



The class clown

Off beat manufacturer continues to inspire

By Darrell Ohs

Photos by Ohs and courtesy Paul Stannard

From the vast alumni of motorcycle builders, both then and now, Hodaka stands out as the class clown of them all.

At its startup, in 1965, it was already behind the class leaders from Japan and Europe that had established seats in the front rows. Placed at the back of the room the new kid, younger and smaller than the rest, was desperate for attention.

Right away though, Hodaka did well in the 90cc categories in competition and endurance trials – but even after self-proclaiming its only model, the Ace 90, as “The World’s Finest Under-100cc Motorcycle” that status was a little too modest to impress the cheerleaders much.

Though sales of the Ace 90 had reached 10,000 by the end of 1966 the little company had few resources to distinguish itself from the crowd. Hodaka then started assuming the role of class clown, finding that with a little self-effacing humour and silliness it could at least be noticed by getting a few laughs.

By 1970 it had started by creating cartoon characters as namesakes for its next models. If that wasn’t disruptive enough, here’s another incident of managerial misbehaviour: Ed Chesnut, Hodaka technical writer, subtitled the factory service bulletins as “Walloping Writs of Wholehearted Whodaka Whoop-de-dooos with Whomping

kets, company directors looked to Japan. In the post-war economy, however, currency and trade between the nations were highly regulated and the Japanese had little available US cash on hand.

To open the door for the export of American grain the Japanese had to have manufactured goods to trade in return. The issue was resolved with Yamaguchi motorcycles coming to the US in exchange for Oregon wheat. Farm Chemicals of Oregon called their new motorcycle division the Pacific Basin Trading Company (PABATCO).

The bread-for-bikes back scratching seemed to be going well between PABATCO and Yamaguchi until the latter suddenly went bankrupt in 1963. This not only left PABATCO in the lurch but also the Japanese engine supplier for Yamaguchi: the Hodaka Industrial Company of Nagoya Japan. By this time PABATCO had signed on 480 dealers whose inventory had dried up – and Hodaka Industrial was holding the bag for a cancelled order of engines as well as the idle plant and equipment to build more.

After Yamaguchi tanked, PABATCO thought it knew what a good small-bore motorcycle was made of. It assumed, correctly as it turned out, that the American market was ready for a street-legal yet competent and durable lightweight trail bike. The company reasoned that if it put together a research and development team to design and market its own motorcycle from Athena, and Hodaka tooled up their factory to manufacture it, then by symbiosis both companies might come through the Yamaguchi episode intact.

Former Hodaka general manager Chuck Swanson, 77, still lives in Athena and was a major creative influence in designing the first Hodaka motorcycle, the Ace 90. During his tenure with PABATCO that began in 1964, Swanson says he “did it all, from helping to start the thing to closing it down.” He recalls that PABATCO had to convince a reluctant Hodaka Industrial to commit more of its capacity towards manufacturing an entire motorcycle, because the Japanese company feared the prospect of contending toe-to-toe against Honda, which was already an industrial giant in Japan.

The architecture of PABATCO’s new street-legal trail bike more closely followed European engineering with a double down-tube full cradle frame and telescopic forks, whereas the main Japanese players were

hanging their small-bore engines from stamped steel frames, or merely stylizing their larger road models as “street scramblers” with some of the form of a trail machine, but virtually none of the substance.

Within a year of reaching an agreement for a Japanese-American partnership the first Hodaka Ace 90s were steaming across the Pacific. The 8.2 hp, four-speed, Ace 90 debuted with a bulbous 2-½ gallon chrome-plated gas tank, stainless steel fenders, a red painted frame, and folding and adjustable footrests, which became signature characteristics of Hodaka’s design plan for 10 more years. At \$379 it also underpriced the nearest competitors.

In 1965 Shell Oil bought Farm Chemicals of Oregon, thus becoming incidental owners of a subsidiary motorcycle company (PABATCO). Takeover by a multinational corporation worked out well for Hodaka “because without Shell’s ability to put up irrevocable letters of credit it would have been really tough to grow bigger,” Swanson recalls.

And as PABATCO prospered under Shell small dealers sprung up in nooks and crannies of North America. PABATCO then introduced the bikes to the Australians in 1971. Hence the inspiration to name the next models Wombat and Combat Wombat.

Hodaka’s popularity and sales soared from the mid ‘60s through the first half of the ‘70s (approx. 150,000 units) at which time the eccentric marque found the motorcycle game changing, and they weren’t big enough to play by the new rules.

In 1973 floating exchange rates were introduced and in an unregulated currency market the Japanese yen started rising rapidly against the US dollar. Matching prices with the “Big Four” became more and more difficult for PABATCO. They launched the 100c “Road Toad” in 1975 at a competitive MSRP of \$529 (west coast P.O.E.) when Swanson says they really needed to sell them at around \$1200 to make a reasonable profit. The more diversified corporations like Honda for instance “could give away their 125s while profiting from the Gold Wings and cars.” And Yamaha could sell you a piano if you weren’t in the market for a motorcycle, Koch noted.

That year saw the first totally new Hodaka design, the 250cc Thunderdog enduro bike. Two years later the Thunderdog SL emerged for street-trail riding.

The last new model, the 1978 Hodaka 175 SL (street legal) came out on stage literally when the curtain closed. Production ended after 700 units. “They had their act flat

Wads of Wondrous Wisdom and Whizzing Waves of Wanton Wit.”

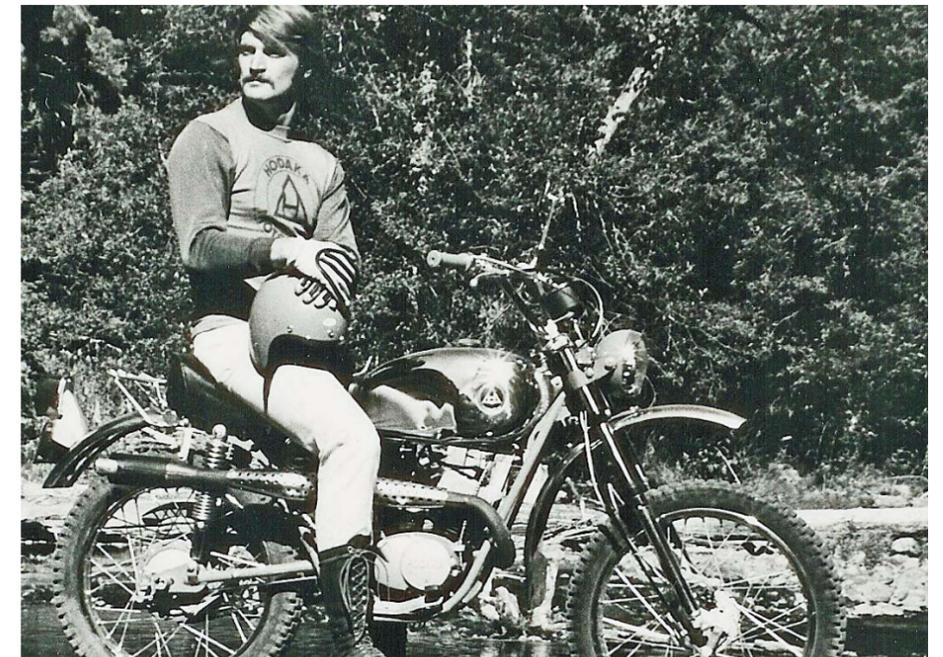
What sort of Bart Simpsonesque muse inspired the Hodaka people to christen their only product line of dual sports, motocrossers, and trials bikes the Super Rat, Wombat, Combat Wombat, Super Combat, Dirt Squirt, Road Toad, Bull Frog and Thunderdog?

To explain, Marvin Foster, 69, who joined Hodaka in 1965 says: “We were just a little tiny company I figure we had to attract attention to ourselves as best we could...” All the employees were enthusiastic trail riders, says Foster, “and we knew what kind of people trail riders were and what would appeal to them.”

Wes Jackson, of Nanaimo, BC started selling Hodakas from his basement in 1973 before establishing a dealership that sold Hodakas until 1979. “They were quite an interesting company,” Jackson says, “they were always coming up with some cute little gadget, cartoons, calendars, and that sort of stuff. It was good for business.”

Perhaps it’s not surprising that Hodaka motorcycles was conceived under singular circumstances.

The company spun off from a liquid fertilizer company, Farm Chemicals of Oregon, in Athena, a small rural town (population 800 and some) in the north-eastern backwater of the state. In 1961, hoping to diversify and expand their mar-



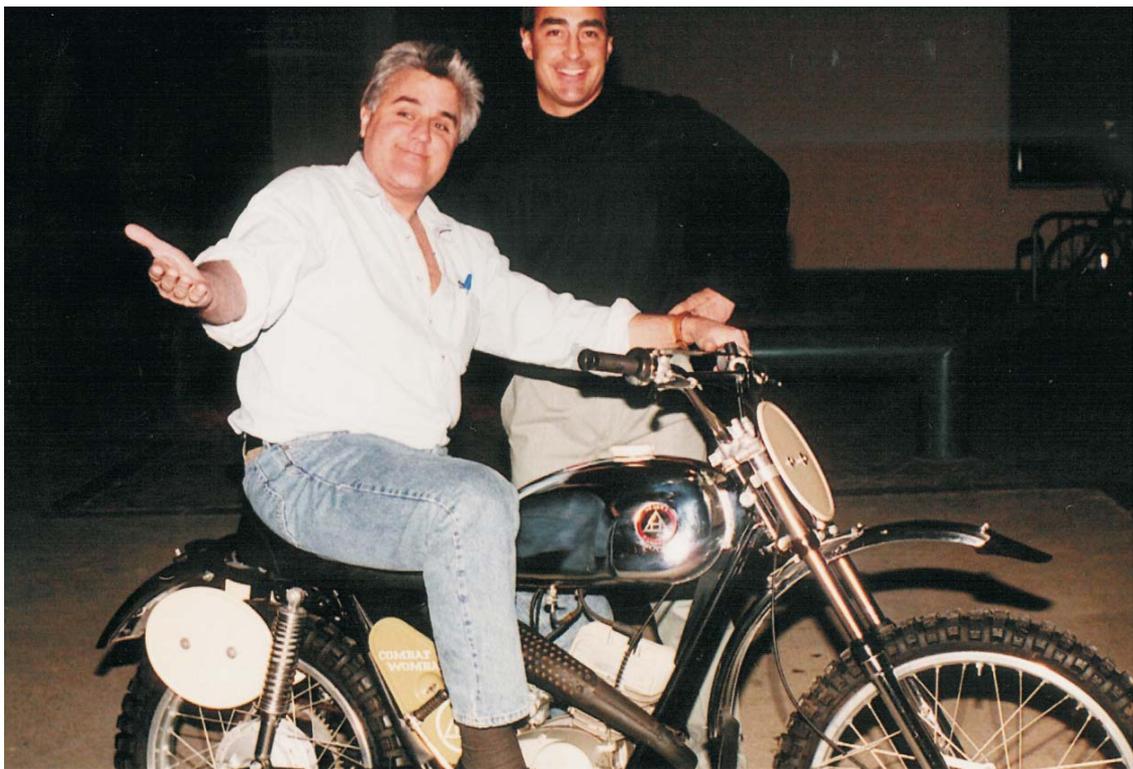
(top) Hodaka executives stand proudly behind the first and 10,000th Hodaka to roll off the line. (bottom) Ed Chesnut, former technical writer for Hodaka, sits aboard one of the many bikes whose names were inspired by a service bulletin that he wrote.

together with that bike,” recalled Koch while looking at one on his shop floor with only 147 miles showing on the odometer. Hodaka was done. Eight freight car loads of parts inventory, bound from Athena, were shipped to a warehouse in Pennsylvania – which burned to the ground in 1981, thus emptying out the world’s mother lode of Hodaka spares.

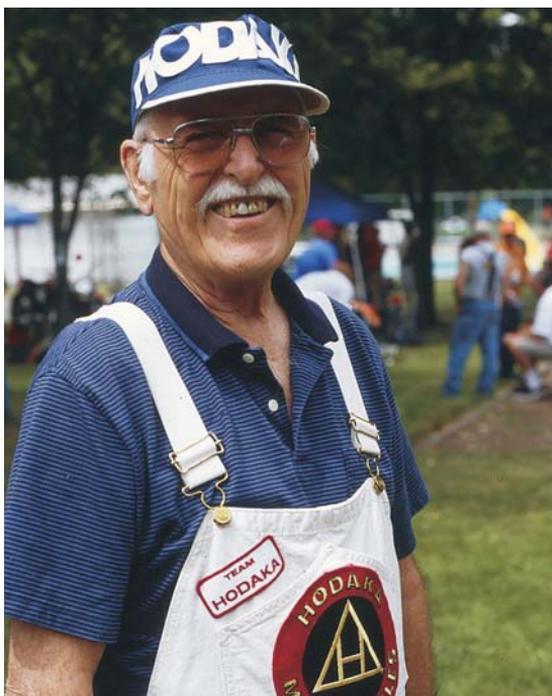
Circumstances suggested that all traces of Hodaka would soon vanish from the face of the earth.

But then came along Paul Stannard, a sausage maker from Rhode Island. Stannard got back into Hodakas in 1987, after a having a Dirt Squirt 100 as a teenager. He found the old twin-shock Hodaka magic and charisma were still spellbinding across the passage of time and technology. Over the next few years he managed to track down and phone some of the old PABATCO guard.

Stannard’s company, Strictly Hodaka, began as a hobby when people were just



(Top) Jay Leno is pictured here with Paul Stannard, the man credited with saving the Hodaka name thanks to his shop Strictly Hodakas, which he started as a hobby. (Bottom left) Chuck Swanson, former General Manager of Hodaka, was at the company from the beginning to the end.



bringing the brand back from the ashes. "It's not just me," rebutts Stannard. "Honest to gosh – there's a bunch of people that are all a part of this. I might be the loudmouth, or the front man, but there's a team of us that all work together."

Networking by telephone, Stannard arranged for the original PABATCO team to gather together for a reunion in Athena. That was 1999 and the beginning of an annual pilgrimage called Hodaka Days.

Several years later saw the population of Athena more than doubling during Hodaka Days. Hodaka families, some representing three generations, spread their coolers, tents and lawn chairs over the grass beneath the sycamore trees in the town park. Now regular events include potluck dinners, seminars and a Hodaka parade down the town's main street.

And what do the former Hodaka employees think when they return to Athena and see their past come rushing back at them? Many of them had devoted their lives to the fertilizer company's motorcycle division between 1961 and 1978. The resurgence in the popularity of the machines and the free-spirited and creative forces driving the company validates what they were trying to do.

"We always tried to make it fun," Swanson says. "And look – today our propaganda and stuff is still working!"

Hodaka Days 2009, the 10th anniversary, will be held June 26-28 in Athena, OR.

www.hodakadays.org *IM*

happy to unload their orphaned machines to clear out their garages and basements. To support his new obsession of collecting and restoring Hodakas he started reselling the extra and surplus pieces. By the early '90s word got around that he sometimes had parts for sale.

Then he got involved in reproducing the rare and non-existent parts to keep his bikes running, and selling the rest of the small production runs to other collectors.

Everybody seems to give kudos to Stannard for