

Honda history and origin

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"We have now established ourselves on solid ground domestically," said Senior Managing Director Takeo Fujisawa. "Eventually, we'll have to aim to be number one worldwide. So, with that in mind, why don't you go check out the overseas market?"

American Honda shortly after its establishment

The order had thus been given, and Kihachiro Kawashima, then manager of the Sales Section at headquarters, began his preparations to study the Southeast Asian market. It was a logical step for the company to take, since it had within a mere seven years established itself as a top manufacturer in the Japanese motorcycle industry. And now the expansion of exports to overseas markets was a very real possibility, reflecting a shift in Honda's policy from domestic fulfillment to a more international profile, featuring such products as the Dream (in 250 cc and 350 cc versions) and Benly (125 cc).

Honda soon began exporting sample motorcycles, about which Fujisawa was emphatic. "Instead of relying on a trading company," he said, "we should first take a look at the overseas market for ourselves. Then we'll find the best way to do business there."

Honda conducted market surveys in Europe and Southeast Asia from the end of 1956 to early the next year, with the former being covered by Soichiro Honda and Fujisawa and the latter taken by Kihachiro Kawashima.

In Southeast Asia motorcycles and mopeds imported from Europe were making their first appearances in the cities and towns, signaling the emergence of a popular new means of transportation that would soon rival the bicycle. In fact, as the region's economy grew, motorcycles were expected to outstrip bicycles.

Kawashima conducted a survey that lasted for more than three weeks, after which he returned to Japan and reported to Fujisawa that the Southeast Asian market was indeed promising. In return, Fujisawa told Kawashima, "Now, go off to America and check it out," ordering him to conduct a similar survey in the U.S. The country that Kawashima saw was truly the Land of the Automobile. After all, cars were an absolute necessity amid the vast expanses of rural territory, which had for years lacked a viable commuter network of railroads. And motorcycles were seen merely as adjuncts to cars, like toys one could use for leisure or, if one was daring enough, racing.

"I had always thought that motorcycles provided a means of transportation with which one earned a livelihood," Kawashima recalled. "Sure, they doubled as toys from time to time, but mainly they were used for everyday necessities. So, in my view America didn't come across as a country that had really accepted the motorcycle."

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Upon his return from the U.S., Kawashima made a proposal to Fujisawa: "I believe it would be easier to begin with the Southeast Asian market than America."

Fujisawa considered the suggestion for a moment, then turned and gave a firm reply. "On second thought," he said, "let's do America. After all, America is the stronghold of capitalism, and the center of the world's economy. To succeed in the U.S. is to succeed worldwide. On the other hand, if a product doesn't become a hit in America, it'll never be a hit internationally."

"To take up the challenge of the American market may be the most difficult thing to do," Fujisawa concluded, "but it's a critical step in expanding the export of our products."

Fujisawa, though, had already decided not to rely on a trading company, saying he preferred that Honda develop a sales network of its own. Eventually American Honda Motor Co., Inc. (American Honda), was established as a wholly owned sales division of the parent company. Moreover, Fujisawa instructed Kawashima, then just 39 years of age, to relocate to the U.S. as the general manager of the new American company.

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