



1979 Mugen-built prototype RC250

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In the mid-1980s, when AMA rules allowed factory works racers to compete, Honda owned the reputation for building the trickiest motocross bikes of any manufacturer; handmade one-off tool-room specials that were pure artisanship.

It wasn't always that way. According to Dave Arnold, Honda's motocross team manager from 1981 to 1995, the team was running basically stock bikes in the late 1970s. HRC (Honda Racing Corp.) and HRA (Honda R&D Americas) didn't yet exist.

Enter Mugen, founded by Hirotoishi Honda, son of Soichiro Honda himself. Japanese for "unlimited," Mugen first made its name as an engine supplier for motocross bikes and Formula 2 cars. Although not contracted for development work, Mugen was a

Honda vendor, and could build bikes to Honda designs. So in the late 1970s, when American Honda complained that its motocross bikes could be better, Honda of Japan tapped Mugen to build an RC250 to new Honda specs.

It was a beauty, with a hand-built chrome-moly steel frame, aluminum swingarm, the trickiest Showa suspension available, a CR125R fuel tank, plus a new head, cylinder, bigger reed valve and redesigned expansion chamber. Only two of the prototypes were built. One was delivered to the team in the middle of the Supercross season, and naturally, three-time AMA National Champion Marty Smith and teammate Steve Wise were thrilled to have such

exotic factory-built (or so they thought) machinery.

Unfortunately, Arnold says, both riders hated it. The prototype had a steeper steering head angle and a shorter wheelbase for greater agility on the series' tight tracks. But the chassis geometry, plus a tall overall height that produced a high center of gravity, made the bike too twitchy and nervous. Smith and Wise rode the Mugen on a press day before an event, and went right back to their old bikes. The team felt that with no mid-season testing time available to develop it, the Mugen had no potential.

One bike presumably went back to Japan, while the other found a home in American Honda's warehouse, where it resides today.