

Z1 Development History – KMC USA Marketing

By Don Graves and Alan Masek

Kawasaki's earliest US marketing challenges were to establish the unknown K brand name and to build a dealer organization: emphasizing Kawasaki engineering capacities and commitment to develop models for the US market. With poor sales in Japan and export disappointments, Kawasaki structured "market in" model development for US customers, in contrast to the typical Japanese "product out" process with development for the domestic market. As a "market in" example, Masek requested electronic ignition for the 500H1 Mach III triple. Johnson, Evinrude and Mercury two cycle outboard motors then featured CDI (capacitive discharge ignition), a superior innovative technology. Kawasaki engineers first said, "impossible, CDI has not yet been used on motorcycles and there are no Japanese suppliers." The same request to the newly assigned engineering development chief HP Otsuki got a new response, "Ok, we'll do it," and Kawasaki did!

In April 1968 Akashi bosses Yamada and Otsuki visited the US to discuss future product. Graves and Masek favored four cycle engines with "music instead of noise" exhaust sound for street bikes. Potential future US air and noise pollution regulation that would favor four cycle engines was discussed. Graves and Masek were amazed and elated to learn that Kawasaki, since 1967, had been secretly developing a 750cc four stroke engine, now producing outstanding bench test performance. A US marketing request for a 750~850cc four cycle "zapper" delivering 13 sec ¼ mile acceleration and 120mph top speed was formalized. Returning to Japan in May 1968 Otsuki presented and Akashi approved a N600 (750 4/4) model development project. In August 1968 "007" Sam Tanegashima was assigned to develop a market survey for a large US four cycle model.

In October 1968 Honda shocked us all with their CB750 announcement at the Tokyo Motor Show. What to do? After Sam's post-CB750 survey completion in April 1969 and Otsuki's KMC visit in August 1969, the N600 based T103 (903cc 4/4 DOHC) model development project was initiated. Masek and private distributor Kawasaki Midwest's Dave Mehney discussed potential US Harley Davidson protectionism concerns with both Akashi chief Yamada and KHI president Yotsumoto. In November 1969 Yamada, concerned about Akashi capacities for the expensive high tech project and potential US trade restrictions, concluded the T103 Otsuki project was too risky for the substantial investment required. In December 1969 at Akashi, "godfather" Yotsumoto trumped Yamada's fears by taking responsibility for the Z1 investment decision based on his confidence in Otsuki's engineering team and KMC marketing capacities.

In February 1970 Don Graves visited Japan with Art Bauman and Walt Fulton at Otsuki's request. They punished and broke the three N600 prototypes being used for future Z1 improvement development. Graves was satisfied with Z1 progress and plans, but insisted the future Z1 engine must be serviceable without removing it from the frame. A major Honda dealer complaint was the need to remove the heavy CB750 engine for service.

Japan-US communication and cooperation for Z1 development was nearly seamless. American design professionals in Santa Barbara participated in styling a first N600 mockup. KHI styling designer Ken Tada later completed, with KMC approval, a “slim, sleek and sexy” Z1 mockup attuned to American tastes. KMC marketing and service staff grew to respect the Japanese engineers, eager to understand American serviceability and customer preference needs. Everyone on both sides of the Pacific gave best efforts to the model we all sensed might become a legend.

Rigorous Z1 development testing was a constant in Japan to assure its safety and success. In November 1971 KMC’s Byron Farnsworth was sent to Japan for Z1 prototype testing participation. US test riding of preproduction bikes was already part of the Kawasaki “market in” process for the 250A1 Samurai, 500H1 Mach III and other models. In February 1972 Farnsworth and two Japanese test riders did confidential cross continent US highway testing with three preproduction Z1s from California to Florida. Final high-speed endurance testing with pilot production Z1s at Talladega, Alabama under Lyndon Yurikusa’s direction provided a green light for mass production.

The four major US motorcycle press editors were invited to Akashi for a June 1972 press preview of an unspecified new model, to include interviews with KHI development engineers and management. While each wanted an exclusive first test scoop, all four agreed to participate as rumors of an unprecedented new Kawasaki model circulated. The revolutionary Z1 and the thorough KHI presentation with complete specs and photos resulted in massive initial press in the autumn issues of Cycle, Cycle World, Cycle Guide and Motorcyclist, naming the Z1 a “superbike” and King of motorcycles. KMC’s official September 1972 Z1 introduction was followed by US customer deliveries in November at \$1895 suggested retail. In the spring of 1973 world speed and endurance records were established with the Z1 at Daytona Beach Florida. Insufficient supply and underestimated world demand became the major Z1 “problem opportunity” for the next 20 months as Akashi heroically increased production capacities.

Total US motorcycle registrations fell by 44% between 1973 and 1975 after the oil shock. Thanks to the Z1, Kawasaki unit sales and Kawasaki dealer profits increased in both 1974 and 1975. From August 1975, “made in America” Z1 models were produced at the new Lincoln, Nebraska plant. Later, Lincoln exclusively produced two variation models developed by KMC for the US market, the Z1 Police and 900LTD factory custom.

Although everyone in Japan and the US sought and took some credit for the phenomenal Z1 success, Graves and Masek remember it as a remarkable unified KHI-KMC team effort. If any individual deserves the crown and “Father of Z1” title, we think it is Dr. Yukio “HP” Otsuki, KHI’s inspiring Z1 engineering project team leader.