing reputation in the gruelling Montjuic 24 Horas, and scoring a controversial victory in the 1967 250cc Production TT in the Isle of Man — controversial, because it was so closely derived from Bultaco's GP racer!

Though the piston-port 250 Bultaco was never intended to be a match for the rotary-valve Japanese and East German two-stroke twins which dominated the class at GP level, or the Honda or Benelli four-stroke multis, it became a favoured choice of the Continental Circus privateers in the mid-1960s, and even scored that unlikely classic victory in the hands of Bultaco's most faithful and successful customer, Kiwi Ginger Molloy, in the Ulster GP in 1966 — other Bultacos

were second and third.

In the next year, works rider Salvador Canellas scored Bultaco's second GP win in front of a passionate home crowd, winning the 125cc Spanish GP with Molloy in second place. Many other points-scoring GP places came the way of Bultaco riders, and it was at their request that Bultaco finally produced a TSS350 prototype in 1968, with 83.2 x 64mm 348cc air-cooled engine, based on a sleeved-down version of the 360cc Bandido motocrosser.

This was entrusted to Molloy for the 1968 GP season, and he had some great rides with it behind Agostini's inevitable MV triple, finishing second in the Dutch TT at Assen and fourth in both East and West German GPs.

These results convinced Bultaco to put the TSS350 into production ready for the following season, but by then Yamaha was up to speed with its 350 twin and Bultaco had missed the boat with its single.

However, Molloy did register a final milestone for the Bultaco marque in 1969, when he finished third in the Spanish 500cc GP at Jarama on a TSS350 bored out to 356cc with a 1mm oversize piston. This was the first time that any two-stroke had ever finished on the rostrum of a 500cc World Championship GP.

The future beckoned but, sadly, Bultaco was not to be part of it. The advent of the twin-cylinder production racers spelled the end of the TSS Bultaco as a privateer option, and no more were built after 1970. It had been nice while it lasted.

Although the 40 or so TSS350 customer bikes built during 1969 (the single year of production) were never competitive in GP racing, they did make their mark at national level, and nowhere more so than in Britain. In 1969 a young rider named Barry Sheene swept all before him with a semi-works TSS350 supplied by the factory and tuned by his dad, Frank.

But the advent of the TR350 Yamaha meant you had to be another Sheene to have a chance of winning open 350 races with the Spanish single, in spite of the fine handling delivered by the heavy but dependable chassis.

In the mid-1970s the TSS350 had a new lease of life in the flourishing single-cylinder class, but then the spare parts ran out and the Bultacos retired from the race track. Until now.... AC

Barry Sheene on a 350 Bultaco at Snetterton in March 1969. (Nick Nicholls)

