SURVIVOR

Kawasaki's Iconic Concours Turns 20

DO YOU REMEMBER 1986? It was a time before cartridge forks, low-profile radial tires, four-piston brakes and before CAD/CAM and finite element analysis had enabled engineers to pare every last gram from structural components.

It was also a time when Kawasaki ruled the performance segment, as it had almost uninterruptedly since the days of the two-stroke streetbike era. In 1986, the fastest machine ever built was the then-new ZX1000 Ninja, a sensuously beautiful beast capable of 160 mph in stock trim. And a time when sport-touring in the United States was almost unknown—a tiny niche market, dominated by BMW.

Against this backdrop, Kawasaki dropped an unprecedented bomb, a remarkably well thought-out and seriously fast sport-tourer, not merely a gentlemanly grand-tourer. One of its chief selling points was that the company promised not to change the bike for five years (imagine, we thought improvements were coming too fast—back then). This was both an oblique suggestion that the bike would continue in production that long and an open invitation to the aftermarket to support the new machine (another anachronism).

But, the secret of how this particular machine defied the odds of the marketplace and is still on sale twenty years later (dog years in terms of motorcycle technology) is no great surprise when you spend time with it.

Engine

Based on the aforementioned DOHC, four-valve ZX1000 Ninja motor, Kawasaki was leaving no doubt that they'd gone all out to build a performance machine. The engine tune was largely borrowed from the Eliminator variant, a low slung dragster-inspired machine, with bodacious torque as its calling card. The carbs were downsized from the Ninja's 34mm mixers to 32mm, the stainless steel headpipes (a rarity back then) made 6mm smaller, and a unique set of cams with 15° less duration than the Ninja, but a fraction more lift than the Eliminator's finished the changes. This gave the heavier Concours 12% more torque in the midrange (3000-7000 rpm) than the Ninja.

A counterbalancer at the front of the block allowed the engine to be mounted as a stressed member in a stout double backbone diamond chassis sourced from the previous 900 Ninja. Steel swingarm mounts replaced aluminum, to provide greater support for the weight of luggage.

Today, the basic engine specifications are unchanged, and our latest example put out 2.2 more hp than it did in our last test in 1996. Engine vibration, mentioned as a problem in earlier tests, was not objectionable this time, not that you don't notice it. The engine makes a low growl under way that makes for an enjoyable soundtrack, and although you can feel it working through the bars, it doesn't qualify as hand-numbing. However, after speaking to a number of owners, we suspect individual models may have slightly more or less smoothness than our test bike.

A number of the original Concours had cam tensioner problems (reported by 17% on our Owner's Survey in 1994). This was cured in 1990 by changing the spring/wedge tensioner design to a ratcheting arrangement to eliminate slipping. Some snatchiness in the original carburetor settings were also reported, but these must also have been fine tuned. Now, especially for those who have become accustomed to the abruptness of fuel injection, the Concours' carburetion is a revelation; smooth, controllable and eminently driveable.

A plus for Do-It-Yourselfers is that the motor's valve clearance is handled by screws and locknuts. Adjustment intervals are reasonably long; every 10,000 miles, and yet the engine's redline is not restricted—good for 10,500 rpm.

Today, you'd have to consider the Concours' motor as well-proven and reliable as any on the road.

Transmission

Fitted with a wide-ratio six-speed transmission, the Concours' first gear is relatively short, to enable a heavy load to be accelerated briskly. Top gear is an overdrive, to allow relaxed high-speed cruising. In-between, the ratios are well-spaced so that you usually have more than one choice in corners, depending on your mood. Our top-speed testing revealed the machine's aerodynamics prevent more than 127.2 mph, in either fifth or sixth gear.

Shifting action is completely silent, and the lever moves with such well-oiled precision that you wonder if current designs haven't found a way to save weight by eliminating ball bearings somewhere. This is truly a fine transmission.

The clutch, being descended from a hot-rod powerplant, has no problems with drag-strip starts and gives very good control feel.

Shaft final drive was considered a necessity for the target market, and although the design is devoid of torque-controlling linkage like a BMW Paralever, it does use a very long driveshaft, like the Yamaha FJR1300, to minimize final drive leverage on the suspension. Kawasaki's patented progressive rear linkage, called UNI-TRAK, is also said to help, and we really couldn't fault the action.

Suspension

Originally introduced with air-adjustable suspension on both ends, the front fork was converted to conventional spring preload adjustability in 1994, as overpressurizing caused fork seal leakage problems.

The rear suspension continues to offer both adjustable rebound and air-pressure preload over a range of 14–40 psi. Removing a single screw on the left sidecover will access both the remote adjusters and we found that full preload (#4) and 15 psi of air worked very well for a solo rider and full luggage. Note that air is a progressive spring by nature and such a system, when done well, offers real advantages. Here, it is done well.