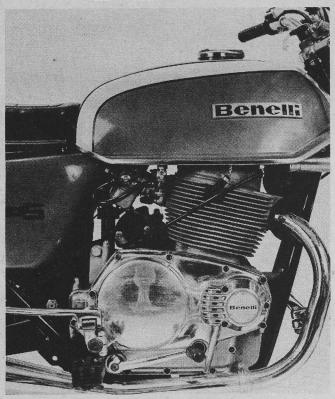
TEST 650 BENELLI TORNADO 5-SPEED

It's big. It's heavy. It's fun.

PHOTOS BY TOM BAILEY



BENELLI



N eerie silence hangs over the road. Everything is still. The test rider has been out of sight for almost two minutes, and those of us waiting begin to fidget. Then we hear it. Off in the distance, the faint sound of a motorcycle being accelerated and decelerated is audible.

The road was built during the depression. It winds and weaves through a little used state park without really going anywhere. After five miles and 50 corners, you wind up about 200 feet from where you started.

As the sound of the bike gets louder, the SUPERCYCLE staff members assembled about 100 yards from the big S-turn focus their attention and cameras on the corner. "He sure is honking," says someone. "Yeah, he sure is," someone agrees. "I just hope he knows that we haven't got enough pictures yet. It's sure gonna look dumb if we run pictures of the bike with its front forks wrapped around a tree." Laughter, then another voice, "Aw, don't worry. He knows what he's doing." A long pause. "Doesn't he?"

Just then the 650 Benelli flashes into view. The rider is banked over as far as he can be. His knee is jutting out. And

but for the lights and turn signals on the bike, you'd swear you were at the Isle of Mann. As he nears the apex of the first half of the S, he hits the gas and goes for third gear. Then approaching the second half of the turn, which is much tighter, he sits bolt upright and begins to brake. Only he isn't slowing down very much.

Everyone watching tenses. Arm and neck muscles stiffen. Trying to help the troubled rider make it through the turn, everyone leans a little to the left. It's no use, though. The bike is traveling much too fast. And in accordance with the laws of physics, the machine and rider travel straight ahead as the corner starts to get tight. Presto! The Benelli is now a 463-pound trail bike. Traveling at 40 mph down a row of trees spaced about five feet apart.

Watching this performance has been a mind blower. No one moves for about 30 seconds. Then everyone begins running towards the point where the bike left the road. Before they get there, the Benelli and rider come riding out of the woods. "Boy, that front brake is sure a fader," says the rider.

Why in the world would anyone want to own a 650 Benelli, you ask. Good question. Especially when you consider that for a lot less money a rider can own a super fast 500 Kawasaki. And for a few dollars more he could own a 750 Honda or a 900 Kawa. So why do Benelli owners have a waiting line of cash customers for the 650? Because it's a fun bike, that's why.

Few bikes we've ever ridden are as much fun as Benelli's 650. It somehow doesn't matter that it isn't as fast as some of the oriental multis. And it doesn't matter that it doesn't handle as well as a Norton. It's just plain fun. You get on the bike and ride. And when you get back, you smile a lot. The sound, vibration and smell of the machine gang up on you. And even if you've decided that you're not going to like it, you find yourself falling in love with it.

We get to ride a lot of bikes. Among these are some of the fastest machines in production. But somehow they wind up being unimpressive. Oh, they're as fast as they're supposed to be. And they're usually pretty reliable. But after several days you realize something is missing. They have no souls. Several years ago we used to dream about the days when we'd all have bikes with multicylinder engines capable of unbelievable speeds. Now that those days have arrived, we find ourselves let down. Maybe it's because anyone with a paper route can afford one of the faster bikes. Or maybe it's because we all now realize that anyone with a right wrist can make one of these bikes go. Or maybe it's just that as these machines become more common, they become much less impressive.

It took us a long time to get hold of a 650 Benelli. We had to wait almost a year. And then we had to pick up the machine at the distributor's headquarters just outside of Philadelphia. That is, the staff member with the lowest seniority was given a helmet and a train ticket to Philadelphia and told to ride the bike back.

The temperature was 30 degrees that day, with a strong wind blowing. Our staffer left New York City early in the morning and didn't get back until late that night. When he walked in he was shivering. His lips were blue. His teeth were chattering loudly. But he was smiling.

The Benelli is a motorcycle of contrasts. It is definitely Italian. Yet it behaves in a most un-Italian manner. It's not especially fast. Yet you find yourself playing racer almost every time you ride it. It's big and heavy. Yet, as you ride, it feels small and light.

Anyone who has ever ridden an Italian motorcycle knows about the problems of quality control in modern day society. The Benelli is different, though. Like every other Italian motorcycle, it feels somewhat racy. But it stays together. We put almost 1000 miles on our test bike and kept it for over three weeks. But during the test nothing fell off. In fact,



nothing even came loose.

The Benelli is civilized in a sporting way. It has the customary turn signals, head and tail lights, and horn. It also has a powerful electric starter. And a great big battery to make sure this equipment is functional as well as decorative. The Benelli even has a functioning alternator. We were able to check this because New York State law requires all motorcyclists to drive around with the headlight on during the day. Keeping the lights on makes the motorcycle more visible. This means that motorists on sideroads have a better chance of seeing you. And if they can see you they can time their entry onto the main road. If they couldn't see you they might miss. And how exciting would cycling be if you couldn't get the adrenalin started by having someone pull his car/truck/bus across the road when you are about ten feet away and making about 60 mph? Anyway, despite the fact that the battery was constantly being drained, it never once failed to supply the necessary juice to turn the engine

The engine on the Benelli is at least half the reason the bike is so much fun. It's a vertical twin displacing 642cc.

Basically the same type of engine that has been since overhead valves. Benelli used a lot of alumenthey cast the 650 engine. It's big. The cases seem to be big as a small bike. And the finning on the cylinders erous, to say the least. The finning is also very erous, to say the least. The finning is also very erous, we discovered this when we tried to be one really cold morning, and had to wait ten make the engine would run at anything less than full choice.

life begins to get a little dull again, you'll remember the feeling of all that torque winding and winding and you'll start to smile.

Sitting on the bike, the first thing you notice is the width of the engine. The footpegs are so far apart that you feel like a wishbone. Eventually you become acclimated to the width, but one thing you never get used to is the clutch arm on the engine. The clutch arm juts out of the top of the cases on the left-hand side of the bike just behind the starter motor. If your leg hits the arm while it's pulled in, which it is each time you use the clutch, the cable pops out and you suddenly find yourself unable to operate the clutch. This is easily

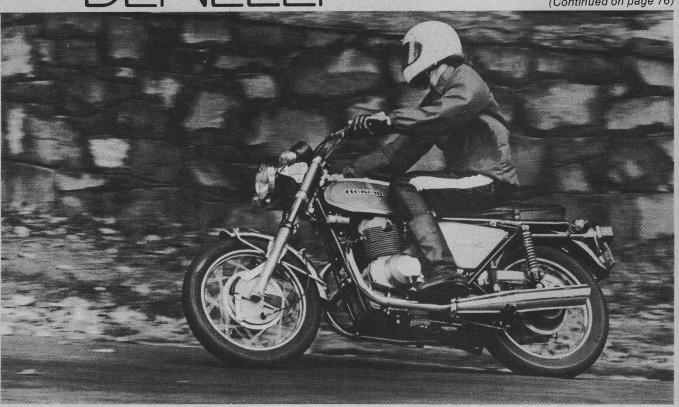
BENELLI

remedied by stopping and putting the cable back in the arm but it's still highly annoying.

Another area which requires constant attention on the bike is the gas tank. It's big and not bad looking. But it only holds three gallons, which just isn't enough. Benelli claims the bike will get 50 miles per gallon. Maybe that figure could be achieved, but only if a 15-pound rider were riding the bike at 6.5 mph in fifth gear with the throttle shut and a 30 mph tailwind. We got around 35 miles per gallon driving on thruways. Around town, and while playing road racer, the bike's mileage figures almost have to be changed to gallons per mile.

The seat on the bike is big and comfortable. And the bars are flat. The in position and shape forces you to adopt a semi-road racing crouch, a position which is, incidentally, quite comfortable. And once you're already in half a crouch, it becomes almost impossible to prevent yourself from mak-

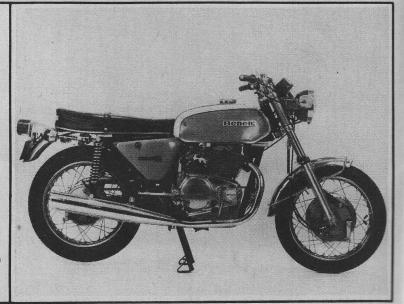
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650 BENELLI TORNADO 5-SPEED

Base price Engine type Bore and stroke Displacement Compression ratio Horsepower Carburetion Transmission Clutch Primary drive Final drive Brakes Tire size, front/rear Lubrication Fuel capacity Dry weight Wheelbase 0 to 60 mph Stand. start, 1/4-mile Top speed

\$1779 4-stroke OHV twin 84 X 58mm 642.8cc 9.6 to 1 57 at 7400 rpm Two 27mm Dellorto 5-speed constant mesh Multiplate, wet Helical gear Single-row chain Drum 3.50 X 19/4.00 X 18 Wet sump 3 gallons 474 pounds 56 inches 6.0 seconds 14.57 seconds/90.78 mph 99.78 mph



CUSTOM CORNER

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The problem is, many a good small shop sometimes goes down the tubes for want of capital, while a less talented but solvent big shop survives. Things should more or less even out eventually and I'd like to see the competition extended nationwide.

CYCLEANALYSIS

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see it, choppers cause back injury, and it's just a matter of time before all the chopper freaks will be knocking on their doors as paying customers. They say that riding a bike subjects the spine to constant bumps and jolts, and that the riding position on a chopper and the rigid frame aggravate this condition. There was a familiar note in the release. "A driver in this position," it cautioned, "is a hazard to his own health because he subjects his spine to possible injury." It smacked of the old public burden theory that was used to uphold the constitutionality of the helmet law. Namely, a rider without a helmet may injure his head and thus be unable to work and end up on welfare. It seems the same logic—or illogic could be used to eradicate choppers from the scene.

The whole question of motorcycle safety is very complicated. Too many people have snap answers and opinions both pro anc con that are more emotional than rational. A look at the accident and fatality record will show that motorcycles are definitely not the safest form of transportation. But then, is safety the sole criterion of life?

We are fortunate in that we still have some freedom to pursue things that turn us on—things like boxing, hockey, football or motorcycles. Each presents its own dangers as well as pleasures. It's all well and good for learned citizens to point to statistics and rant about the evils of motorcycles, but they're missing one thing. They've forgotton what it's like to be young. Those brief priceless years of free-wheeling intense experience when you start testing yourself against the world. Remove the challanges and dangers, and a youngster can enter adulthood as a coddled robot. On the other hand, educate and guide and explain the meaning of responsibility rather than just shutting off a youngster's avenues of exploration and awareness, and you develop someone with

a lot more character.

Motorcycles have traditionally been an instrument of the young. I've spoken to countless ex-riders who've sworn off bikes for one reason or another, but the vibes that come through are that they had one hell of a blast for a while.

Whether motorcycling survives the antibike onslaught that's looming ominously closer remains to be seen. If it doesn't, all I can say is we had something great that succeeding generations may never know. In addition, a lot of people will have to get along somehow without their pet scapegoat.

MINDTRIPPING

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rage. It was in perfect condition, and as I looked at it I said, "Well, we're gonna put it on 'em Sunday." At that precise instant it fell off the stand and broke its beautiful tank, seat and

I didn't let this stop me though. I repaired and replaced various pieces and made it to the track on Sunday.

I knew the bike was against racing, but I didn't care. As I sat on the starting line, waiting for my heat race to start, I leaned over its tank and said, "I don't care what you want to do. I'm going to win this race." The bike didn't say anything. It just sat there waiting for a chance to get me. The chance came soon. On the first corner, in the midst of all the first lap traffic and consequently not going as fast as I could, the back wheel suddenly took off. No warning, just into the air and sideways. I found myself sitting on the track watching the bike sliding down the pavement as the rest of the pack swerved to avoid me.

After that race I got rid of the Ducati. I replaced all the broken parts. I repainted it. And somewhat dishonestly, I never mentioned the bike's psychological problems to the guy who bought it. But I did give him a good price.

Ever since then I've known that motorcycles have their own personalities. And I've been really careful when buying a bike. But I always thought I was the only one who knew. Then one day last spring, a strange thing happened. I was out on a trail ride and I spotted a frustrated figure screaming at a motorcycle. His forearms were cut up and he had a bruise on his forehead. "Why do you do this to me? I've given you all the best things. A competition tank. New shocks. Everything. But still you do this to me," he was screaming. And with that he picked up a large rock and began bashing the motorcycle.

When I approached, he stopped pounding and began walking away. 'It had to be done," he said.

"I know," I said, "I know. Sometimes they're just born bad."

650 BENELLI

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ing it a full crouch and starting to get

With the exception of the front brake, the bike is ideally equipped for playing racer on those deserted, winding roads you find here and there. The pegs are fairly high. And except for the sidestand on the lefthand side, nothing drags until it's almost too late. The transmission ratios are fairly close and the shifting is flawless. The rear brake, though, could definitely use some help. It's plenty powerful and extremely sensitive. You breathe on it and the rear wheel locks up. On wet pavement, using the rear brake is excit-

The front brake is enormous. It measures 230mm in diameter. It has cooling scoops. And it looks efficient. Unfortunately, it doesn't work very well when it's hot. And why Benelli didn't see fit to install a disc unit, which couldn't have been much more expensive than this large drum, we don't know. Under most conditions the drum is adequate. But when you need heavy braking power after nine or ten corners which have already required heavy braking, it just isn't there.

The front forks are also enormous. They're manufactured by Marzocchi. And man do they work. We think they're almost as good as the Telasco units found on the Yankee Z we tested in last month's issue. And that means they're about 2000% better than any big bike forks you've ever seen before. The rear shocks are also Marzocchi units. We felt they were just a little too stiff to be rated excellent. But then the editor is the only person on the staff who weighs more than 130 pounds.

The rear shocks make the bike bounce a little when you go into a bumpy high speed sweeper at anything less than full throttle. Every now and then you grind a half inch or so off the sidestand when you turn left. The front brake fades when you really start to push. And, oh yes, the way the turn signal controls are set up, you sometimes find yourself sig-