

IS A LOW COST ATV THE RIGHT UTILITY TOOL FOR TOUGH TIMES?

By James de Havilland

ATVs, or quad bikes if you prefer, have struggled to find a niche in the golf, sports turf and wider amenity sector. It is easy to come up with arguments why this is the case, but does this also mean we are overlooking the merits of these machines?

If an ATV were to be in the dock, charged with not being fit for sports turf and amenity purpose, there would be quite a long list of 'evidence' that could be levelled against it. How about seating for just one person, no weather protection and limited carrying capacity? Then add petrol power as the killer piece of detail. Verdict: These tools are just too limited to appeal the sports turf and amenity sectors.

These arguments have now been used for so long that many may wonder why there is a reason to 're-open' what should be an open and shut case against the ATV. The reality is that these days nobody can afford to just assume a particular tool remains unsuitable for a specific set of task. We live in interesting times, after all.

So, rather than consider what an ATV does not offer it is perhaps worth reconsidering what these tools can do. The first and most relevant point is that they have a light footprint. Fit turf friendly tyres, as opposed to the cleat pattern that enables most ATVs to excel in traversing really tough terrain. Next, inflate the tyres to no more than 0.2 bar/3 psi and you can drive a suitably shod ATV across the finest of turf without the risk of doing any damage.

Now consider this same ATV equipped with a sprayer, and the complete package starts to make a degree of sense. Add the narrow width of these vehicles, the most portly squeezing through a gap of under 1.30m, and it is clear an ATV can access the narrow spots that could well be off limits to a wider utility truck. There is no reason why an ATV could not be used to spray a bowling green.

That said ATVs have a notoriously poor turn radius and a tendency to chew up turf in a tight turn. This is down to the fact that most do without a differential in the rear axle and, in the case of the

widely available 4WD models, the front wheels not only have a relatively modest turn angle but a fair degree of resistance to overcome too. The words 'clean', 'tight' and 'turn' are not usually blended together in a sentence describing ATVs.

So, after coming up with a potential use for an ATV, the next paragraph counters it with an equally valid reason to look at something else. The point that is missed, however, is that not all ATVs are 4WD models and that some have a rear differential. Step forward the Kawasaki KLF300.

Weighing in at around 240kg, fuelled up and ready to go, the little KLF300 will pull at trailed load approaching 320kg, is nominal 15kW/20hp 270cc petrol engine driving through a five-speed semi-automatic transmission that allows for a gentle spraying pace through to a top speed that will easily meet the demands of most users.

Of equal importance, this ATV is the only mechanical transmission utility 2WD model the writer knows off to be fitted with a locking rear differential. With drive to both rear wheels



Kawasaki offers its KLF 300 in 2WD form, this model benefitting from a rear differential. This enables this ATV to turn not just pretty tightly but more cleanly too. With moderate care, amenity operators can see many years of service from an ATV, a point to consider when looking at true operating costs.



Trailed attachments have the added advantage of fitting behind both ATVs and utility vehicles. On level terrain a light, 2WD ATV will pull around 250kg, more powerful models coping with double that even over rougher terrain.

C-Dax. ATVs are more than just a means of getting from A to B, with a range of attachments from manufacturers to include C-Dax and Logic greatly extending what can be done with them. A mounted sprayer is a key application.





The agricultural sector has taken the ATV to heart, livestock farms in particular exploiting the ability of these units to get to hard to access parts of most farms. Note the use of gloves, hard hat and eye protection, a key basic requirement that should be adhered to.

engaged, the turn radius is 2.9m. With the diff in its default unlocked mode, the KLF300 will turn within a more modest 2.6m. Slow for the turn, easing the KLF300 around on a hint of throttle, and the turn will be clean too.

Anyone who knows their ATVs will realise the KLF300 is based upon a model that first saw the light of day way back in the 1980s.

The current 2009 machines are well proven in other words. And, at around £3,900, ex VAT, they continue to make a good case for themselves as an affordable, potentially turf friendly, ATV.

Kawasaki, as with the likes of Honda, Suzuki and Yamaha, do not offer ATVs in road legal, quadricycle form. If you want a KLF300 to travel down the road, it will do so on the back of a trailer. There are ways to make a non-homologated ATV road legal – farmers have done so for years - but the restrictions are such that if road travel is a priority it is probably better to go for a homologated quadricycle.

In broad outline, a quadricycle will have its power output restricted to no more than 15kW, be fitted with a catalytic convertor, and have lighting equipment suitable for highway use; in other words indicators and road legal headlights that dip to the left. Entry level models are available from what appears to be an ever growing range of importers, KYMCO being among the most established in the UK.

So how much will you need to pay for a road going ATV? As an example, the 2WD KYMCO

MXU300 RL, a CVT dual-range automatic designed for heavier use, has a sticker price of £3,043, ex VAT and registration fees. Well under £4K on the road in other words.

Larger models, including the 2/4WD MXU 500 RL have output restricted to under 15kW too, but the larger engine has more 'oomph'. The penalty is a much heavier price tag of £5,699 ex VAT and registration fees.

So what about other ATVs and the choice of utility models on offer? At the extreme end of the power scale are 50hp plus v-twin engine models. Units made by Polaris and Can-Am can be specced up in two-seater and load platform guise and ready for the road too. There is a far broader spectrum of ATVs on the market than there was at the turn of the century.

The key point is not to dismiss an ATV because it has perceived weaknesses but to rather take a look at what an ATV can do. Fit a tow hitch, and larger models will pull up to half a metric tonne. Add a winch, and an ATV can be used to carry out jobs to include light tree clearance.

The rear rack can be fitted with more than just a spray tank and the hitch can operate a light top dresser. You can even tow powered mowers or light gang sets.

The biggest reason not to consider an ATV will remain the light utility vehicle, but the latter will cost considerably more. If you are looking for a light runabout that can be used for a range of light duties, perhaps now is the time to take another look at an ATV.

Manual or automatic?

Automatic CVT drive is now widely found as the only transmission option on a broad range of ATVs. The once universal semi-automatic manual transmission with a foot operated gear shift remains an option from some manufacturers, Honda resolutely sticking to this format with ESP, electronic shifting, adding a modern twist to a proven concept.

The key reason 'manual' transmissions remain popular is that it is easier to keep a relatively constant speed. Although a CVT transmission can settle to a reasonably fixed working speed in level going, as it will with a utility vehicle, a geared drive and centrifugal clutch combination seems to do it better.

Honda now offer the 420 Fourtrax AT automatic as an alternative to its foot and push button shift 420 siblings, the new model arguably proving the best of both CVT and manual transmissions. This is because the ATV can be operated in a manual ESP mode to enable the operator to select and hold a given forward speed.