

SUZUKI

Friendly and Fast

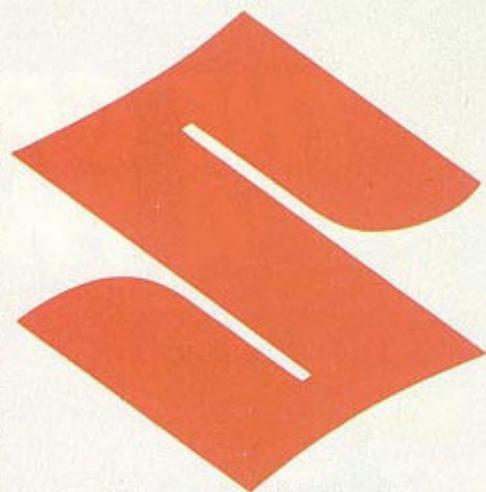
The last in a four part series on the best, and worst, from the Big Four

MADE IN JAPAN



Suzuki may have started with some quick little two-strokes, but with bikes like the GSX-R series they sure have the hang of making four-strokes, too. Waterbottle owner BILL McKINNON wraps up his four part series on the heroes and

horrors from the Big Four with a look at Suzuki's follies and their finest.

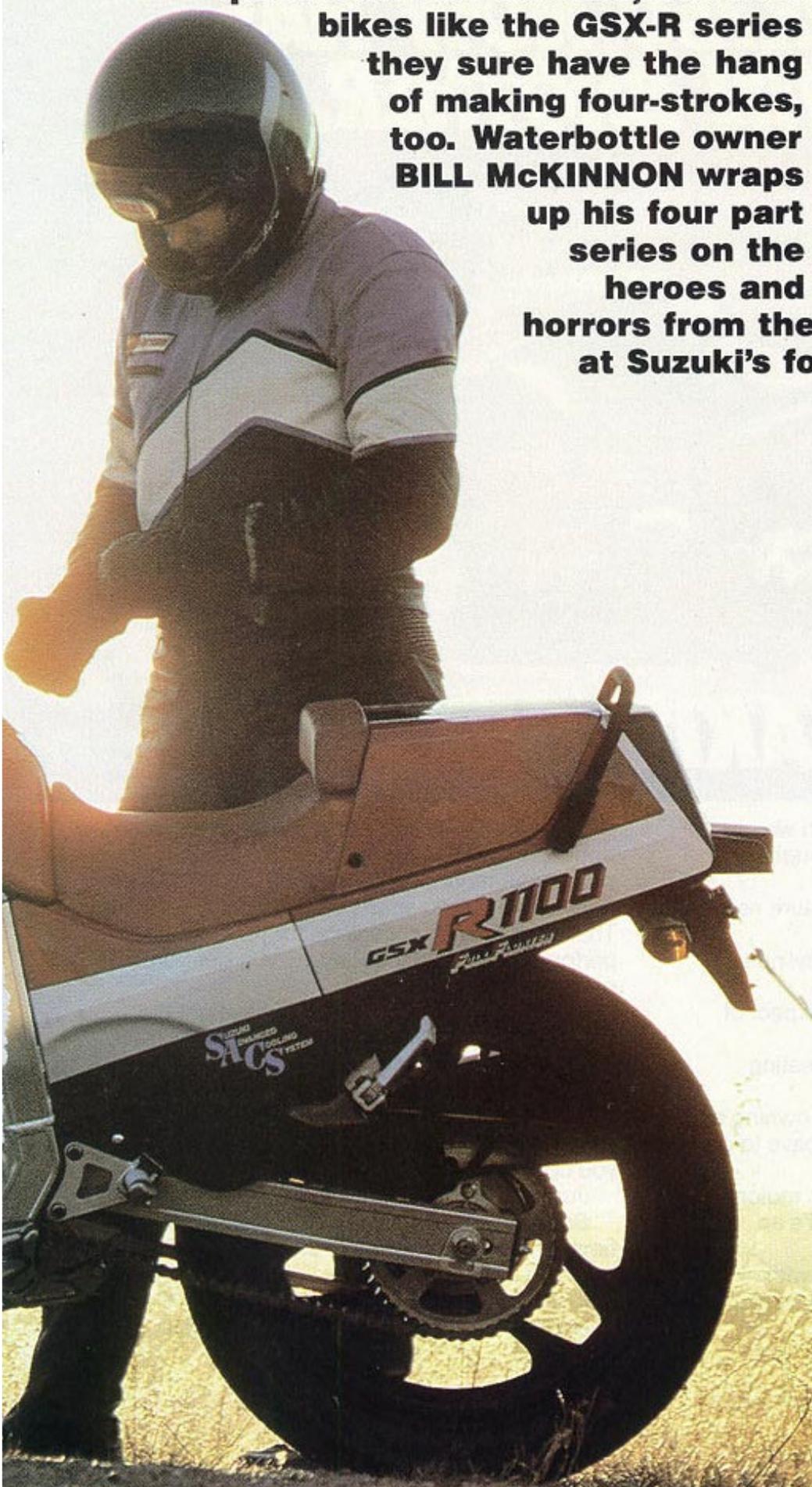


GET into an argument about the contribution each of the Big Four has made to the fundamental but often ignored concept of giving riders better bikes for their money, and it's hard to go past Suzuki as the outfit which has done most for the cause, especially since it started getting serious with four strokes in 1976, the year the first of the GS series, the GS750, came along.

Prior to that year, Suzuki had been pretty much a two-stroke only firm, although its beginnings had nothing to do with bikes, having been founded in 1909 by Michio Suzuki as the Suzuki Loom Works. However after the company's first scooter was produced in 1952, Suzuki-san must have realised quickly that there was a better quid in bikes, because it became the Suzuki Motor Company shortly after, in 1954.

Suzuki first made its mark here in the mid-Sixties with a couple of two strokes that were the forerunners of the very successful GT series. The T20 (1966) and T250 (1969) Hustler 250s (the latter featuring a six-speed box and an impressive 32 horsepower at 8000 rpm) were the quickest quarter litre machines of the day.

The T500 (1967), as the Cobra, the Titan and then the GT (in a lifespan of ten years), held the same honour in the





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500 class until Kawasaki's Mach III triple relegated it to just-so status.

Grant Roff, another contributor to these pages, once owned a Titan. (He later lashed out and updated to a GT — in 1985.) Grant took pity on me once because I'd lost my licence for the umpteenth time due to one of my frequent misunderstandings with police officers and magistrates in those days, just before a Six Hour back in the mid-Seventies, and offered me a lift on the back from Armidale down to Sydney for the race.

He rode the Titan WFO all the way, which was fine except for the fact that we had to stop eight bloody times in 500 km for juice — and the same on the way back — a record which I'll bet still stands.

The GT series was well established by 1973, with models in 125, 185, 250, 380, 500, 550 and 750 capacities. The 380, 550 and 750 triples were fat slushbuckets but they did have the sort of character that comes from being unique. I've still got a 750, and in comparison with Suzuki's latest GSX-R of the same size the Bottle feels like it was made in the Stone Age — not a mere twelve years ago. I love riding the thing, but I wouldn't use it to substantiate a "they built 'em better back then" case.

Suzuki's biggest lemon also made a brief but spectacular and very costly appearance on the stage in 1975. I'm talking about the RE5 Wankel rotary. By all accounts it was a revelation to ride, but despite this it was universally ignored, much like the turbo bikes a little later down the track.

Taking the plunge

1976 saw Suzuki take its first plunge into four stroke territory in a big way, with the GS750 scoring the *Two Wheels Bike Of The Year* title for 1977. The GS is now generally acknowledged as the first big Jap bike which you could actually praise for its handling without being laughed out of the room.

Some would argue that the GS series represents the UJM at its bland, soulless, antiseptic worst. If you're among them then you'll love these comments from Colin Miller's test of the GS1000S — the best of the series — in *Two Wheels* February 1980. Mr Miller jumped on the GS just after he'd finished with a Lav 1000 Jota:

"... Nowhere can the Laverda outdo the Japanese speedster, even though there are several areas in which the GS outperforms the Jota. It is unarguably Japan's best Superbike, and may well be the world's finest."

Strewth. Hope that didn't make you park your brekky on the kitchen floor.

The GS line also scored shaft drive — on the 850 and 1100 models, as well as a 1000 — and these bikes, along with Yamaha's XS1100, have hauled many a rider into six figures with no hassles at all. We had a GS1100GKE — the full dresser — on test for six months in 1985. "The Whale" we called it. It was a purist's nightmare but a lovely thing to load up, grab the lady and head off for a sunny weekend on. And yes, it did have "character".

In 1980 Suzuki showed that if you know what you're doing, it is possible to master four stroke technology in five short years when it released the GSX line, including the inspired 1100 Katana. "Is the new wave flash sharp enough to cut drifting silk knickers?" asked Kel Wearne. Styling-wise you'd have to give the Katana a pretty good chance. The name came from the highest quality Japanese swords, which were supposed to be able to cut a falling leaf in half, in the air.

The Katana still looks as good today as it did when it first came out, and the GSX1100 engine, with its twin swirl combustion chamber design, ranks as one of the strongest Jap engines ever made. The same Mr Miller got to test the GSX1100 (the fat lady model, not the Katana) in January '81. His only complaints were the no-reserve fuel gauge setup, the thin grips, helmet lock, toolkit, rear lights and high-low beam switch.

"Otherwise," he concluded "the GSX1100 is perfect."

However, Suzuki managed to turn the big GSX into a dog in 1984 with the atrocious EFE model. The engine grew in capacity from 1075 cm³ to 1135 cm³ and got a serious case of the shakes, a dreaded sixteen went on the front (of a 241 kg bike! Aaagghhh!) and it was restyled by the Hamamatsu blind society. Its one claim to fame was that it was the first Jap bike we tested to put out an honest 100 rear wheel neddies on the dyno, but otherwise it was, as Smithy would say, chunderama.

Fortunately, it was merely a stopgap extension of the line, designed to hold the fort for twelve months until the advent of the third generation Suzuki four, the GSX-R.

As styling exercises, the GSX-Rs rival the Katana in the way they've clicked with riders since the release of the 750 in 1985. The racer-replica look effectively managed to beat a better but less flash competitor — the Yamaha FZ750 — by a mile when it came to sales, giving the lie to the theory that people ain't prepared to pay cash for flash in the Eighties.

They are — if it works, and hits them right between the eyes like the GSX-Rs have.

The GSX-R1100, released in 1986, won *TW's Bike Of The Year* award, and if Colin Miller reckoned the GS1000 and the GSX1100 were as near as perfect as the Japs could build 'em I'd be interested to hear his comments about this mutha. It might be a case of too much of bloody everything, but I like a bit of overindulgence, and on the road nothing takes the breath away like the biggest GSX-R.

You might have noticed during this story that I haven't mentioned any Suzukis which have been affected by major mechanical woes. After all, the Japs pump 'em out at such a rate that there have to be a few lemons rotting at the bottom of the fruit bowl, right?

Well, I'm stuffed if I can think of any Suzukis in the last twenty years that have given their owners cause for regret due to expensive mechanical faults. That's not a bad record, even if Suzuki has stuck to the conventional UJM in-line four, but then it only started using that configuration in 1976.

Whatever marque you're one eyed about, there's no denying that when it comes to building big, fast, reliable weapons from Nippon that give the boys what they want in a motorcycle, Suzuki deserves to stand at the top of the heap.

These Ones Worked

T20 Hustler (1966). As potent and aggressive a 250 in its day as the RG and RGV250s are now. Had its Yamaha YDS3 opposition well beaten.

T250 Hustler (1969). More of a good thing. Beat a CB250 Honda and a Harley-Davidson 250 Sprint H in a big *Two Wheels* shootout. (Issue Number Three if you're a connoisseur. The Harley looks ace.)

T500 Cobra (1967). I nearly bought the last of the line GT500 in 1976, brand new, \$1000 on the road. Still kicking myself.

GT750 (disc brake models '73-'77). Bought one of these second hand instead, so I lived happily ever after. The ►



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boys keep telling me it'll become a classic, but it's too good for that. **GS750 (1976)**. Made Honda's four, and most other big Jap bikes at the time, look fat and old when it came out. Could accurately be described by the old "quantum leap forward in motorcycle design" cliché.

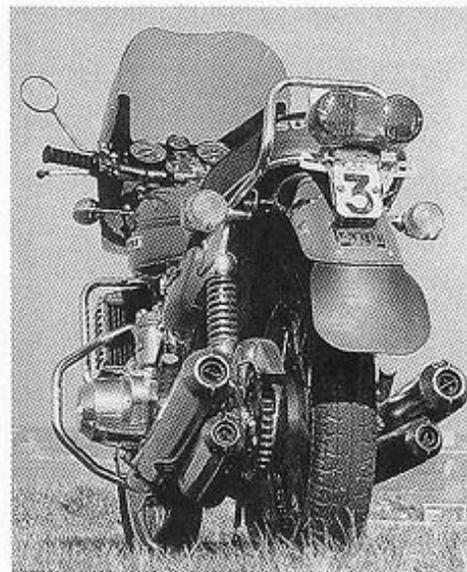
GS1000S (1979). I won't buy into the argument about it being a better bike than the Jota, but a stylish cross-country do-anything Jap bike in any case.

GSX1100S Katana (1979). A bike to make you weak at the knees, whether looking at it or riding it. Wonder what the bloke who designed the Katana was smokin' at the time?

RG250 (1983). The nearest thing to a racebike in any class at the time, credited with the "Best handling bike on the road" crown for a couple of years.

RG500 (1985). Nervous, but like sitting on a little laser beam when it took off. Bob Barnard should buy one for Sunday morning rides at his racetrack.

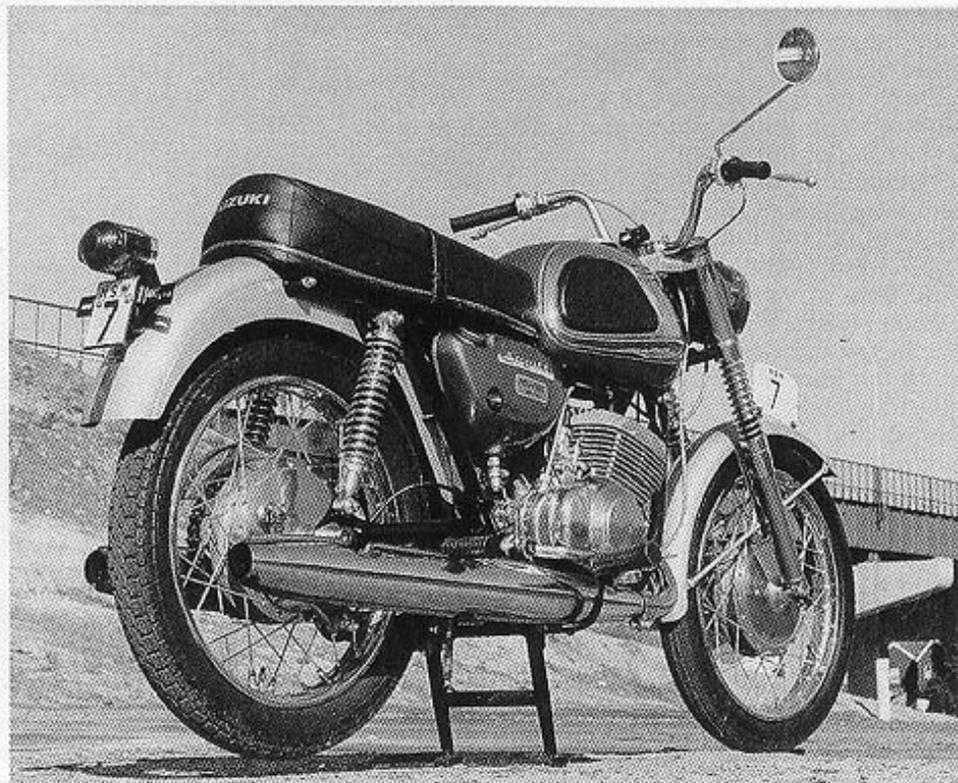
GSX-R1100 (1986). If anyone out there is rich enough to have three decent bikes in his collection, this (or the '87 model) should be one. ▶



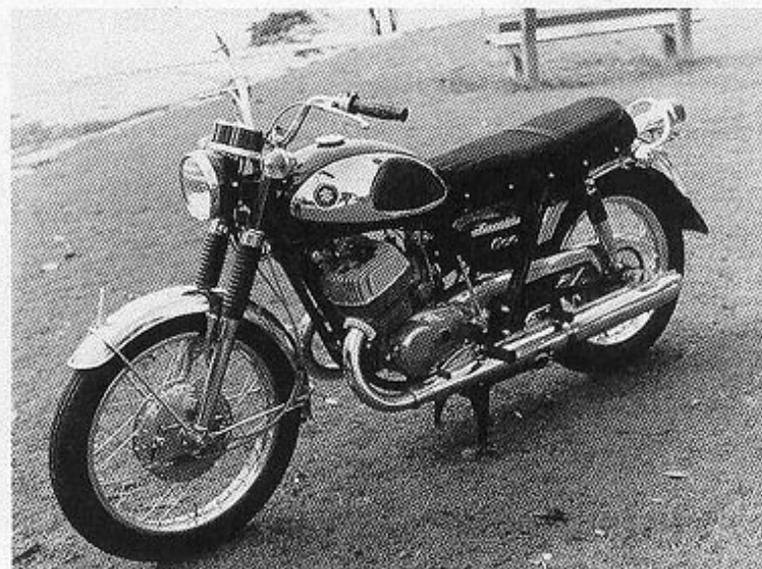
Two stroke, 750 triple — pure '70s rudeness — that was the mighty Waterbottle.



Left: The GS1000 was an honest bike with ample poke. Dunno about the rider though...



Below: The Hustlers were the 250 to beat in their day. Good performance, and nice, clean lines.



Suzuki's 500s built up a cult following — well deserved too. This one's the earliest and fastest — the Cobra.



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“Nice idea at the Time, But . . .”

RE5 Rotary (1975). Too much too soon, or just plain dumb? We'll never know — although in the case of the latest Norton (“Ra ra, chaps, it's the birth of a new British bike empire!”) I'd go for the just plain dumb.

GSX1100EFE (1984). In the test we used a big illustration of a dinosaur. Appropriate.

GSX250FW (1984). TW Turkey of the Year. Didn't gobble anything, though.

GR650 (1983). Weird twin cylinder.

The biggest purpose built commuter ever made, but none of the blokes who scream so loudly for “sensible motorcycles” (a contradiction in terms, surely) bought one.

Intruder (1986). Harley clone, therefore it deserved to die. The people saw that it was a fake, and lo, it disappeared from the road.

GSX-R600 (1988). Half arsed and disappointing compared with the rest of the GSX-R line.

GSX1100FJ (1988). Surely they could have wrapped a better touring bike than this around the GSX-R1100 engine? 🍌



The EFE handled so badly it made media headlines. Not a good design.



The RE5 rotary engine petrol guzzler. Our June '75 test mentioned “awe-inspiring complexity” yet “surprisingly ordinary” performance. A flop.



Above: Take out the “Int” and you've just described this Harley clone.



The Army bought the GR650 — it must be ordinary. An over sized commuter.