

TBM heads over to northern France for a head-to-head between the Yamaha WR450F and Gas Gas EC450...

STORY BY NICKELER, PICS BY J.B.

NORMANDY LANDINGS...

'Will you be doing a 450cc shootout in 2003?' a punter asked me last December on the TBM stand at the Dirt Rider Expo show. 'I guess so' I replied, 'what's the problem?'

'Well you'll need a good few pages' he said, 'because by my reckoning there'll be eleven dirt bikes within the 400/450 category!'

He was right and all. There are at least eleven bikes in the class and that's before you even consider new model launches like the forthcoming CCM, and Sherco... or the Cannondale!

But quite apart from the obvious logistical problems of arranging an 11 bike shootout,

there's the much more fundamental issue of comparing like with like. Is it right for instance, to judge a bike like the XR400R against a Vertemati 450E? Or a DR-Z400E with the new Husky TE450? Or even to compare 400s with the 450s at all? And even if we were to separate out the 400s that throws up its own anomalies (XR400R versus TM400E anyone?).

The point is that with a burgeoning class like the new middleweight thumper sector, it's actually far more relevant to break the class down into smaller groups and consider potential purchaser's needs and requirements far more accurately.

So that's exactly what we've done. Starting

with two newcomers in what's most likely to be the hardest fought sector of the marketplace - the sport-trail/enduro market - we got our hands on a registered WR450F and Gasser EC450, loaded up the TBM 'Winnabagel' and headed over to France for a few days' trail riding in the company of our 2002 man of the year (and all-round good oeu), Chris Evans.

Spring is a great time for trail riding. For a start there's plenty of goop about, the temperature's not too warm and the tracks are still relatively empty. Obviously Chris had arranged for the weather to be kind to us, so in the company of 16 or so other riders we quickly despatched our

coffee and croissants, strapped on the roadbooks and headed for the trails.

The Bikes

With one eye on the marketability of a whole new capacity class, both Gas Gas and Yamaha (along, it must be said, with various others) have taken the opportunity of bolstering sales by introducing a 450cc in place of their existing 400 and 426 respectively. In fairness to Yamaha this may be slightly over-simplifying matters, since the new WR450F is more or less a completely new machine (as detailed in TBM 87). One which gets the boost of an electric-start, a big hike in both



power and torque and an even bigger hike in fuel capacity. The net result of those changes are that the 2003 Yamaha is certainly easier to start, but arguably harder to ride in a spirited manner.

Gas Gas could I suppose, also claim that their 2003 EC450FSE is a whole new bike - though in their case the majority of changes have been wrought on the chassis and suspension side rather than the engine. Of course the motor has received some attention from the factory boring machine. Hogging out the barrel to a full 95mm whilst maintaining the stroke (at 62.6mm) of last year's 400, has resulted in considerably more power from the Iberian lump. And in the absence of production Cannondales, the Gasser remains the sole dirt bike to utilise electronic fuel injection. And it has an electric-start as standard too.

For 2003 the Spanish factory's attention has concentrated on making the EC sharper handling, better suspended, and quicker turning, which given the laziness of the steering of last year's 400 is perhaps no bad thing. By altering the geometry half a degree, the Gasser now steers plenty quick enough, and despite losing a little stability in the process, the compromise seems to have worked. The change of forks (to Marzocchi from WP) is slightly harder to fathom - though it may have something to do with the fact that WP are now owned by KTM.

When we collected the bike, the Gasser

importer was at pains to point out that when cold, the EC's electric-start should be assisted by kicking the bike over a few times, first. This he said was to prime the oil pump and 'help circulate oil to the head' (so he claimed). More likely we think is the fact that modern dirt thumpers run very high compression ratios and on some European bikes, the battery struggles to cope turning them over. Although we complied with his wishes on the first day, the next morning we tried starting the bike from cold without kicking it over first - just out of journalistic interest. After turning the key and nudging the button the Gasser simply burst into life immediately without labouring at all - helped no doubt by the seamless fuel injection which compensates for altitude, air temperature and engine warmth.

Although the Yamaha can't boast fuel injection, its starting procedure is almost as simple and equally as reliable. Switch on the ignition isolator tucked away behind the headlight, add a bit of choke and then thumb the starter. That's it. So with both bikes requiring nothing more than the push of a button to get them going, it was left to the French trails to make us work up a sweat...

Spanish Inquisition

Starting out on the Gasser I had a distinct feeling of *deja vu*, having tested the EC300 a month earlier. There's no doubt that the 450 comes from the



Left: Yamaha lump produces awesome power. Maybe a little too much?

same family - there's the same taut feel to the suspension, the same precise steering and the same instant response to the throttle. You get the distinct impression that Gas Gas have set out to deliberately make their bikes feel much more racy this year, and in this respect I think that they've clearly succeeded.

Swing a leg over the slender saddle and you'll find yourself settling into one of the best riding positions on any four-stroke. There's a broad set of pegs, a fairly narrow fuel tank and a firm but comfortable saddle. Behind the wide alloy bars sits an all-new electronic multi-function speedo which continued to operate correctly throughout the entire duration of our test. A first for a Gasser I believe. But like all Gassers the surprise comes when you begin to operate the controls - they're

incredibly light without being over-sensitive. Don't underestimate the value of this. Heavy controls are one of the key factors in fatigue.

Out onto the first of the day's trails and the Gas Gas is taking no prisoners. It responds instantly to the throttle - leaping forward the second you give it some gas. The injection is soooo crisp, it's incredible. Even low down when labouring the engine in a high gear you can't confuse the EFI.

Matching the sharpness of the throttle is a chassis which is equally as crisp - almost to the point of nervousness. The bike responds to every input like a startled rabbit - leaping and darting over objects. I think it's fair to say that the steering is considerably improved over the old bike, though it's nowhere near as relaxing to ride.



ure. For certain when I slipped myself onto (and practically into) the WR's comfy saddle for the start of the afternoon's riding it brought an instant smile to my face after the Gasser's much firmer upholstery. The suspension sunk gradually with an incredible plushness and the motor felt so smooth by comparison with the Euro bike that it's hard to believe these two machines are serious rivals for the same small sector of marketplace. Even the broad tank which we'd found so off-putting on first acquaintance with the bike seemed to have miraculously shrunk a little during the intervening period.

After brimming the ten litre tank with fuel (the Yamaha had actually used around a litre more than the Gasser), I set off down the road heading for the next trail. On tarmac the Yamaha is just incredible. Its motor delivers tyre-shredding performance with all the potency of a highly tuned racer but none of the aggro. It's smooth, refined and pleasantly quiet. And thanks to a set of brakes which are blinding to say the very least - easy to exploit.

In fact I loved the WR-F right up until the point where I turned onto the first muddy trail and opened the throttle. At that juncture things went decidedly downhill. Okay, let's be fair about this, the Yamaha was wearing part-worn enduro tyres whereas our Gasser had been fitted with new MX knobbles specifically for our outing. But the difference in traction and hook-up between the two bikes was down to more than just tyres. Turn onto the dirt, stand up and the first thing you notice is the width of the tank. Crack the throttle and the Yamaha's brutal tide of power unsticks the rear end and starts it spinning like a washing machine on final rinse. Trying to get the WR to go straight was a matter of either being incredibly delicate with the throttle (and thus slow), or determinedly brutal (and in my case out of control). On firmer ground things improved - but not as much as I'd hoped. There's more traction and a whole heap more forward motion, but corners make you work for a living as you struggle to muscle the Yam around (powering around a blind turn simply isn't an option on most trails).

On loose and sloppy going the WR-F struggles to inspire the Gasser's level of confidence. It's not like the Yamaha is unstable or anything. On the contrary, the big WR feels perfectly composed while its sliding sideways at 30 degrees to the direction you want to go. The trouble is I wasn't just having problems with the rear end, the front felt equally as uncertain. Grip it seemed was

Depending upon your point of view this is either a good or a bad thing. In my opinion it doesn't make the 450 any less of a trail bike, just one which now feeds-back a whole lot more information to the rider.

By the time we reached our first checkpoint at a small roadside cafe two hours into the ride, I was buzzing - and not just from the high octane coffee either. The Gasser has that effect on you - it certainly keeps you awake. Time for a switch of bikes and chance to assess the Yamaha WR450F on a decent long trail ride.

True Blue

Our first test of the 450F (back in November) had pretty much concluded that the WR was not our idea of a racer. Sure it had the speed and the power but it lacked the agility necessary in a race bike. By the same token then, we figured the WR's home was on the trail and the road where its walloping power delivery could be put to good use at times, and where its girth and general softness would add to the pleas-



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Normandy Landings

tenuous at the best of times, and while the suspension gave what can only be described as a magic carpet ride over the bumps (it really is that supple), this only added to the WR-F's sensation of remoteness.

Unlike the last time we tested the bike, this time it had a propensity to stall at inopportune moments - and not just when the throttle was closed either. I suspect it was nothing more than a jetting problem (something which obviously doesn't affect the Gasser since there are no jets), but the Yamaha would stall if you tried to feed in a taller gear too early. And in the really sloppy stuff there's another problem as well. The amount of engine braking available. Throttle-off on the approach to a hazard and you'll find the back end trying to overtake the front, as all that weight keeps trying to push you forwards...

At one point I swapped bikes with another rider on a WR426F (for the purposes of comparison) and the difference between the two bikes was staggering. I noticed immediately how much more taut and hard-edged the 426 felt. The pegs were higher, the tank narrower, the suspension firmer - and the handling felt so much sharper as a result. And although the other rider said he liked the 450's muscle, I think he was just being kind. He was right in one sense - the 450F has the firepower to make a beast of a bike like the WR426 seem tame by comparison. The problem

is however - you just can't exploit it most of the time. When the going's slippery and muddy it's like trying to hang onto a bucket of frogs - the thing's all over the place. Then, once the trail does dry out, it's like piloting an off-road dragster. This bike is capable of such enormous velocities that to ride it like that risks seriously endangering your health - or someone else's. Time to swap bikes then - with Chris!

Getting back aboard the Gasser was like a breath of fresh air. It's like slipping into a pair of Nike trainers after trying to run in MX boots. It scythes through dirt swifter than Blez cutting through a free buffet. With firmly damped suspension and a front end that's seemingly unstickable, the EC450 is a much more tactile experience. Immediately you begin to up the pace as your body picks up on the Gasser's surreptitious messages. And the Gasser isn't short of go either. Crack the throttle and the bike hurtles forwards quicker than a surrendering Iraqi. In terms of out-and-out power I suspect that it falls just short of the Yamaha's crazy horses, but when you add grip and hook-up into the equation there's no comparison. The Gasser wastes far less time on fruitless wheelspin and puts more of its power to the ground.

It also feels considerably lighter as well. Without the chance of weighing them, this is one of those things where I suspect perceived weight



Gasser's switchgear is high quality stuff, whilst the controls feel beautifully light to operate...



and power delivery has a lot to do with it. I wouldn't mind betting that there's probably no more than 5 kilos between them in the Gasser's favour (if at all), but there's no denying that the Gasser 'rides lighter' than the WR-F. It has a more delicate touch, it lofts the front end easier (because of finding more grip), and it seems to spend more time flicking from rock to rock rather than simply blasting over them.

Clearly Chris thought so too, because at the next junction he signalled for me to pull over. 'Can we swap bikes' he said 'because I'm having trouble staying with you on the WR. It keeps pushing me wide on bends.' We exchanged machines again, Chris took off on the Gas Gas as I attempted to follow him on the 450F. Much as I'd love to claim that it was easy to hang with



him - the truth is, it wasn't. As the trails headed down some deliciously steep and stony descents, the WR feels the big bike that it is. The broad tank prevents you getting the bike heeled over easily and the weight becomes even more noticeable - even if the brakes do a great job of keeping you out of the hedges.

Decision Making

As you've probably figured, by this stage we'd more or less made up our minds. It wasn't that the Yamaha was particularly awkward or difficult to ride. It's just that the Gasser offered far more fun for the expenditure of less energy. And you could get away with so much more on the FSE. Overshooting one tightening downhill corner, I stamped on the Gasser's rear anchor, turned in

Okay, so it's a bit of a cheesy pic...



and then throttled on. Hard. The Gas Gas simply railed the corner and exited with a plume of roost, whereas on the Yamaha - well I'm convinced I'd still be there now, picking brambles out of my gums.

So are there any areas where the Yamaha compares favourably with the Gasser? Build quality! It has to be said that the Yam feels far more robust than the Gas Gas. We crashed both bikes a few times (once on the road - don't ask), and it's fair to say that the Yamaha emerged from these incidents far better. By contrast (and over the course of three days) the Gasser bent a foot-peg, damaged its stand, bent a lever, trashed its grips and twisted the forks in the yokes. We had to attend to some of these problems before we could ride again, whereas the Yamaha required no attention for damage whatsoever. If longevity is an issue to you - clearly the Yamaha has the build to take the knocks and come back for more.

Finally there's the thorny issue of both the cost and the matter of road legality to consider. As it comes the road-legal Gasser undercuts the Yamaha (£5050 against £5199), but that doesn't include the cost of making the Yam road ready. Budget on about £300 for Yamaha's own 'legaliser' kit though we reckon dealers will be striking bargains on hard to shift 450s once the brilliant new 250F becomes readily available.

Ridden in isolation, the 450F doesn't feel anywhere near as unwieldy as you might imagine. We leant our 450F to a punter to try (whose own XR400R had expired) and the plain and simple truth is he loved it. But then he never rode the FSE. As a beefy trail bike the Yamaha's really quite a blast. The suspension sucks up hits like they don't exist, the motor keeps driving hard while the bike generally feels quite pleasant to

ride. And we know it's good and strong. It's only when you bring another bike into the equation that it begins to put the Yamaha into perspective. But that's the whole reason for a comparison test like this. Competent though the WR-F undoubtedly is, set alongside a bike like the Gas Gas EC450, there really is no comparison. In every respect apart from perhaps build quality, comfort and out-and out acceleration, the Gasser nails the Yam and does it quite convincingly.

If you only ever ride on your own, you'll be quite happy with the 450F. But if you ride with some mates

and one of them happens to own a Gasser, don't whatever you do, ask for a test ride...

Thanks Folks: Geraint Jones and Clive Passingham (Yamaha) and John Shirt (Gasser) for help with the bikes. Also to the other trail riders who made the trip so enjoyable. But biggest thanks to Chris Evans for accommodating us at short notice, putting up with our constant whinging and listening to our broken attempts at Français. Cheers guys...

Second Opinion

Let's not beat around the bush here. If I was in the market for a new 450 I wouldn't be beating a path to Yamaha's door. Fact is I'd buy the 450 Gas Gas (even over the new 450-KTM). Never have I felt so at home on a four-stroke enduro bike as I did on the new Gasser. Essentially this is down to a fantastically planted front end (a revelation after getting off a KTM), incredible glitch free power at low revs and small overall dimensions. These three factors conspire to give a feeling of control and confidence none of the competition can offer. The Gasser isn't perfect - the exhaust is too noisy and the finish is still a bit dodgy - but for making me feel like a superstar (if not look like one - Ed), I can forgive it almost anything. Alongside the Spanish bike the Yamaha just feels big and heavy. There's nothing particularly wrong with the 450F, it's just that in my opinion there's nothing to particularly like about it either... **Chris Evans**



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