

Yamaha Motor Monthly Newsletter

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A fully functional YA-1 is on display in the Communication Plaza corporate museum at Yamaha Motor headquarters

The Core of Yamaha Motor

YA-1

A Symbol of the "Unique Style of Yamaha"

The "Unique Style of Yamaha" is an unchanging standard that resides in every workplace where Yamaha Motor's *Monozukuri* thrives. It is based on original and innovative concepts, outstanding technologies with superior performance and functionality, and also on design that expresses Refined Dynamism. It is the continued pursuit and polishing of this unique style that enables Yamaha Motor to create and supply throughout the world high-quality products in tune with human perceptions. To find a product that truly embodies the "Unique Style of Yamaha" one needs to look no further than the very first Yamaha motorcycle, the "YA-1." It was developed and manufactured 60 years ago by musical instrument manufacturer Nippon Gakki Co., Ltd. (presently Yamaha Corporation) and released for sale by the company in February 1955.

A Quest for Originality: We Won't Stop With Just a Copy

To develop the YA-1, Nippon Gakki took the German DKW "RT125" as its model. The reason was simple: it was a famous motorcycle praised internationally for its beauty and exceptionally high level of engineering excellence.

Development of the YA-1 began in March 1954. At the start of the project, the president of Nippon Gakki at the time, Genichi Kawakami, had given the team very clear instructions to be extremely diligent in reproducing all aspects of the RT125 in quality and precision. He didn't want a second-rate product; he wanted one that recreated the reliability and quality of the original so fully that it could stand with pride in comparison not only to Japanese products but to any in the world. But the development engineers wanted even more when it came to ease of use and implemented their own ideas. They had built an engine that was nearly identical to the RT125's, but paired it with a new 4-speed transmission instead of the original 3-speed. Through trial and error, they undertook development of a number of innovative devices for the model, like putting the shift lever and the kickstarter pedal on the same shaft and changing the starting system to a primary type that allowed engine starting no matter what gear the transmission was in by disengaging the clutch.



This was the scene of the trials for casting the cylinder, something that heavily influences the engine's performance. The first casting results using the company's piano frame casting technology were laughed at as looking like "teapots." Repeated trial and error and the sweat and tears of the team eventually led to amazingly precise casting capability for the time.

The Roots of "Yamaha Design"

In design and coloring as well, the development team wanted to make a machine that stood out from the rest. In the mid-1950s when Japan was struggling to rebuild itself after the devastation of World War II, the motorcycle was still nothing more than a means of transportation and a workhorse for transporting goods. As a result, virtually every Japanese motorcycle looked rustic and rugged in design and the only color they came in was black. In stunning contrast, the YA-1 sported a beautiful maroon and ivory color scheme for its exterior and a cloisonné Yamaha insignia with the three crossed tuning forks on the fuel tank. The high-quality finish of the model radiated luxury and genuine quality. Of all the motorcycles in the world modeled after the RT125, the finish of the YA-1 was in a class of its own.



The engineering team with the first prototype they completed after two months of work.

Excellence in design and coloring, refined styling, engine starting with one light kick, sharp acceleration, excellent, easy-to-use handling—the YA-1 had it all. The YA-1's engineering and design made it a newly developed motorcycle that was more than just a copy of a European model; it was the result of the high goals of the development team to find the essence of each function and take it to a new level.

The Struggles of an Industry Latecomer – Developing a Sales Network

Just one month behind the original schedule, the long-awaited first Yamaha motorcycle, the air-cooled 125cc 2-stroke "Yamaha 125 YA-1," came off the production line and was shipped from the factory in February 1955. Only eight months had passed since the choice of the RT125 as the base model. It was a perfect example of president

Kawakami's motto of "To work carefully is to work quickly" in practice. But speed would be meaningless if quality didn't keep pace. In the production of the YA-1, each and every unit was assembled by hand to ensure the highest levels of precision and quality, and only those units that passed strict quality-control checks could be shipped from the factory to the market.

Despite the company's absolute confidence in the quality of its product, they had trouble selling the YA-1 in the months after its release. One of the employees who had been in charge of wholesales of Nippon Gakki's pianos and was reassigned to developing the sales network and direct-sales of the YA-1 recalls:

"Searching for dealers every day to handle the product was like climbing a mountain with needles for grass." Since Yamaha was a latecomer to the industry, the best motorcycle shops in each area already had strong ties with established manufacturers, which made it extremely difficult to get new contracts with dealerships. To make things worse, the price of the YA-1 was about 20% higher than the average price of a 125cc class model. As the owner of one dealership said, "The YA-1 was a very good looking bike and the electronics were especially good. But no one really knew how good it was. If the price was lower, it might have sold, but they wouldn't lower it. Kawakami-san had great confidence in the bike and the thing that finally showed people its quality was the Mt. Fuji Ascent Race."



President Kawakami personally led his employees on a "Yamaha Motorcycle Campaign" to promote sales. The photo shows an event in front of a musical instrument store.

Proving Yamaha's Quality through Racing

The race that the company entered in order to prove that the performance and reliability of the YA-1 was different from the rest was the 3rd Mt. Fuji Ascent Race held in July 1955. The race would be held just ten days after the motorcycle division of Nippon Gakki (presently Yamaha Corporation) was spun off as a new independent company, Yamaha Motor Co., Ltd. Despite this being Yamaha's first-ever motorcycle race, the team came through with a magnificent debut win. Then, in the 1st Asama Highlands Race held four months later in November, the Yamaha team not only won again but took every spot on the podium. The result was a sudden jump in recognition of the Yamaha brand name and the reputation of the YA-1. That also meant a big leap in sales as well. "[The YA-1] sold at an unbelievable rate. Before you knew it, the three dealerships handling it in Tokyo had suddenly grown to around 20," according to the aforementioned dealership owner.



The team that won a stunning debut victory with the YA-1 in the 3rd Mt. Fuji Ascent Race

Thanks to the continuous efforts of Yamaha Motor's first employees to raise the company's recognition through racing, their spirit of "Absolute Quality" in manufacturing and in selling each model with care and full aftersales service that aimed to make every customer that bought a Yamaha a loyal fan, the image of "Yamaha Quality" became firmly established.

The YA-1 Is Still Winning Fans

On a fine autumn day more than 50 years after the YA-1 first went on sale, a round of applause from a crowd gathered at the Yamaha Test Course greeted the soft but crisp purr of a 2-stroke single-cylinder YA-1 engine as it came to life. At the Communication Plaza, Yamaha Motor's corporate museum located at its headquarters in Japan, a precious collection of historic Yamaha models like the YA-1 are on display and kept in running condition. Since 2001, the periodic sessions held at the Yamaha Test Course to

actually run these models and check their condition have been turned into an event open to the public that now attracts many appreciative fans of Yamaha and motorcycles in general.

Among Yamaha motorcycle enthusiasts in Japan, there is one group that has toured the roughly 250 km from Yamaha Motor headquarters in Shizuoka Prefecture to Tokyo on their treasured YA-1s. This tour is based on the story of how president Kawakami himself led a tour of YA-1s to Tokyo at the time as a promotional effort to demonstrate its performance. The group replicated this historic tour by making the trip to Tokyo in 1992 and then doing the trip back from Tokyo to Yamaha headquarters in 2002. On both trips, there was some mechanical trouble along the way, but both were completed successfully.

There is also the story of the owner of an old musical instrument shop who remembered that he had a YA-1 that had been sitting in his warehouse for nearly 40 years, and spent a year and a half patiently getting it cleaned up and back into running condition. Of this restoration project he said, "We have to preserve and pass on to the next generation old things of genuine quality, things of historical value and things that simply can't be replaced by new things of today. I learned this from working with musical instruments and music, and I have put it in practice during my life. Motorcycles are the same. My YA-1 is one that president Kawakami himself gave to my father. To truly preserve and pass on this proud creation of the engineers and craftspeople who built it, the hollow shell of its form is not enough—that would be meaningless. That's why I want to leave it as a fully operational model."



As a symbol of Yamaha Motor, the YA-1 is displayed at many events, where it invariably wins the admiration of many motorcycle fans.

Outside of Japan, there are also YA-1s on display in places like the Schloss Augustusburg motorcycle museum, one of the largest in Europe, and at Incolmos, Yamaha Motor's distributor in Colombia.

The YA-1 was born of a quest for originality and to make something more than just a copy. In order to achieve that goal, the development team refined their technical skills, and focused on design to further differentiate the YA-1 from the competitor models of the day. With its quality finish, classy coloring and undeniable race results, this definitive model of its day came to be known affectionately by fans as the *Aka-tombo* ("Red Dragonfly"). And, as a symbol of the Yamaha brand, it continues to win the hearts of many motorcycle enthusiasts to this day.

Message from the Editor

This month's issue about the YA-1 and how it became a symbol of the "Unique Style of Yamaha" and helped create a brand image different from other motorcycle manufacturers with its quality, design and technology makes you want to get a look at the real thing, doesn't it? I hope everyone will find the opportunity to visit the [Communication Plaza](#) at Yamaha Motor headquarters in Iwata to see it sometime. There you will find the "Red Dragonfly" waiting for you and looking as if it's ready to go out for a ride!



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