



2005 BIG DOG PITBULL ROAD TEST

Radical chic & the rubber horizon

Wherein form pounds hell out of function

by Terry Roorda

Slung down low in the saddle, a scant two feet off the ground, I reach back with my left hand and retract the rear-mounted kickstand—more properly called the “handstand” since it’s a lot more convenient to operate manually than to fold a long leg back and mule-kick at it. I thumb the “Run” button to arm the starter, following a protocol unique to Big Dog, and then thumb the starter button to rouse the sleeping 117-inch brute of a motor to life, and step the six-speed Baker transmission into first with a decisive *clack*. The clutch lever eases out with a near-hydraulic smoothness as I dial on the torque and head down the driveway and out onto the road. This is

a familiar road, being in front of my house and all, and from here to some backcountry roadhouse and back I’ll stay exclusively on familiar roads; roads I know are well paved.

And I’m doing this in the morning. Not because that’s when I do my drinking, but because that’s when my spinal discs, the shock absorbers of my vertebrae, are at their full tumescence, having lain horizontal a good eight hours. With my discs fully charged, I can ride hard on the hardtail for the time it takes to fully acclimate to the experience and then I can keep going, busting this bronc over whatever the pavement deals, because, by then, I’m used to it. I do this routinely and my destination is invariably a bar, in keeping with the design objective of the Pitbull. I do this routinely, morning after morning, because the Pitbull tells me to. The Pitbull’s command overwhelms the little voice in my head that says, “What? Again? Are you nuts?” and I am powerless to resist. The backcountry bars aren’t even open yet.

This is compulsive behavior, I know. By rights I shouldn’t be drawn to the Pitbull. It’s not my preferred style of motorcycle. At least not in the abstract. There are other, more suitable mounts in the garage; bikes I could spin off four or five hundred miles on in a day and then check a map for a longer way home. There are much more suitable Big Dog models I could be testing, for that matter. The Pitbull’s hold on me is of a mysterious nature. A 150-mile putt on this thing leaves me stoved up and eyeing the Jacuzzi with a look that makes it nervous. What is it? A pathetic stab at a second childhood? A wistful revisiting of my youthful dalliance with hard-tails? Perhaps. A midlife vanity crisis? A need for thumbs up from the motorists who pass me on the back roads—and they all do, because I’m not making what you might call good time—agape with admiration at my blinding paint and chrome and ugly big-assed tire? Yeah, that too.

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A dog's life

The Pitbull is the Big Dog model that made the company see the light. The year was 2002, and even though the company was producing a number of other models—roadworthy models with clever innovations like rubber-mount motors and rear suspensions—it was the 2002 Pitbull with its rigid frame and fat 250mm rear skin that got the market juiced and quickly became their most popular offering. And the ensuing years proved it wasn’t a fluke. The more extreme the attributes of all of their models—i.e. the fatter the tire, and rangier the frame geometry—the more popular the bikes, and the more popular the manufacturer, became. The



Pitbull has continued in its role as point bike in the company’s probing for the limits of the custom-extreme envelope. If there were a 330 tire—which there is now—they would probably put it on the Pitbull—which they doubtless will for 2006. It will be even less agile and forgiving than the current model, and will continue to rock the sales charts. As it is, the 2005 Pitbull already represents a complete ground-up redesign of the model, and from both a fashion and engineering standpoint, it’s a standout among its market peers; unmatched in its resumé of hot-button performance and cosmetic attributes. Only its hardtail kennel-mate, the Ridgeback, is as uncompromising in putting radical chic to the pavement.

It all starts with the powertrain. The entire 2005 Big Dog lineup received an upsizing of motors from the S&S 107-inch to the 117-inch. In making that switch, the Big Dog engineers collaborated with S&S and did some serious reworking of the highly strung 117 to bring it to a more street-temperate and EPA-compliant state.

Changes included cam and valve train modifications, the use of TP Engineering rocker boxes, and a single-fire crank-trigger ignition. More significantly, the bikes were all given the BDM Balanced Drive System (BDS), derived directly from Baker Drive-train’s revolutionary Drop Starter Slam Clutch primary design. This system utilizes a right-side, direct-drive six-speed transmission and uses the space vacated by the transmission pulley to move the starter down and the clutch basket in. The advantages of the setup are many, and include a simpler, more direct starter engagement, lower gear ratios throughout the box—making sixth speed a more usable cog under normal riding conditions—and a narrower engine

profile, allowing for a tighter rider stance at stops. The engine offset required by the previous left-side drive is also gone, thus eliminating the steering bias endemic to fat-tire bikes of the

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leftist persuasion. Taken together, the S&S 117 and BDS are as potent, capable and unique a combination of power and drive as exists on any production custom on the market today regardless of price.

Cosmetically, the Pitbull just keeps getting prettier. For 2005 it got longer and cleaner with additional stretch added in the backbone, and the chas-

sis center post removed entirely to make room for the BDS. A new dash was also added atop the two-piece fuel tank. The bike sports a full complement of proprietary matched billet components including wheels, rotors and pulley, forward controls, hand-grips, fender struts and triple trees. There’s chrome everywhere, and the quality and variety of the paint schemes available on the bodywork



is the eye-popping envy of the industry. Whatever its other virtues or lack thereof, there’s no denying that the Pitbull is an elegantly integrated and strikingly beautiful styling exercise.

A size too far

And then there’s that tire. Both the Pitbull and Ridgeback models put on a couple of inches in the rear end during the off-season and now run on Avon 300/35-H18 rubber, and in so doing may have finally crossed the line. The Avon 300 is not just a lot wider than the 250 the Pitbull was equipped with previously, it’s also lower profiled, which looks totally bitching but means the tire has virtually no give in it. The combination of the stout 1.5-inch tube rigid chassis—which is engineered to handle the output of a 115 hp motor and the torsional demands of the whole oversized Pitbull package—with a massive low-profile tire pumped up to 42 psi, is a handful on all but the smoothest and

straightest stretches of highway. The weight centralization of the BDS saves the day somewhat. More than somewhat, actually, since without it, the bike would push the very limits of rideability in all but the most narrowly circumscribed barhopper applications.

Outside of those barhopper applications, and away from inti-

mately familiar pavement, the Pitbull demands your full undivided attention to both its own handling nuances and the surface nuances of the roadbed, hands tight on the controls and eyes focused exactly on the pavement ahead; playing pavement poker; watching for tells; reading the road. No sightseeing from this perch, boy. Any lapse in attention can have jarring consequences. There is little compromise in this machine under these conditions; only the hard-line dictates of a stiff hardtail chassis and an unpredictable 300/35-H18 copilot. The situation is made all the more dicey by the low-end grunt of the 117-inch motor. It pours on the power with a blip of the throttle, and on ragged pavement you can find yourself blipping unintentionally over the bumps. Whoa Nelly.

So why can’t I just keep the hell off of it? ♦

