

3 REASONS WHY ARAI HAVE REFITTED THE BAR

By Adam Wheeler

THE **MX-V** IS THE FIRST OFF-ROAD HELMET FROM ARAI FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS AND WITH THE LID ABOUT TO HIT DEALERS AND SHOPS WE WERE INVITED TO HOLLAND TO SEE HOW THE JAPANESE FIRM HAS MOVED AHEAD ONCE MORE...

Arai
HELMET
MX-V
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FEATURE

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STILL THE SAFEST LID...

Arai's AIC (Arai Inspiration Centre) in Hove, UK, at first glance does not look like anything spectacular but once inside and among the features of the facility – a vast helmet hall of fame, demonstration areas and test machinery – the real stamp of class is in the sum of parts. Much like the company's lids. It is in the former truck garage that Arai Europe have gathered a smattering of media from across Europe to introduce their MX-V; an overdue but comprehensive addition to their helmet cannon from the Japanese privately-owned firm with more than 63 years of experience.

The MX-V replaces the VX-3. While holding the lid it is definitely carries a more modern design, has the same build quality feel and weight as normal Arais (so not the lightest on the market at a little over 1.4kg for the large unit but definitely the most robust) and still has that distinctive 'dome' shell. Arai has not 'broken' one of their 350kg moulds with this fresh product, created from scratch, but the MX-V is an eyebrow raising upgrade of the first order.

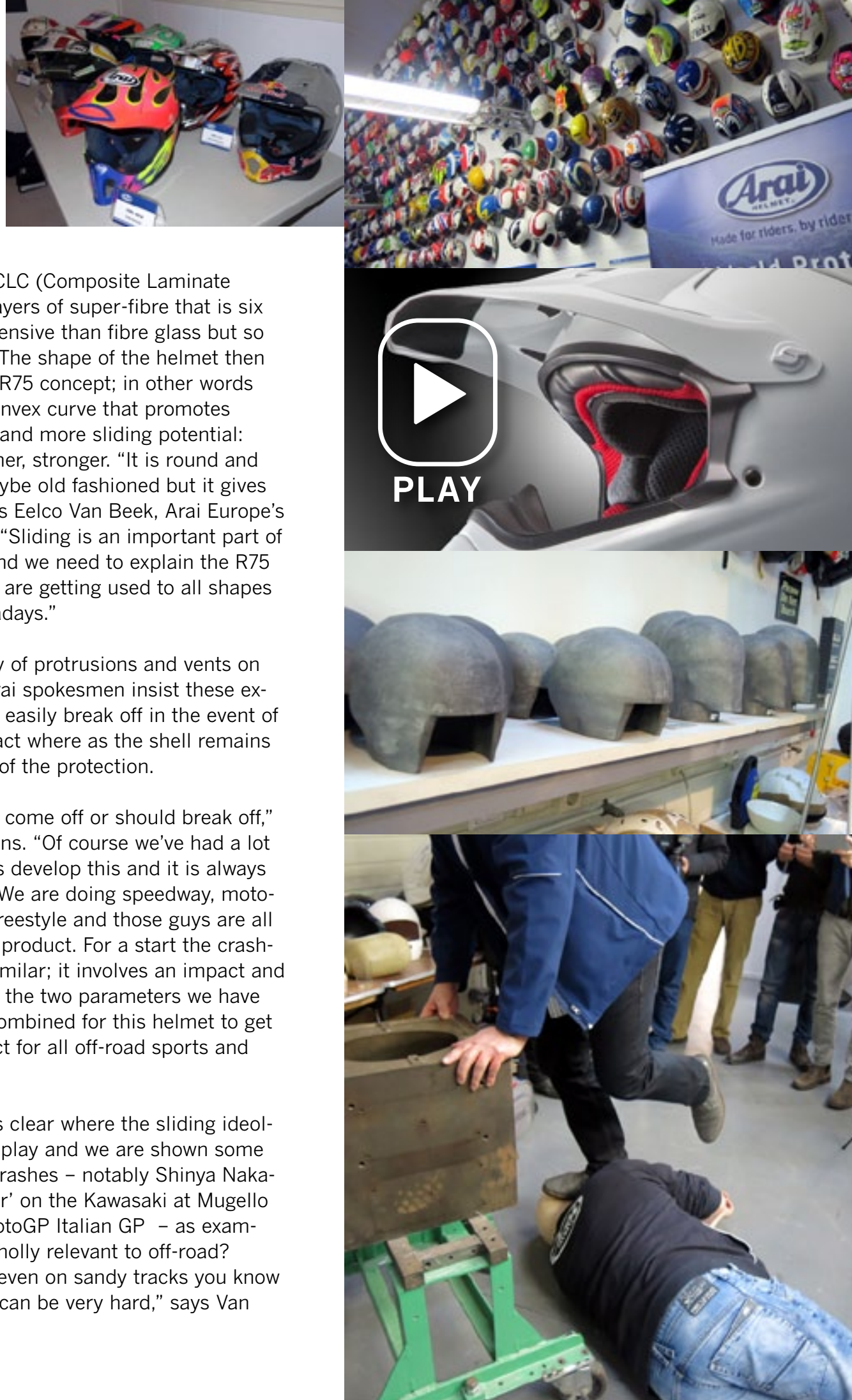
At the heart of the helmet – and all Arais – is the combination of the rockhard outer shell and world patented Polystyrene inner shell. The company pour all of their belief and fabrication into this synergy. We watch while an Arai employee demonstrates the mould process and then places an outer shell composite over his head, lies on the ground and invites someone to stand on top of him. We are then handed cutaways of flexible plastic shells in comparison (that make up many of the lighter and cheaper helmets on shop shelves) and they feel as safe as a paper bag. It was at that point that we were pretty sold on the forces that go into the MX-V.

The shell uses CLC (Composite Laminate Construction) layers of super-fibre that is six times more expensive than fibre glass but so much stronger. The shape of the helmet then embraces their R75 concept; in other words a continuous convex curve that promotes a rounder form and more sliding potential: rounder, smoother, stronger. "It is round and smooth and maybe old fashioned but it gives protection," says Eelco Van Beek, Arai Europe's Sales Manager. "Sliding is an important part of helmet safety and we need to explain the R75 because people are getting used to all shapes and forms nowadays."

There are plenty of protrusions and vents on the MX-V but Arai spokesmen insist these external additions easily break off in the event of a crash or contact where as the shell remains the focus point of the protection.

"Everything can come off or should break off," Van Beek explains. "Of course we've had a lot of riders help us develop this and it is always a compromise. We are doing speedway, motocross, enduro, freestyle and those guys are all using the same product. For a start the crashes are largely similar; it involves an impact and slide. Those are the two parameters we have looked at and combined for this helmet to get the right product for all off-road sports and activities."

On the road it is clear where the sliding ideology comes into play and we are shown some pretty graphic crashes – notably Shinya Nakano's 'fastest ever' on the Kawasaki at Mugello for the 2004 MotoGP Italian GP – as examples. But is it wholly relevant to off-road? "Definitely and even on sandy tracks you know that the terrain can be very hard," says Van Beek.



ARAI MX-V

"We asked ourselves whether this is something we could apply to off-road as well as street and we came to the answer that for sure it could work. You have to keep sliding and minimise that first impact."

Despite the march of technology Arai still claim that polystyrene inner shell is the best-performing and versatile material at their disposal and their secret formulation and experience in working with the substance is one of the factors in differentiation with their rivals. "There are many other materials such as memory foams," Van Beek continues. "Even with memory foam for it to return to shape it will take seconds and in a crash you won't have that time. Also after a crash and damage to the outer shell then you won't want to keep the helmet. We are very interested to see if someone can come up with that 'super material' that can outstrip polystyrene."

The list of features does not end there and – naturally – it seems like there has been a plethora of tests for everything connected towards making a better helmet: higher penetration areas and test-busting resistance, a lower centre of gravity and liner material of different intensities, much more efficient venting, consideration for goggle strap and plastic screws as opposed to the vogue aluminium because the "peak, which is slightly bigger and wider, is designed to break" advocates Van Beek. Arai were one of the first to use the Emergency Release System based around the inner padding sections that can easily be popped out. A facial contour application reduces pressure on the soft parts of the face and lowers force on the jawbone for more comfortable and better fit. Dry cool material inside the helmet finishes off an item that sits happily alongside and at the end the impressive range of off-road helmets that Arai have unveiled over the past forty years. It might have been some time in the making but as the Arai Europe MD, Ingmar Stroeven, says: "we are ready when the product is ready."

FEATURE

2 PRIORITIES...

It seems a little hard to believe in this day and age as companies grasp for market share, particularly in industries like motorcycling that continue to be surrounded by adversity (the environment, legislation, economy, changes in consumerism), that Arai persist to foster a genuine belief in product before the profit. Astonishingly it actually seems to be this way and lends further credence to the half-decade gap from the VX-3 until the MX-V.

“Things are difficult, especially in the economical situation we are in today. The good thing is that Arai is not a company with shareholders that apply pressure with the only goal of increasing market share or profit margins,” says MD Ingmar Stroeven. “It is still a family-owned company and the head of the firm, Michio Arai, has a very strong focus. He does not want to compromise anything when it comes to safety and protection and if that means being one of the smaller brands in the market then we have to accept that. By the same token if the market picks up then we have to be a position where we can increase for the future. That is the philosophy and it will not change.”

The conviction over the ‘reason-for-being’ behind the MX-V and Arai’s other helmets (several more new models coming in 2014 and the flagship RX-7GP coming in 2015) is another selling point for the company. It almost seems like a strange tactic but appears to work so far and sensibly the firm have adopted this safety stance as part of their marketing strategy. There is a golden rule in their eyes. Van Beek: “If people only ever look at the shape or the price then you are not going to win but if you start explaining and showing and talking about all the experience we’ve accrued over the years...the fact that we are bikers ourselves, that we are a privately-owned company...basi-

ARAI FACT

All Arais are virtually hand made and take 16-18 hours each through 27 steps.

cally we know. There are people at Arai who have been working here a long, long time and it is difficult to consider moving to another company when you know the philosophy, passion and dedication to making helmets. Design is important, but it is number two. Function over design is crucial.”

Arai’s history dates back to pre-second world war in Tokyo as a hat maker. Their influence on helmet protection and into motorsport, four wheels and two, mean that their proven reach places them as one of the leading, most trustworthy and durable names. “I’ve worked for Arai for about twenty years now and every year you see brands coming up and others disappearing,” Stroeven says. “Some stay, but there are only a few. In the long run we keep on doing the same thing and it works.”





3

RACING PROOF...

ARAI FACT

Arai make one off-road helmet for every six on-road in their overall production numbers



Like only a few other companies such as Alpinestars, Dainese and other helmet brands like Shoei and AGV Arai use and profit from the racing world. Dani Pedrosa, Cal Crutchlow, Colin Edwards, Nicky Hayden, Hiroshi Aoyama, Maverick Vinales and Jonathan Rea are just some of the Arai names on tarmac while Joel Roelants has been spotted using the white MX-V in MXGP motos this season. The CLS Monster Energy Kawasaki team – Tonus, Ferrandis, Lupino and Covington - run Arais in MX2.

Racing is a relatively unwilling test bed for the company at extreme levels but they are present through a fondness of being part of the scene. Many might forget that back in 1981 they were market leaders in 'cross and the first with detachable mouth-guard. Racing is where Arai take pride in showing their wares. Stroeven: "We don't make special helmets for racers and then a general one for consumers. The products are exactly the same. I remember a story from the time of Kevin Schwantz. It was at Assen and he'd crashed a couple of times. I had just started to work for Arai and we'd run out of helmets at the track so I went to a local dealer to buy a Schwantz replica! We took it back to the track and put the sponsor logos on it and that was his race helmet."

"We come from racing," he insists. "There is a saying in the paddock: 'good helmets pay crap and crap helmets pay good'. We try to convince people that safety is an issue. Someone like Marc De Reuver has admitted he might get more money with another brand but with an Arai he gets paid back in terms of good protection."

De Reuver and Roelants were at the AIC on the day of the launch. The Belgian has suffered several concussions in his career most notably in the season where he won his first and sole Grand Prix in 2012. "I've tested the Arai a lot already – even yesterday I crashed quite hard! All the times I've ridden with Arai I've never had a concussion or anything like that," he vindicated. "I've used different brands and not been so lucky. It is hard to get a good result on the track with a concussion!"

You cannot scan along a Grand Prix gate these days without spotting at least four different makes of neck brace. In light of some comments by segment leader Leatt that helmet companies could do more to harmonise with neck protection we asked Van Beek if the MX-V had been created with this area in mind. "We know it works with a lot of systems but it cannot always match," he conceded. "It depends on the length of your neck. It has not been a major factor in the development of our protection. We still believe that the neck should be able to move and should not be so rigid."

What about some of the more interesting helmet innovations in the paddock? 6D helmets seem to be gaining good reviews and feedback for their nodule system. "It is interesting that people think about new ways," offered Van Beek. "If you look at polystyrene then we have been using this since the 1930s and have imagined many times that there must be another material offering better protection but the reality is that there isn't. Very often people talk about rotational forces but there is no way of really measuring this. There are no guidelines for it. I'm curious [about 6D] because you have this distance between the inner and outer shell, so what happens in a bigger crash? Those springs are designed for a certain strength and compression. What happens if you have an accident with much more energy involved? We haven't tested it. It is good that people are thinking of new ways but we still believe that this is the safest direction for riders."





THE BOSS SPEAKS **INGMAR STROEVEN, MD, ARAI EUROPE**

The general message and philosophy around Arai is the preoccupation with the product over any business interest. As a businessman can this approach be a bit frustrating? Also because of the cultural divide with the Japanese and Europe...?

I suppose it is but then that is part of our role here in Europe. We have to be between that strong belief from the Japanese side and then the other side with all the distributors, dealers and market demands and a more commercial perspective. I would not say 'frustrating' is the right word but sometimes we think 'why can't we innovate quicker?' or 'the market is ready, why can't we do that product release sooner?' but in Japan the idea is that we are ready when the product is ready, not the other way around. You could see it as a frustration but if you understand what Arai is about then it is also a very nice thing.

Arai always seemed to have such a heavy and important link with racing...

We use it as one of our marketing tools but I think that Arai basically comes from the racing scene anyway. We do a lot with our racing service and have one person in each F1, MotoGP and World Superbike. We invest a lot in terms of making the helmets and them available to those athletes with us. Maybe in the past racing was even more important in terms of marketing and promotion but nowadays it is quite hard to find any races live on television because most are pay-per-view so perhaps

there is less scope. However for us it is still one of the main things to be involved in.

There has been a lack of push in off-road though...

I think for the last two years we have been in a position where we have been 'waiting' for a new model that could catch the interest of consumers. We were not strongly involved in the world championship [FIM MXGP] but we were quite dominant in the Enduro market and in the UK especially we had a high percentage of riders using Arai. With the MX-V I think we have a great product to be able to do more in Grand Prix and focus on more racing.

With so much choice for consumers now what is the best way for you to promote this new model?

It is tricky because safety is not a sexy argument! Although everybody wears a helmet and are mindful of its role to nevertheless always focus on protection and different safety levels is something that is not easily explainable to consumers. They still look at the brand, like the model, the colours, the fit and they accept it. That is also why we have the inspiration centre in Holland – the AIC – to train a lot of dealers. Over the years we have had hundreds here to show and teach them the differences between the helmets and ones that offer better protection than say a plastic one that is on the market. Gaps in quality is still a subject we feel we need to educate people better.

You see so many options for helmets now. Is it a tough market?

It is a market that is getting smaller. There are less motorcyclists and bikes being sold and every person that buys a helmet and chooses another brand is another consumer you are losing. The bigger picture is that the motorcycle industry is reducing. In Holland you need to do three exams to be able to ride any kind of bike on the road. Standards are getting tougher every year. In the past I think a lot of young people liked to ride a bike but nowadays I doubt if that mentality is the same.

That's quite worrying really as it isn't a beneficial situation for anybody in the industry...

Yeah, the market will get smaller and that is likely to happen. I think the motorcycle industry in general needs to promote itself. It is good that some manufacturers at the moment are offering new models and affordable ones, not just the big, fast expensive things. The smaller bikes are apparently riding well and that could be the way to go.

So how do you feel about Arai's position in 2014?

I'm convinced that things will improve, talking specifically about Arai. I think we had some issues in a few countries we are represented in and these have been cleared. People are getting more motivated and optimistic in general. Even places like Spain where unemployment was reaching crazy levels at one point the buying level is slowly going up. It is going to be better than it has been in the last couple of years.

ARAI FACT

It takes 12 minutes for a Japanese worker to make the Arai outer shells by placing fabrics (like Kevlar) inside five moulds. 125 helmets are produced each day by just one employee. The shells are removed from the casing, weighted and check for imperfections. The shells are cut by laser as opposed to water to maintain the fibre contact.





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