

BIG DOG MOTORCYCLES 2006 MODEL LAUNCH

Dog days in the high desert

Still going to extremes

by Terry Roorda

SEDONA, ARIZ., SEPT. 7—It's 3:40 a.m. and the coyotes have come down from the red rock cliffs encircling the gracious Enchantment Resort and taken up positions by the tennis courts outside the patio door of my adobe casita. And there they break into a piteous squealing and yowling like they're

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towards real-world riding acumen. The Wolf, Pro Sport, Boxer and Husky—all gone now—sport relatively sensible 180mm rear rubber, conventional frame geometry, and tractable suspension. The remaining canines, the Mastiff, Bulldog and Pitbull, were what they called their new “Super Fat” series, with the Mastiff running a 230mm and the others running on radical 250mm rubber. It was the dawn of the New Age of Big Dog, whose early reputation had been staked to road-ready rubber-mount motorcycles, but who had begun to see the light and the future the previous year when the Mastiff had been introduced equipped with that 230 and it proceeded to charge straight to the top of the company’s unit sales spreadsheet, accounting for more than half of total Big Dog sales.

Dog days

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they’re standing on each others’ corns and I’m suddenly rudely awake and bolt upright in bed clutching the 600 thread count sheet to my throat and peering out futilely into the abject Sedona darkness.

And then as quickly as it began it’s all over and I’m left to wonder whether I just dreamed this eerie sequence. Spooky stuff happens here in the Boynton Canyon vortex where, reportedly, energy swirls up from the earth and suffuses flesh and spirit in a phenomenon I’ve heard analogized to the rush of subway air blowing up Marilyn Monroe’s halter dress while she somehow stood on the grating in high heels—a mystical act in and of itself. When it was put that way, I found it much easier to visualize the power of the vortex, and I remain open to any and all possibilities. So what, then, is this coyote choir trying to tell me? That there’s a disturbance in the vortex? Some sort of harmonic divergence? That the ghosts of the mysteriously vanished Sinagua Indians who once inhabited this canyon are restless and on the haunt? That the automatic sprinkler system has switched on by the tennis courts?

That’s the thing about a vortex. You just don’t know. Still, Sedona has made a living off the vortex seekers and all the New Age juju that goes with it since the heady days of the Harmonic Convergence in 1987, and this place has a reputation for

transcendence and transformation, and on that score, at least, I can attest to the apparent validity, having been here once before in 2001 for the launch of the 2002 Big Dog Motorcycles model lineup and seen



The restyled Mastiff

for myself the transformation the company’s undergone since that first affair in Sedona.

When last we convened here at the vortex, Big Dog was a very different outfit, producing seven diverse models, four of which were still what you might call serious road machines—highly styled, to be sure, but decidedly biased

You don’t argue with that kind of success, and Big Dog followed suit for 2002, designing the fat-tired Bulldog and the Pitbull, which with its hardtail chassis represented the next exploratory probe of the market’s appetite for the radically unorthodox. And it clicked. The Pitbull immediately shot up the charts to become the new sales leader and set a pace that saw the company’s output grow by a staggering 46 percent that year, with revenue hitting \$30 million, and they continued expanding at a blistering pace even as other production custom manufacturers stagnated or folded altogether and the economy remained stubbornly volatile. By 2004 they had quadrupled their bottom line to \$120 million, selling over 5,000 bikes. Maybe there’s something to this vortex thing after all.

Doggy style

Fittingly perhaps, it’s only the Mastiff and Pitbull that have survived to make the return trip to Sedona. They represent the Pro Street side of Big Dog’s five-model 2006 family, but aside from their names they bear virtually no resemblance to their 2002—or even their 2005—precursors. Both bikes received a ground-up redesign for 2006, the objective being a longer, lower look, and to achieve that end the new chassis have 6 inches of stretch in the backbone and have gone an inch under stock on the downtubes. Also contributing

to the effect is an increase in front end rake from 40 to 42 degrees (39 degrees in the steering head and three in the trees to keep the trail manageable). The



The new K-9

wheelbase grows 4.5 inches as a result of these mods. Gorgeous new one-piece stretched fuel tanks give the bikes a sleeker appearance, as well, but at the cost of a slightly diminished fuel capacity. They now hold 4.6 gallons instead of 5.

The Pro Streets part ways stylistically at this point, with the Pitbull (MSRP \$26,600) sporting shorter fenders front and back and a fashionably fat 300/35-18 tire on its hardtail frame. The softtail-style

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Mastiff (\$28,500) uses a slinkier 250/40-18 (the same tire described by the company in 2001 as “monster”). Each model has its own personal set of matched forged wheels and pulley. The makeover on these models is complete, and when all’s said and done, they’re about as long and low as things get. In fact, the Mastiff has ended up so close in lowdown poise and appearance to the 2005 top-of-the-line Bulldog, that something had to give, and the Bulldog has been retired. The company realized they could no longer justify a five grand price differential between the two bikes when all the Bulldog brought to the table that the Mastiff didn’t were an inverted front fork, chin spoiler and an air ride rear suspension. The air ride is a \$1,500 option on all softtail-style models for 2006, and if you do want to go lower, but don’t want to pop for the air, the stock suspension is now manually adjustable for ride height. Do so judiciously. At the low extreme, the shock travel and ground and cornering clearance become, shall we say, limited.

Like all the new Big Dog models, the Pro Streets are powered by Big Dog-modified, fully polished 117-inch S&S mills with TP Pro Vent rocker boxes and S&S Super G carburetors, replacing the Super E used on last year’s bikes. The only visual change on the motor for 2006 is a nicely sculpted nose cone that replaces the previous plain Jane unit, and complements the company’s proprietary air cleaner and coil cover. Transmissions are the same Baker right-side drive, direct-drive six speeds introduced to the line last year, and also returning for a second year are the BDM Balanced Drive System primaries developed in concert with Baker Drivetrain and utilizing his ingenious Drop-Starter Slam-Clutch technology which centers the starter and clutch basket in the chassis. The result is a slimmer profile, better weight distribution and a happier starter. Also making the starter happy is a high-output charging system that puts juice back in the battery even at an idle. The company frankly admits that this feature recognizes the riding habits of Big Dog owners, which tend to include a lot of short hops to the bar. Final drive is handled by a narrow carbon-fiber belt and Teflon-coated pulleys. PM four-piston brake calipers and full-floating rotors handle stoppage.

The exhaust systems on the bikes are the conservative 2-into-1 units introduced last year as part of the company’s wider initiative towards regulatory compliance in the present and future—an initiative that will bring fuel injection to the lineup next year. They’re mild-mannered to say the least, but do emit enough of a rumble to satisfy respectable

consumers. Big Dog tells us that fully 80 percent of their buyers opt for something louder after purchase, and the company is more than willing to accommodate their preference with their own line of Mean Mother exhaust pipes, as well as offerings from Supertrapp and Vance & Hines. They just won’t install them for you at the time of delivery.

The long Dogs

The yin to the Pro Streets’ yang in the Big Dog mandala is the chopper contingent, consisting of the Chopper, Ridgeback and K-9. The K-9 (\$29,900) is new for this

year, having replaced the departing Bulldog numerically if not genetically, and keeping the head count in the kennel up to five-model strength. What we have in this model is essentially a Ridgeback with softtail-style rear suspension, and what a natural progression that is. A suspended 300-series motorcycle was inevitable once Big Dog put the big meat on the Ridgeback last year and hinted that something like this was in the offing as soon as they’d worked out the engineering wrinkles involved with making that massive tire happy with shock absorbers. The Ridgeback itself



The radical Ridgeback

(\$27,900) returns for a third year in all its imposing nine-foot-long enormity and retains its crown as the most unrelentingly cool and cruel chop on the block. It shares its long-boned frame geometry with the K-9—both bikes stretching 4 inches over stock in the backbone, 8 inches in the down-tubes, and 12 inches in the front end. New for 2006 is a larger one-piece fuel tank that retains the swept appearance of the previous cell while kicking capacity up to 4.4 gallons.

And then there’s the Chopper (\$28,700), the company’s top-selling model and bar-none the most lovable and rideable chopper in the whole production custom industry. Little has changed on this model for 2006. Little needed to change, and all they’ve done to it is give it a different set of handlebars—the same ones found on the Ridgeback and K-9. These bars bring the controls back within easier reach from the saddle and were implemented to make the bike more ergonomically appealing to a broader consumer base, i.e., women riders.

Run, Dogs, run

The riding experience varies widely between the models I tested in the vortex. I took a pass on the hardtails, having spent an inordinate amount of time on these beasts over the past year, and concentrated on the softtail-style machinery, starting with the redesigned Mastiff. To ride this machine is to realize just how long and low they’ve made it for 2006. Visually, it’s an unqualified success. Ergonomically, it’s not quite there yet. The most pronounced miscue in that department is the reach to the handlebars, which, even for a rider of my 6-foot-4-inch spread, is unnatural and results after a number of miles in distinct discomfort between the shoulder blades. Watch for Big Dog to rethink this setup in production or, in the alternative, offer some pullback bars as an option. The performance of the motor is gutsy, though not over whelming in the high elevation of northern Arizona, where we rode between 4,400 and 7,000 feet above sea level. The carburetor, in particular, had its share of fits; missing and coughing occasionally in the thin air and also emitting the occasional backfire when starting up. Some rejetting would be in order if you’re going to be spending the bulk of your saddle time in the high country. Aside from that, the modifications in the cam, valvetrain and cylinder fins made to the 117 by the Big Dog engineers give it a temperate demeanor with a lot less vibration than you’d expect from that many solid-mounted cubic inches.

Also of note is the slick operation of the Baker transmission and the pure joy of hitting sixth gear at 70 mph and settling into a wide-grin groove.

The Chopper continues to impress me in virtually every aesthetic and functional particular. It looks exactly like what a chopper should look like, and feels exactly like a chopper should feel. It handles much more gracefully than it has any right to, considering its rangy architecture and 250/40-18 rubber, and transmits noticeably less vibration to the rider than anything of comparable dimensions and displacement I’ve ridden. Did I mention I love this model?

Like its close sibling, the Ridgeback, the new K-9 is one immense motorcycle when viewed curbside, but once in the saddle it shrinks to surprisingly manageable proportions. Ergonomically it suits me just fine, but is also suitable for riders somewhat shorter than my 6 feet 4 inches. Maneuvering the K-9 is no stroll in the park, but it’s significantly more of a stroll than the Ridgeback. What suspension travel there is in the rear is sufficient to take the hard knocks out of the ride and

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The popular Chopper

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keep the rear rubber on the road when the pavement gets choppy, especially in the corners.

As a side note—and not specific to Big Dog, Lord knows—the overarching attribute of the riding experience on any 300mm model on the market is the sheer mass of rubber on the rear, which seems to have a will of its own and responds more instinctively to the push and pull of vortexes than the direction you thought you had in mind. And I'll once again whine in my best voice-

in-the-wilderness castrato that these donuts ain't sensible, and I'll do it even while recognizing that high heels on subway grates ain't sensible either, but nobody's listening when the train whooshes by. And as long as we've raised the tire/shoe analogy, I'll go even further and venture, with the courage of a man who knows that nobody's listening, that the 300's are the platform shoes of our time: Gotta have 'em to be cool today, but you run the distinct risk of looking out of step when the punk rockers swing in on the fashion pendulum tomorrow. (Of course there's the alternative possibility that they'll prove to be more like mullets, which

seem to have some exasperating degree of staying power.)

Pyramid scheme

No Big Dog launch would be complete, or even recognizable, without what we of the moto-cynical corps have come to call, "The Sheldon Show." This is the post-ride wrap-up rap session conducted by Big Dog's deep-pocket sole proprietor, Sheldon Coleman, a guy who looks like a young Peter Fonda and whose taste in duds tends towards Land's End, but who, appearances notwithstanding, knows his motorcycles cold. This is a ritual unique in the industry in which the press corps becomes Sheldon's personal focus group for an hour or so, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of his new offerings. I write about it yearly, and doubtless he hates me by now, but writing about "The Sheldon Show" has become one of the few remaining pleasurable acts in my otherwise benighted existence, so there. And besides, Joseph Pulitzer

said that a newspaper should have no friends and I take that air bubble straight to heart, so herewith my annual poke at Sheldon:

Dig it. Here we are in the middle of the Boynton Canyon vortex; in the New Age touchy-feely capital of Spaceship Earth, having struggled against bizarre force fields and 300mm tires all afternoon, trying in our lizard brains to separate the fact from the weirdness, and what does Sheldon do? He draws a pyramid on his big easel-mounted pad of paper and commences to get all ethereal about the subtle intertwining of style, reliability and performance in the Big Dog Big Picture. A damn pyramid, fercrapsake. I don't pretend to know my kundalini from my chakra, but I know a pyramid when I see one, and I know how freighted it is with mystical meaning, and I know I'm staring at one now when I least expect it. Tell me there's nothing to this whole vortex thing. ♦

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