

THE LAST RD

**YAMAHA'S 1979 RD400F DAYTONA
SPECIAL — THE LAST AND BEST
OF THE AIR-COOLED RDs —
REPRESENTS THE FINAL CHAPTER
OF ONE OF THE MOST DYNAMIC
AND SPECTACULAR ERAS IN ALL OF
STREET MOTORCYCLING**

All white with a big red stripe.

The saying's been around forever, it seems, tethered as it is to what's arguably the most celebrated racing motorcycle lineup in two-wheeled history: Yamaha's two-stroke road racers – TDs, TRs, TZs, etc. From the RD56 of the early '60s to the TD1 to the legendary TZ750, this group dominated worldwide road racing for decades, the white and red international livery punching the bikes' championship credentials with an aesthetic upper-cut you couldn't dodge if you tried.



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PHOTOS: RICH COX, DAVID IRISH, ED BURKE/GK DESIGN





The dramatic color scheme, however, never made it to Yamaha's vaunted line of two-stroke streetbikes — the R5, RD350s and RD400s sold from 1970 through 1978. And that's a hell of an irony given the fact that the R5/RD family not only shared plenty of design and actual hardware with their on-track counterparts, but dominated their street-going categories every bit as strongly as the racers dominated their competition. After all, R5s and RD350s (and 400s) weren't known as 'giant killers' for nothing.

But all that would change in 1979 with Yamaha's introduction of the Daytona Special, an RD400 that sported — for the very first time since the 400 replaced the 350 in '76 — a handful of significant design and technical upgrades in addition to its TA/TD/TZ-spec paint job. Some of the design mods were in response to increasingly stringent EPA regs, others for increased performance and functionality. Either way, the end result was The Bomb — a bike so good and so exciting it made magazine writers and testers swoon.

Cycle's June '79 road test sums it up nicely:

Anyone who has ever been tempted to have at a balloon with a pin, jump up and down on a perfectly made bed, shoot the wrapper off a drinking straw, wreck a sand castle or drop something out of a high window will understand the temptation of the RD400F Yamaha. The way it insinuates itself into comradeship with a street rider's darker side ought to be against the law. Innocent-looking, trim, petite, quiet — all of it's a sham: the 400F encourages the unwary to go too fast, accelerate too briskly, stop too hard and wheelie too often. Anyone with the narrowest streak of anti-social behavior will find the RD the perfect conspirator. It is Dennis the Menace on Yokohama tires, and is the most fun street motorcycle currently available for sale.

The fact the bike was available at all in the U.S. was a shock. The previous year's RD400E was given a silver paint scheme, one that nearly yelled "final edition" when you looked at it. EPA-mandated emissions limits were behind the "no-2-strokes" agenda here, and even though Yamaha said it had technology that would allow it to meet the emission statutes for '79 and '80, no one really believed they'd push it for very long. Four-strokes were taking over by the late '70s, and most everyone felt the 2-stroke streetbike thing had finally run its course.

But rumors of the RD's death had been greatly exaggerated. Cycle again:

Here the little whipper-snapper is again, and trust Yamaha to have looked the EPA dead in the eye, flipped them a bird and produced an RD that's even quicker than last year's version. Did they do it because they were seriously interested in the 400 as an ongoing profit center, did they do it to show off their technical depth, or did they do it to stick it to Kawasaki and Suzuki, both of whom have folded their two-stroke tents?

"All of those," reckoned a Yamaha spokesman.

Ed Burke, a guy about as deep as one could get in the product-development side of things at Yamaha during those years, agrees. "To tell the truth," Burke told me, "we really didn't know how long we could keep the RDs going. Every year we'd see what the EPA was doing, and every year we'd somehow find a way to keep ahead of them. The factory was really good about tweaking the bike every year. We were back-ordered all the time, and retail sales were phenomenal, in the U.S. and also in Canada and overseas. Yamaha wanted very much to keep it all going; the bike was a mainstay, and profitable. Cruisers were the coming thing, but in '78 there was little fruit there, so the company wanted to keep two-stroke streetbikes alive.

"When we decided to do the Daytona Special," Burke adds, "we knew it would be likely the last of the air-cooled RDs, as we had liquid-cooled designs in the pipeline. So we knew we had to make the F-model special, with added technology, power, functionality, styling, paint, etc. We wanted the RD line to go out with a bang, and celebrate the many years of R5 and RD successes in the showrooms, on the street, in the magazines and, of course, on the racetrack.

"Looking back now, it's pretty clear we did a decent job with it. The suspension was good, the frame was stiff, and the engine was really torquey, at least for a 2-stroke, which made it super nice to ride, and it looked good. It had morphed over the years from a rough-around-the-edges hot rod to a more refined sport motorcycle, although one with serious performance and an attitude to boot."

Yamaha's massive worldwide road racing efforts certainly helped keep the RDs lit up in the eyes of the buying public. With guys like Kel Carruthers, Gary Nixon, Jarno Saarinen and Don Emde holding the Yamaha 2-stroke flag high in the early '70s, to Kenny Roberts and Steve Baker



The magazines loved the RD400F — and the idea of it probably even more. But Yamaha had liquid-cooled 2-strokes and 20-valve 4-strokes in its future, so by 1980 air-cooled RDs were gone forever, at least from showrooms.

(and others) doing so in later years, Yamaha often seemed like the only manufacturer competing successfully on the world and national stage. The club-level scene was largely a Yamaha benefit, as well. The combination of racing and having similarly-outfitted streetbikes for sale to the public was a strong one, the racing keeping Yamahas — and the RDs — front and center for enthusiasts looking to buy a new bike, and the streetbikes' performance capitalizing on the vibe with satisfying all-around performance.

"Image-wise," says Burke, "the RD line had the perfect backup with all the racing success and the promotional exposure that came with it. Yamaha had become *the* performance company, and it showed in our sales numbers." Indeed, Yamaha was quickly closing in on Honda in the U.S. and in Europe for the top-sales spot.

The Daytona Special — and all the RDs before it — were in many ways a direct outgrowth of Yamaha's very first motorcycle: the 1955 YA-1, a 125cc two-stroke single that won its class in two