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Known as one of the “Big-four” in the motorcycle industry, Kawasaki has grown from a small shipping company into a large Japanese conglomerate that is recognized globally for its premium manufacturing. But how well do you know the 140-year old company that produces the fastest bikes in the world or what it did before it ventured into motorcycle manufacturing? This article is here to give you the history of Kawasaki motorcycles.



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Humble Beginnings

Founded by Shozo Kawasaki in 1878, Kawasaki Heavy Industries originally started as a small shipping company before joining the Japanese shipbuilding industry. The company later expanded to locomotives and train cars manufacturing before building Japan’s first submarine during the Russo-Japanese war. By the early 1910s, Kawasaki was manufacturing a large percentage of Japan's naval fleet and even built the Japanese military aircraft in 1922 after World War I. From building ships, locomotives, submarines, aircraft, helicopters, and industrial equipment, Kawasaki ventured into robot manufacturing and created Japan’s first industrial robot in 1969.

In 1960, Kawasaki took over Meguro motorcycles –a major key player and only Japanese motorcycle manufacturer to produce a 500cc bike. This opened up a new era for the company as they produced their first B8 125cc two-stroke motorcycle models in 1961. In 1962, Kawasaki released its second series of two-stroke models ranging from 50cc – 250cc and in that same year, its 250cc disc-valve “Samurai” began to draw the attention of the motorcycle in the U.S.

Early Success

4 years later, Kawasaki launched the 650WI that was inspired by the BSA A10 in 1966 and this model became the biggest Japanese-made bike of that year. Following the huge acceptance of 650WI, the company released the first Kawasaki H1 to the public in 1969. Also known as the Mach III, the motorcycle was powered by a 500cc Mach III two-stroke triple engine that created a big reputation for the brand in the U.S as one of the fastest bikes. That same year, Kawasaki dropped the bigger and smaller version of H1 - an H2 bike powered by a 750cc two-stroke triple engine and S1 (250cc), which became a huge success both on and off the racing track.

In 1973, the company launched its first four-stroke 900cc Z1 motorcycle. The monstrous bike offered riders more power, performance, and overhead cams. In subsequent years to come, the 900 Z1 was continuously remodeled to offer more performance and was later renamed the Z-1000. Kawasaki released another impressive bike in 1978, the KZ1300 motorcycle that had a water-cooling and shaft drive. The racing world was not left out of Kawasaki's emerging dominance as they won a total of 7 titles over a period of 3 years, thereby bringing more recognition to the brand.

Increased Recognition

Good things continued to happen to the leading motorcycle manufacturing company, as they released their first supersport Z1100 GP in 1980 and also won the manufacturer's title in the 150cc class ELMWorld Road Racing Championship for the fourth time in a row in 1981.

In 1982, Kawasaki diversified its sales operation by selling the Z400 GP and Z1000R to the Japanese and American markets. The company's most notable and first liquid-cooled engine, GPZ 900R was produced in 1983. The bike achieved the feat of 250km/h and was later renamed Ninja in 1984 to bring in more sales for the company.

Kawasaki's fastest production bike for 5 years, ZZR-110 was launched in 1990. The ZZR-110 came with a 1052cc engine, strong frame, and a decent suspension belt that endeared it to bike racers. Other notable models like the GPz 1100, ABS, and the off-road Super Supra was also introduced by the company in the late 90s.

Global Success

The beginning of the Millenium came with a bang following the increased sales of the Ninja ZX-12R in the U.S in 2000. This powerful beast had a maximum output of 178PS, a 1200cc engine, and an aluminum monocoque frame that made it a beauty to behold. By 2003, Kawasaki launched three more models under the lineup - Ninja ZX 6RR, a street bike Z1000, and the Ninja ZX-6R. The ZX 6RR and ZX 6R were designed to be the quickest circuit bikes in their class and over the next few years, they became the most potent middleweight in the racing industry due to their increased performance.

2004 marked the 20th anniversary of the most famous Kawasaki bike, GPR 900R, and to commemorate the event, the bike was remodeled into the ZX-10R. This supersport model won the "Master Bike" title two times and also emerged victorious in other racing series around the world. In 2006, Kawasaki built its most powerful engine ever, Ninja ZX-14 with an aerodynamic aluminum monocoque chassis that delivered high staggering performance on track events. From 2007 to 2014, the company made a comeback model for all its motorcycle lineups by

adding more features, faster engines, and upgrades in style, design, and performance. In 2015, Kawasaki built the Ninja H2 to celebrate its 50th anniversary in the motorcycle manufacturing industry. The Ninja H2 was a supercharged 1000cc inline-four-cylinder motorcycle that became the star of uncountable racing series all over the world due to its whooping performance and blistering speed of 249mph. The H2R motorcycle was later remodeled for sports racing in the form of H2 SX in 2016. Today, Kawasaki boasts 34 production models, 17 discontinued models, and more than one million motorcycles produced worldwide.

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