

# Great Bikes

## 1964-1978 Hodakas



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The Hodaka brand enjoyed a tremendous 15-year run for US importers PABATCO that lasted from 1964-1978 before being overrun by Honda, Yamaha, Kawasaki and Suzuki. Today, the various Hodaka models have cult following among enthusiasts.

NO DISCUSSION OF America's love affair with motorcycling is complete without paying tribute to Hodaka, the 1960s-1970s era phenomenon that almost singlehandedly popularized the dual-sport genre in the US. Hodaka, although sadly unknown to motorcyclists who were too young to ride when the company was active, was an unusual marriage of Japanese manufacturing and American design and marketing, and its remarkable influence on the off-road community is still remembered fondly by veterans of the scene.

The Hodaka story begins in 1961 with the Pacific Basin Trading Company (PABATCO), founded in tiny Athena, Oregon. In those days, hard currency was in

short supply due to exchange regulations, so companies like PABATCO sprang up to barter American goods for foreign trade, in effect bypassing the currency restrictions. PABATCO, which had access to locally grown produce, began such a trading relationship with Yamaguchi, a Japanese manufacturer of small trail bikes. Within two years, Yamaguchi had shipped PABATCO approximately 5000 motorcycles, which were distributed throughout the US via 480 dealers—forming a very significant part of PABATCO's bottom line.

The relationship suddenly changed when Yamaguchi unexpectedly declared bankruptcy in April 1963, and PABATCO was left with no motorcycles to sell. Hodaka Industrial Company of Nagoya, Japan,

which supplied motors to Yamaguchi, was now teetering on the brink of collapse as well. Rising to the occasion, PABATCO and Hodaka Industrial joined forces. PABATCO would supply the design and marketing and Hodaka would supply the manufacturing.

PABATCO's employees were true enthusiasts and knew what American riders were looking for in a trial bike. The first fruits of their labor arrived in June 1964, when the first shipment of Hodaka Ace 90s arrived in the US. Available only in red, the Ace 90 boasted a reliable single-cylinder two stroke engine fitted into a rugged double downtube frame design (patterned after the English Cotton) for just \$379. Better yet, the bike was fully street legal, so it could be ridden rather than trucked to the trails. The Ace 90 began a national obsession with lightweight, street-legal trailbikes.

The following year, in 1965, PABATCO was purchased by Shell Oil Company. To its credit, Shell allowed PABATCO to function quite autonomously, since its business was good. In fact, by June 1966, the ACE 90's two-year anniversary, Hodaka had churned out 10,000 of the little beasts. Along the way, as upgrades were made in response to improved engineering or customer inputs, the company made sure the changes were evolutionary and could be adapted to earlier models as well. This helped support a burgeoning aftermarket of parts suppliers and tuners who quickly took to the Ace as the trail bike of choice.

As Hodaka Japan was in full swing manufacturing, PABATCO was doing its part by aggressively entering the bike in competitions; earning high-profile wins in endurance runs, trials, desert racing, flat track, scrambles and even road racing. To celebrate the 10,000th Ace, Marvin Foster (Hodaka's Marketing Manager) rode his bike on a 3800-mile trip to Baja, Mexico, without a single failure. Legends like



The 1964 Ace 90 was the model that started it all. Americans clamored for the little chrome-tanked 90cc two-strokes.



Responding to MX craze of the late 1960s, Hodaka produced the Super Rat 100 from 1969-72, and it resurfaced in 1974.





Introduced in 1973, the Combat Wombat MX model ushered in the tidal wave of Japanese-made 125cc motocross machines.



The Dirt Squirt 100 was originally manufactured with Hodaka's trademark chrome tank in 1973. A red tank model followed in '75.

World Trials Champion Sammy Miller and Daytona 100cc Road Race Champion Harry Taylor also made their mark on Hodakas. For 1970, the company produced its first dedicated MX racing bike, the Super Rat. This was later followed by an updated 125cc enduro design called the Wombat in 1972, which Frank Wheeler rode around the entire perimeter of Australia (some 10,000 miles) in just 21 days, resulting in further publicity and marketing success. Another MX racer, the Combat Wombat, was introduced shortly thereafter. Hodaka's model monikers continued getting weirder with each new model: from the "Dirt Squirt 100" of 1973 to the "Road Toad 100" of 1975 to the "Thunderdog" introduced thereafter.

As the Hodaka craze took over the small bore market in the mid-1970s, customers were not the only ones to sit up and take notice. Honda, Yamaha, Suzuki, and Kawasaki realized the market's potential and started pouring big money into their dirt bikes. These huge organizations were able to leverage their considerable resources to provide more advanced technology, and Hodakas started

to look obsolete by comparison. Worse yet, as the economic recession of the late 1970s took hold, the dollar was devalued against the Japanese yen, driving prices of

secure PABATCO's future by purchasing the Hodaka engine plant outright, but the Japanese rebuffed the effort, and Shell responded by not renewing the contract between PABATCO and Hodaka Industrial. Production ceased in 1978, with PABATCO selling its remaining parts and accessories to Wheels Of Time, Inc. and Hodaka Industrial selling its tooling to Daelim Industrial, a Korean conglomerate.

Today, nostalgic Baby Boomers are fueling a resurgence in Hodakas. Every year, the faithful gather to celebrate "Hodaka Days" ([www.hodakadays.org](http://www.hodakadays.org)) complete with vintage-era scrambles and trials, as well as presentations from the original PABATCO crew. Parts are plentiful and there are quite a few vendors who specialize in Hodaka accessories. Best of all, the price of admission to the Hodaka club is still quite low—under \$1000 for a good running example in many cases.

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<u>Model</u>	<u>Mfg. Dates</u>	<u>Market</u>
Ace 90	1964-1967	Dual-Purpose
Ace 100/B/B+	1968-1972	Dual-Purpose
Super Rat/Ace 100MX	1969-1972	Motocross
Wombat 125	1972-1973	Dual-Purpose
Combat Wombat 125	1973	MX/Enduro
Dirt Squirt 100 (chrome)	1973-1974	Off-Road
Super Combat 125	1974	Motocross
Super Rat 100 (mdl 98)	1974	Motocross
Road Toad 100 (mdl 99)	1974-1975	Dual-Purpose
Thunderdog 250	1976	Enduro
Wombat 125/SL	1976	Dual-Purpose
Dirt Squirt 100 (red)	1975	Off-Road
Road Toad 100 (mdl 02)	1976	Dual-Purpose
250/SL	1976-1977	Dual-Purpose
175/SL	1977	Dual-Purpose
Dirt Squirt 80	1977	Off-Road

Japanese products through the roof and leading to a glut of discounted inventory. Consumer tastes were also shifting, toward larger on- and off-road bikes. And corporate pressure was piling up on PABATCO as well. Faced with grim prospects during the recession, parent Shell attempted to



The 100cc Road Toad was typical of the lightweight two-stroke "enduro" (dual-purpose) motorcycles of the 1970s.



The Thunderdog 250 of 1976 was the largest motorcycle made by Hodaka. The road-going SL model came along a year later.