

Big-bore trail bikes have a tendency to make a chap's chickens all come home to roost, as the doom-laden expression goes. Applying them to on-going, off-road, situations rather than comfortably assessing their streetwise personal image intensification abilities can be exceedingly risky without the rider skill level of yer average Arthur Browning or Serge Bacou. The first time I was foolish enough to apply self and a test sample of the 'old' XT550 Yam to a competitive environment — a fairly undemanding club enduro on army land in Hampshire — the result was damaged body and bent bike. An incident involving chucking me off and then chasing after, cartwheeling all the way down a sandy hillside gully, ended when the bike caught up and bit me at the bottom. The memory and scars linger on.

Since the two-valve XT500 and four-valve XT550 defined the species though, a great deal of improvement has taken place and Yamaha has been challenged by other manufacturers producing their own dual-purpose mega-thumpers. All the bikes are endowed with more power than most of us could safely handle on the trail, and a vast array of motocross-inspired suspension and ancillary equipment. In assembling a collection of this year's state-of-art beasts, we set out to discover whether the improvements are real. Amazingly, none of us became burdens on the National Health Service as a result of this endeavour.

You'd think that there couldn't be many technical variations on the Big Banger theme but Yamaha, Suzuki and Kawasaki have found a surprising number of different routes towards what one assumes is a standard set of design parameters — spreading the torque as thickly as jam on a buttie, maximising the power and minimising the weight. In some cases of detail, though, it's fairly obvious that they either got lost on the way or weren't bothering to be serious, particularly in the critical dirt-orientated area of weight...

Yamaha's motor boasts the longest developmental background and set the ground rules of one big slug shuffling up and down according to bangs in the massive bore, breathing in and out through four valves. Both the Yam and the Suzuki DR rely on single, chain-driven,



Willis weightlifts the odds as the boys indulge in healthy group activities . . .

overhead cams but Kawasaki went for two-upmanship. The KL produces significantly louder whirring upstairs, from its dual cams. Wet-liner liquid cooling also sets the Kwack apart, allowing a higher compression to offset what it gives away in capacity to the others, and the electric foot is unique, too. All this gimmickry might impress browsers through brochures but only bruisers will learn to live with the flab it adds on, unfortunately.

The days of big-bore singles drowning in petrol if the throttle's cranked open too swiftly have long gone. The XT600 employs the Yamaha Dual Induction System, rechristened (sic) 'YIDS' in an attempt to provoke the wrath of the Jewish Board of Deputies. This twin-choke rig harnesses a conventional slide carb feeding just one inlet valve at low revs to a CV unit sharing the same float bowl, which chimes in through the other valve as engine speed picks up.

Kawasaki and Suzuki have successfully circumvented such complications with, respectively, 40mm Keihin and 38mm Mikuni flat-slide carbs of ultra-modern efficiency, losing nothing in the process despite having to kink their big inlet orifices owing to the proximity of rear suspension components (the Yam's shock passes between the tracts connecting carb throats to airbox . . .)

The Suzuki's claim to individuality is its TSCC head (twin-swirl combustion chamber) which has a spark plug for each pair of inlet and exhaust valves. This may keep

the home fires burning well but it does fuck-all to improve ease of lighting the conflagration. The worst consumer complaint about all these motors is the degree of persuasion necessary to get life bursting forth and the DR definitely wears the dunce's cap. They all own automatic decompressors linked to kickstarts but the Yam is the only half-sweet starter, the other two demanding 'BBB' treatment (Bloody Big Boot). The Kwack's electric hoof, of course, takes away this pain and anguish but its value when the bike is stalled, half-buried in some revolting quagmire, is completely undermined 'cos it ain't directly turning the crank like a primary kick, so neutral has to be laboriously sought in the box of cogs.

All the bikes carry power tags in excess of forty ponies and all of them, undoubtedly, produce considerably less at the back wheel. We didn't subject them to the dreaded dyno because, by the time our feeble organisational skills had found time, the test nails were in varying states of dilapidation and it wouldn't have been fair. They were, however, all up and running for MIRA abuse — until Roland Brown, well-known failed wheelie-king, modified the DR that is — and the face-off was quite interesting. The Kwack's double knockers, high compression and big juicer combined to give it a clear quarter-mile edge but its top speed was underwhelming. The Yam was slower to rev out and didn't sound happy screaming top-end songs but nevertheless cracked the ton and

was fastest by a slight margin over the Suzuki. The latter was slowest off the line but also just scored its century. Performance figures like these are pretty damn meaningless for casting an eye in the direction of dirt potential, but for road use suggest that the KL is sharpest for urban swordplay and the DR is probably the most competent high-speed bike. As I've said, the XT goes a tad quicker but it shakes and complains ominously at such velocities. . .

The various chassis designs are now 'sorted' to a point unimaginable to anybody who bounced around on early trail plonkers. Compromise geometry produces steering quick enough to go round rather than through organic obstacles without scuppering reasonable straight-line stability on fast tarmac. All of 'em have high centres of gravity, imposing inevitable 'slamming trapdoor' cornering tendencies in normal road use. The Suzuki's let's-pretend, twenty litre, desert tank and monstrous seat height, along with the Kwack's radiators, water jacket and sackful of cylinder head internals make them the most afflicted: the Yam feels small and nimble by comparison. But it's all swings and roundabouts because both Kwack and DR will scratch merrily on dry road, the Suzuki even being capable of decking its sidestand bracket without too much staining of trousers. On the other hand, front wheel lightness hinders the Yam's cornering confidence tho' this is translated into a big advantage off-road.

Being honest, the motley crop of Bridgestone and Dunlop trail tyres fitted to the bikes are responsible for a large chunk of handling predictability. They really are getting impressive on anything but the greasiest of surfaces but, once again, the nature of compromise means they're getting progressively less useful in the mud, blood and berms.

Suspension advances stand out like a sore bum — a thing you're far less likely to acquire now thanks to the imposition of alloy swingers a-go-go and each manufacturer's long-travel and rising-rate rear systems, matched by air-assisted front legs. Muscling what are still heavy old weapons about comes a lot easier when, as with modern motocross utensils, the bike is set up to do most of the work for you. On these lumps, though, no-brain scrambling technique is strictly inadvisable

Photography Tony Sleep

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Big trailsters are nowt if not visually loud. Decals, acronyms and suspension labels assault the eye . . .

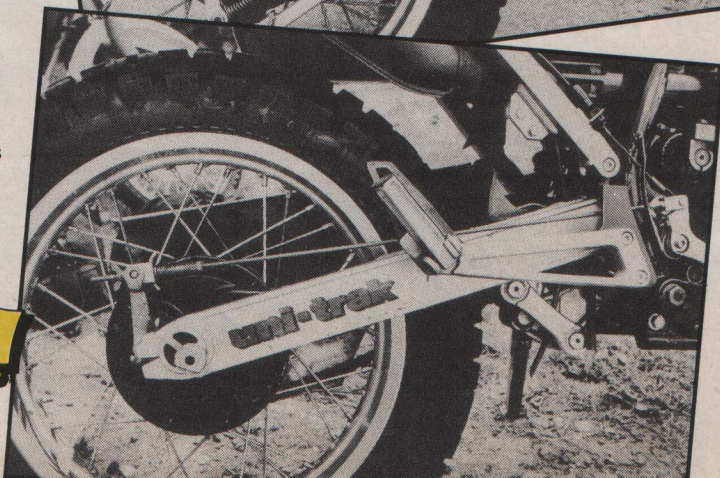
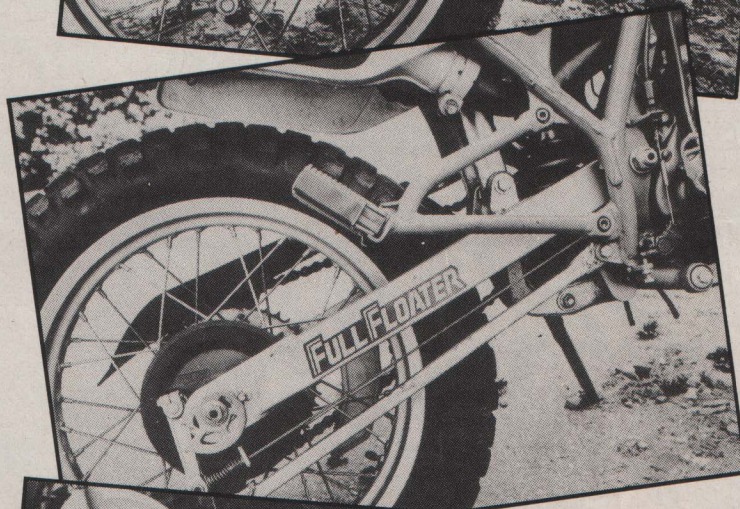
because getting it *wrong* and ending up wearing the bike can lead to permanent disabilities, but more of that later. Needless to say, suspension is veering towards the too-soft for roadwork but wallowing about can be eliminated on all three by winding up some rear pre-load. The front ends are a different matter, unless you feel like blowing in enough air to threaten the seals, and the KL stood out as the one most liable to death-defying front dive when braking.

The anchors, of course, are now another *de rigeur* feature in that Yamaha, Kawasaki and Suzuki have tacked excellent front discs on. It's nice to finally see trail bikes that can stop within the ever-extending limits of their tyres on the highway and real holeshot heroes might use all the brakes off-road, but it's worth remembering that dirt racing starlets can afford to change pads as often as under-pants. Just one day's gentle trail riding through sandy terrain will kiss the brakes goodbye, even if you never use them. The discs

pick grit up and feed it past the pads like grinding paste.

Using photography as the excuse to exploit that rare 1985 occurrence — a sunny day — we took the bikes off down to the Hampshire border country, an area harbouring the nearest large grouping of legal green lanes to Sin City. A spread of rider agility spanning novice to has-been, with me lurking as never-was-but-keeps-on-trying in the middle, and frequent swapping around, produced a reasonably comparative picture of trail behaviour. As we could have guessed, *misbehaviour* is still a better word.

Mounting anticipatory fear was arrested by a pub lunch *before* we started, but weary reality caught up fast. Heading down the aptly nicknamed 'Boulder Alley', a long overgrown downhill track that's been washed out into nothing but a rock-strewn gully, it became obvious that all the 600s wee far too high-g geared for judicious plonking. Riding the clutch and virtually running astride the bikes, wildly



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BANG

thrashing limbs fending off the stonework, were team orders. The Yam, slim, comparatively light overall and certainly lighter on the front end, coped best whilst the KL, pulling the tallest of first gears, was the worst pig. Intimidated by its lorry-like demeanour we'd all fought bitterly *not* to ride the Suzuki, but, in fact, the holder of the shortest straw survived remarkably well... for the time being. At the bottom, in a leafy glade graced with a small riverbed, we decided to pounce about for relatively safe pictures, but soon learnt our mistake. Firstly, the location was actually a humidity trap full of hungry horse flies and secondly the DR began to make us hate it.

It began by stalling in midstream and then the hot engine absolutely refused to start again. Having smartly forgotten such subtleties as tools, we were unable to extract the myriad spark plugs for oracle-like examination or drying so we had to wait for it to cool down. The flies tucked in with relish. Eventually, one of us kicked it viciously enough to fire up and we wobbled off towards Frensham Common, which is crossed by an undulating soft sand blast. There's only one legal route so if you venture out, make sure the map's the right way up 'cos the place is rotten with nubile rubbing something interesting along horses' backs and righteously aggressive

wardresses fending off aspirant Paris-Dakar entrants in navigational error mode, using the full weight of the law. Things were no better, proving beyond doubt that big-bore trail bangers are either for experts, idiots or poseurs. The XT, KL and DR all possessed the abundance of welly necessary to get going in sand and that was only part of the problem.

Wound up and then kicked up a few cogs, they'd growl along like good 'uns, cracking on speed in a manner so alarming that I grew decidedly nervous; not to say shit-scared. The Kawasaki's willingness to rev and its high ratios were the most frightening whilst the Yamaha's superior bottom end, which at least

allowed it to chug amiably through power-sapping sand, and its manoeuvrability inspired the most confidence — although none of them inspired *much*.

At the root of this aggro was the necessity to steer with body-language and back wheel stomp application rather than front end input on sand. Accepted wisdom for the type of terrain is to keep weight at the back in fast going, power on and pray for approximately accurate changes of direction. Too much or too little welly application or the wrong rider weight disposition and there's only one place to go — on your ear. Trouble is, if you're moving at all, rather than just digging a burial slit with a

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rabidly spinning back wheel, you're moving quite fast on these cycles so carelessness costs lives. Basically, the bikes are just too big and heavy to take risks on. The heaviest of the lot, by the way, isn't the Suzuki as we'd expected. The gizmo-laden Kwack slams over 360lbs onto your leg when it goes down, as I discovered and felt after a short burst of over-confidence at Frensham. That's just *too* much for any trail bike (I couldn't lift it without assistance to crawl from under) and makes all its silly fancy bits like 'works' alloy sidestand and eccentric spindle mounts for high-speed competition chain adjustment a giggle and nothing else.

Back in the evening sunshine

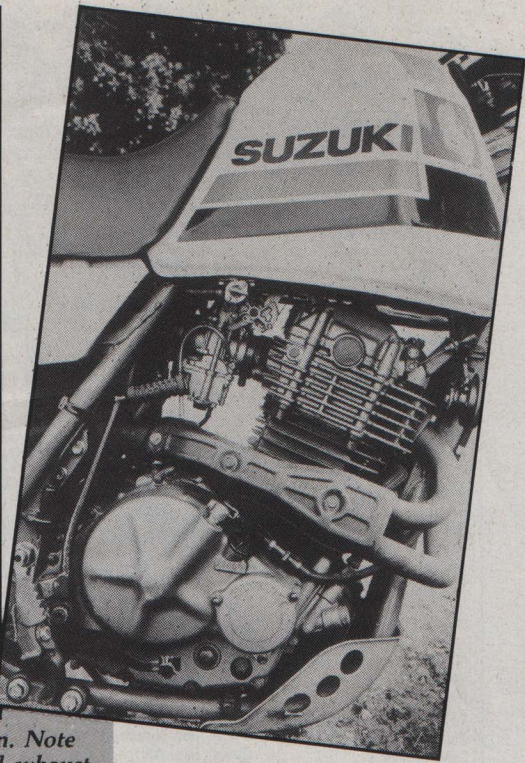
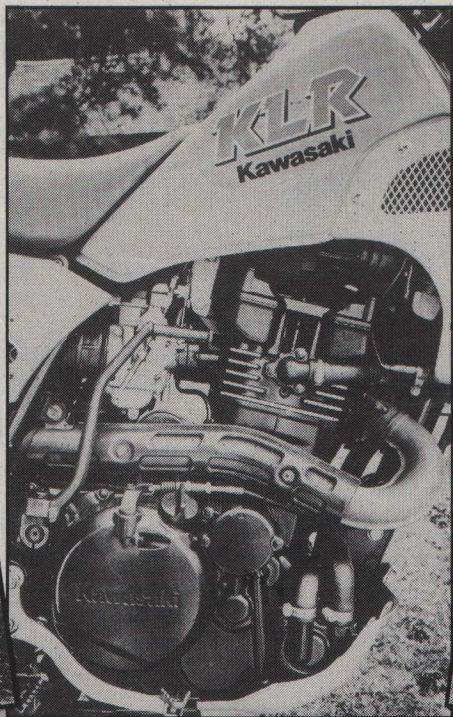


Mixing three doses of 600cc plonk with sand turned out to be a high-risk equation, tho' the Yam projected least fear

on the pub lawn, filthy and disgusting motorcycles loaded onto truck and a steady gargling punctuating the conversation, we agreed that Yamaha's four-stroke dirt banger pedigree still puts it out in front, even if the comical plastic air scoops that replaced the Tenere's oil cooler do offend aesthetic sensibilities. The Suzuki DR600, which *has* got an oil cooler if you're fascinated by such things, comes second in the dirt league despite reluctance to start and the Kawasaki, er, has the best motocross rip-off styling, considering it's safer on the road. Oh well, a couple of years spent body building might tell a totally different story. ■

CHUFF.

BANG!



Three separate motive routes to the single solution. Note practical, if not pretty, seam-welded stainless steel exhaust on the Kwack water bottle

bike

CHECKOUT

YAMAHA XT600

Price (inc taxes).....	£1925
Guarantee.....	12 months parts and labour
Engine.....	4-stroke SOHC 4-valve single
Bore x stroke.....	95x84mm
Capacity.....	595cc
Comp. ratio.....	N/A
Carburation.....	Teikei Y27PV twin choke
Oil capacity.....	N/A
Clutch.....	Wet multiplate
Primary drive.....	Gear
Gearbox.....	5-speed
Electrics.....	12V

KAWASAKI KL600R

Price (inc taxes).....	£1949
Guarantee.....	12 months parts and labour
Engine.....	Liquid-cooled, 4-valve, 4-stroke DOHC single
Bore x stroke.....	96x78mm
Capacity.....	564cc
Comp. ratio.....	9.5 to 1
Carburation.....	Keihin CVK 40
Oil capacity.....	2.0 litres
Clutch.....	Wet multiplate
Primary drive.....	Gear
Gearbox.....	5-speed
Electrics.....	Alternator/12V/14Ah Battery

SUZUKI DR600

Price (inc taxes).....	£1999
Guarantee.....	12 months parts and labour
Engine.....	Liquid-cooled, 4-valve, OHC, TSCC, single
Bore x stroke.....	94x85mm
Capacity.....	589cc
Comp. ratio.....	8.5 to 1
Carburation.....	Mikuni VM 38SS
Oil capacity.....	2.3 litres
Clutch.....	Wet multiplate
Primary drive.....	Gear
Gearbox.....	5-speed
Electrics.....	Alternator/12V/5Ah battery.

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres	
Front.....	Bridgestone 3.0x21
Rear.....	Bridgestone 4.60x18
Brakes	
Front.....	Hydraulic disc
Rear.....	SLS drum
Suspension	
Front.....	Air-assisted fork. 255 mm travel
Rear.....	Monocross rising-rate 234mm travel

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres	
Front.....	Dunlop K750 90/90-21
Rear.....	Dunlop K750 130/80-17
Brakes	
Front.....	Single 250mm disc
Rear.....	Drum
Suspension	
Front.....	Air-assisted fork. 250 mm travel
Rear.....	Unitrak monoshock system. 220mm travel

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres	
Front.....	Bridgestone 100/80-21
Rear.....	Bridgestone 130/80-17
Brakes	
Front.....	Disc
Rear.....	Drum
Suspension	
Front.....	Air-assisted fork
Rear.....	Full floater monoshock system

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....	1435mm
Overall width.....	N/A
Seat height.....	860mm
Weight	
(inc 1 gal fuel).....	302 lbs
Fuel capacity.....	11 litres

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....	1470mm
Overall width.....	875mm
Seat height.....	870mm
Weight	
(inc 1 gal fuel).....	361lbs
Fuel capacity.....	11.5 litres

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....	1465mm
Overall width.....	875mm
Seat height.....	N/A
Weight	
(inc 1 gal fuel).....	329 lbs
Fuel capacity.....	21 litres

PERFORMANCE

Top speed in 1/2 mile, prone.....	97.54 mph
Upright.....	91.09 mph
Best one way.....	102.34 mph
Standing 1/4 mile (mean).....	14.52secs/86.93 mph
(One way).....	14.04 secs/92.09 mph
1/4 mile roll on from 50 mph	
(Mean).....	84.17 mph
(One way).....	89.70 mph
Top gear.....	58.58 mph
Fuel consumption, overall.....	54.6mpg
Speedo accuracy	
At ind. 30mph.....	27 mph
At ind. 50mph.....	47 mph
At ind. 70mph.....	66 mph

PERFORMANCE

Top speed in 1/2 mile, prone.....	93.1 mph
Upright.....	87.6 mph
Best one way.....	94.2 mph
Standing 1/4 mile (mean).....	13.79secs/80.15 mph
(One way).....	13.46 secs/82.03 mph
1/4 mile roll on from 50 mph	
(Mean).....	N/A
(One way).....	N/A
Top gear.....	50.64mph
Fuel consumption, overall.....	48.52mpg
Speedo accuracy	
At ind. 30mph.....	28 mph
At ind. 50mph.....	45 mph
At ind. 70mph.....	63 mph

PERFORMANCE

Top speed in 1/2 mile, prone.....	94.92 mph
Upright.....	91.22 mph
Best one way.....	100.05 mph
Standing 1/4 mile (mean).....	14.74secs/87.62 mph
(One way).....	14.27 secs/90.39 mph
1/4 mile roll on from 50 mph	
(Mean).....	86.95 mph
(One way).....	92.39 mph
Top gear.....	N/A
Fuel consumption, overall.....	N/A
Speedo accuracy	
At ind. 30mph.....	28 mph
At ind. 50mph.....	48 mph
At ind. 70mph.....	68 mph