

Bultaco History

Over 1,000 riders gathered in the hills above Barcelona on a wet and windy day in late October. But torrential rain couldn't dampen their enthusiasm — they were ready to celebrate the birth of one of Spain's most iconic motorcycles, Bultaco.

Bultaco had a huge impact on the world of motorcycles, with road models like the Tralla and Metralla gathering an army of fans while the TSS road racer, the Pursang motocrosser, the Matador enduro and of course the Sherpa T trials bike made their mark in national and international events. And it all started because of one man's passion for motorcycle sport.

Fifty years ago, don Francisco Xavier Bulto resigned as technical director of Montesa. He had started the company with Pedro Permanyer in 1944, but when Permanyer and the other directors decided to pull out of racing Bulto felt he had no other option.

When word spread that don Francisco was leaving Montesa, his racing team went to production manager Joan Chalamanch's office and asked what he was going to do. "I'm going to suggest that he starts his own motorcycle business," said Chalamanch. "And that we are all behind him."

That was May 17, 1958, and within days work started on a new 125cc single-cylinder 2-stroke motorcycle. Four months later the prototype was ready for testing, and by February 1959 they were ready to go into production. The new company's name was Bultaco — Francisco's telegram signature when he was on business trips for Montesa and a contraction of Bulto and Paco, Francisco's nickname. The "Thumbs Up" gas tank emblem was designed by Paco after he noticed British riders give the signal to show all was well as they flashed past the pits.

The first Bultaco, the Tralla 101, was revealed to the press March 24, 1959. The Tralla —

Spanish for whiplash — was not only a good roadster but also the basis for an effective racer, so it wasn't long before a road race version based on the factory bikes joined the line-up. The resulting Tralla Super Sport in 125 and 250cc versions gave a generation of privateers including Barry Sheene a taste for the Spanish fliers. Sheene's first race was on a Bultaco in 1968, when he was 18.

A visit to the U.S. had shown don Paco there was huge potential for offroad bikes, so for 1960 Bultaco produced the dual-purpose Sherpa N. A team was entered in the 1962 ISDT led by Paco's nephew Oriol Puig Bulto. They came home with two gold medals, and the following year Bultaco entered the prestigious Scottish Six Days Trial. Oriol's bike broke down with an electrical fault, but that gave him the chance to watch maestro Sammy Miller in action on his Ariel "GOV 132." Miller won the event, but was shrewd enough to try a Bultaco. He liked what he saw, and when Ariel announced it was pulling out of competition at the end of 1964, Miller went to Spain and spent 12 hectic days building the first Sherpa T, and eventually signed on with Bultaco.

It was the start of a chain of successes that would lead to 15 years of domination of the sport, with Bultaco winning the European Trials Championship (later World Championship) nine times between 1968 and 1979.

Even so, the factory was forced to shut down in 1979. It reopened in 1980 with government help, but production slowed to a trickle, with only 249 bikes produced in 1984. The end finally came on Feb. 6, 1987, and Paco Bulto died in 1998, aged 86. In total, about 330,000 Bultacos were built in Barcelona.