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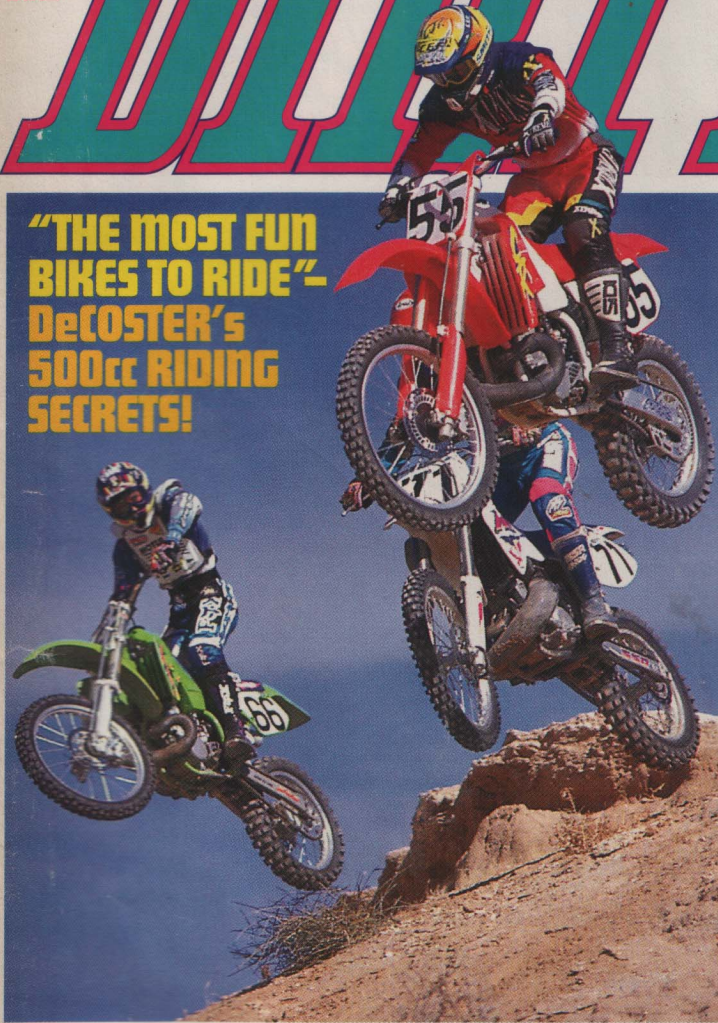
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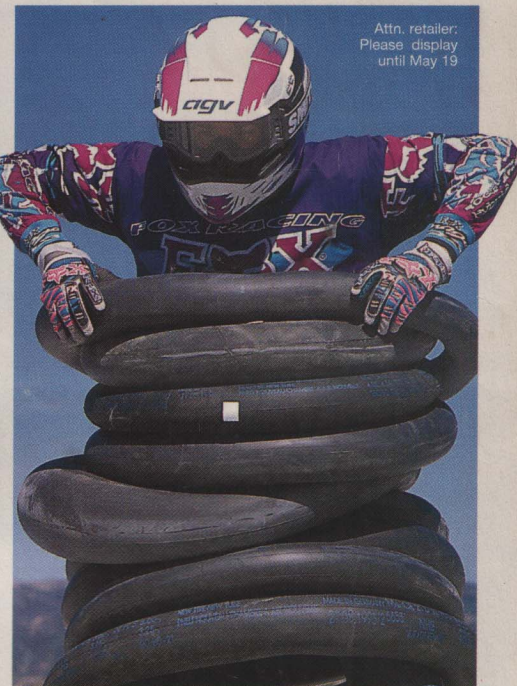
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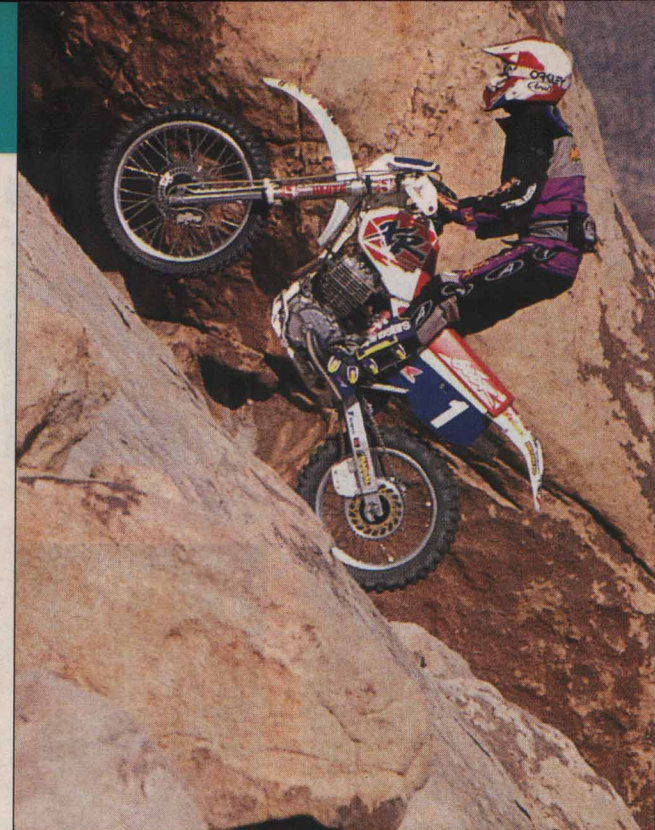
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ON THE COVER: Yes, that's Joe Papa trying to climb out from under an inner tube comparison this month. And yes, those are 500 motocross/off-road bikes leaping into a two-level comparison test, in the same issue as a lightweight enduro bike shootout. And yes, we're looking inside more works bikes. That's us: hopeless yes men. Photos by Joe, Ron and Tim. Color seps by D.I.S.C.

DIRT BIKE Magazine (ISSN 0364-1546; Canada GST #R125009266), May '94, is published monthly by Daisy/Hi-Torque Publishing Company, Inc., with editorial offices at 25233 Anza Dr., Valencia, CA 91355. Subscriptions \$18.98 for 12 issues (one year). Canada and foreign add \$6 additional postage for one year, \$12 for two years. Copyright ©1994 by Daisy/Hi-Torque Publishing Company, Inc. All rights reserved. Nothing in this magazine may be reprinted in whole or in part, by mimeograph or any other means, without the express permission of the publisher. Contributors: Photographic submissions must be 5x7 or 8x10 glossy black and white, or 35mm and larger color slides. Please mark each photo with owner's name and address. Manuscripts should be typewritten. Unsolicited contributions, manuscripts, photographs and illustrations must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Unless special arrangements are made in advance, all published material becomes the sole property of Daisy/Hi-Torque Publishing Company, Inc. The publisher does not assume responsibility for unsolicited material. Second class postage paid at Valencia, CA 91355, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to DIRT BIKE Magazine, P.O. Box 958, Valencia, CA 91380-9058. Printed in USA.



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# NOT FOR THE TIMID

Track-testing the woolly mammoths of motocross

By the staff of DIRT BIKE

We hear that Open-class motocross is a shrinking segment of the sport. Question: Is Open-class motocross getting smaller because so little development is devoted to 500s, or is there so little development because Open motocross is getting smaller?

The answer depends on who you ask. Honda and Kawasaki will say the class shrank first, causing development budgets to shrink. KTM dealers will shrug and claim that most of the bikes they sell are Open-classers. Hardcore Open-class riders will dismiss the entire question: They point out that the 500s we have are awesome machines. How do you develop something that's already developed?

## THE TERRIBLE THREE

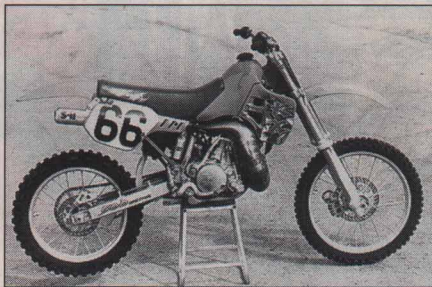
In fact, two of the 500cc two-strokes currently available were basically finished evolving back in '87. Since then Kawasaki and Honda have made only minor changes to their 500s. KTM has gone off in a different direction with its big-bore. The 550 KTM is currently designated as an off-road bike. All of the development that it has received in the last few years has gone in that direction. It has a bigger fuel tank, wide transmission ratios, even a kickstand, but you can tell there's still someone at KTM who has motocross on his mind when it comes to the 550. For one thing, the tank this year is much more streamlined—it's actually narrower than the KX's. The KTM also got more advanced suspension and a new Keihin PWK carb.

Overall, though, the bike isn't really all that different from the last KTM 500 motocrosser back in '91. That means it fits right in with this group.

## MOTOR—THE MAIN INGREDIENT

It's funny. When you don't ride Open bikes for a long period of time you forget what it's like. In your mind, you make

them more fearful than they really are. A CR250 makes so much power, you rationalize, that anything that makes 20 more horsepower must be completely unrideable, and was only put on the market by an Iraqi plot to destroy the youth of America so that our military is seriously weakened. It's not true. All of these bikes are mellow and easy to ride. They aren't slow, not by any means, but they aren't going to hurt you with horsepower, either.



After testing the bikes stock, we tried a Pro Circuit pipe and an Answer silencer to smooth out the KX's powerband. The improvement was slight, but noticeable.

Best power award goes to the KTM. We can't explain this. The entire company probably is smaller than the department that handles the payroll at Honda, so how can the KTM have the most advanced engine of the three? Maybe it's because the company is so small. At KTM it's probably easier to change a part than it is to make two parts exactly alike. Whatever, the KTM motor wins on several counts. First, it's more powerful than the other two. In an all-out drag race with good traction, it will win about 70% of the time. Why not all of the time? When you are dealing with 50-plus horsepower, the human factor looms as big as ever in the equation. Sometimes you just can't make yourself hold the throttle open, no matter how hard you try. With the KTM, holding the gas on is easier than it should be. The bike is smoother than the other two. Usually a lack of horsepower is the main factor leading to a smooth power delivery, but that's clearly not the case here. The other contributing factors are good, clean carburetion, a linear build-up of power and flywheel inertia. The KTM scores in all three categories.

The Kawasaki makes almost as much power as the KTM, but doesn't do it as politely. It make less off the bottom, but

due to sputtery carburetion, it's not smooth at all. This isn't much of a surprise—KXs have always run that way, and nothing on the bike has changed for years. A leaner pilot (from 60 to 55) cleans it up slightly, but it's still a little raspy. The Kaw makes its best power in the upper midrange where the bike hits hard and vibrates badly. After a few laps, you learn how to ride the KX and you can go amazingly fast, but you will be staying away from the poorly jetted parts of the powerband and putting up with an unreasonable amount of vibration.

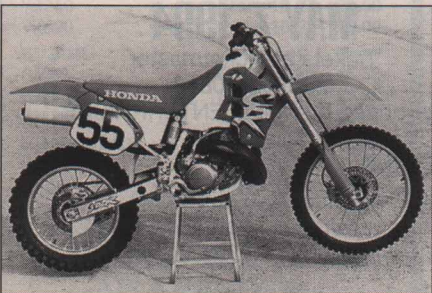
The Honda makes more lower mid-range power than either of the other two, but then sinks to a rather ho-hum top-end (at least by these standards). You learn quickly not to rev the Honda—there's simply no point to it. The bike works best when you shift early and almost idle around the track. It seems odd to listen to a CR rider compared to a KTM or KX being ridden on the same track. It seems like the CR is just lazily cruising around the course while the other two are on fire. Lap times will show that the Honda is going just as fast, maybe even faster. This is something that Honda learned in '85. Back then, the CR was strong on bottom and fast on top, but no one wanted to ride it. In later years, the Honda got mellow and easier to ride.

CR carburetion is cleaner than the Kawasaki's but it still does its share of coughing and stumbling off the bottom. Jetting a 500 seems to be more difficult than usual. At Glen Helen in San Bernar-



There's no argument that the KTM has the most potential of the bikes here, but it's not ready for MX in stock form.

On a motocross course, you could expect the KTM to pull most of the holeshots, then lose the lead to the Kawasaki in the rough stuff or the Honda in the turns—unless it's Greg Zitterkopf on the 550, then there's no telling what will happen, or when. ▶



History has shown that the Honda is put together better than most airplanes.











## OPEN-CLASS CHAOS

◀ Tons of torque, smooth delivery, decent handling—you would think that someone at KTM actually cares about the Open class.



dino, California, for example, our CR seemed to be crisp. At Sunrise in Adelanto, 20 miles away and 2000 feet higher, the CR was too fat everywhere. You can leave the bike stock at sea level, but if you go higher, count on dropping one size on the pilot and perhaps even the main.

### TRACK TIME

Motors are what a 500 is all about, but you have to wrap that motor in something. Otherwise, the KTM would be the hands-down winner here. Where the 550 comes up short is in suspension. The bike clearly was designed as an off-road machine, and as such, the suspension is way

*The Honda is the only Open bike that really does handle like a 250. You don't have to force the bike through tight turns.* ▶

too soft. At Sunrise Cycle Park, where the bumps are big and the jumps are tall, the KTM was out of its element. It bottomed and wallowed no matter what the settings. This problem compounded where there were deep ruts, because the pegs are rather low, and when the suspension takes a hit, you stand a good chance of losing your footing.

In stability, the KTM ranks extremely well. That's odd, because the 440 uses the same chassis and it head shakes like a woodpecker trying to hammer through stucco. Could it be that the motor characteristics affect handling in every way? Of course it can! We have been saying that for years. The 550 also is surprisingly good in the turns, because you can get on the gas early, then smoothly motor your way around the corner.

*Which bike will win with three absolutely equal riders? What a ridiculous question; there aren't three absolutely equal riders on earth! If there were, the CR would have an advantage on tight tracks and the KX would have the upper hand on rough tracks. If the KTM had the KX's suspension, it would be on top anywhere.*

The Honda is typical of big CRs of the last few years. The rear end is great; the front end isn't. This year, Honda stiffened up the fork, and the front is better for racers, although the odd spots of harshness are still there. Perhaps what Honda should have done is stiffen up the frame instead of the fork. That was the big change on the CR250 this year, and the 250 seems to be worlds better than the 500 up front.







*Kawasaki's trump card is stability. The faster the rider, the better he likes it.*

*The CR500R makes the least power of all the big MXers. Of course, that's like saying that swallowing lit sticks of dynamite will hurt LESS than swallowing most other explosives. ►*

feels like it's two miles long and a half-mile wide. Part is due to the overly big and tall fuel tank, which makes the rider sit too far back. Part is due to the engine, which is anything but smooth down there at low rpm, forcing you to get on the throttle a little late.

**MORE STUFF**

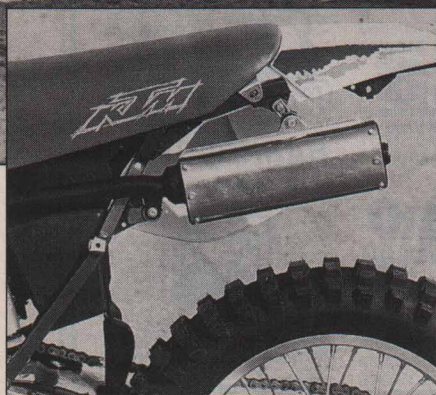
In detailing, all the bikes have hits and misses. The Honda has great brakes, the Kawasaki's are okay and the KTM's aren't so hot (the front is weak and the back locks up). The clutch pull, on the other hand, is amazing on the KTM. It's lighter than most 125s. The Honda and Kawasaki are a little stiff and make your arms pump up early.

For motocross, the CR has the best gearbox. Not only does it shift better than either of the others, but it has no gaps. Both of the K machines have big jumps from second to third gears.

So where does this leave us? There's no doubt that the Honda is the best motocross bike in stock form. If you took a motocross track and straightened it out like a tight piece of string, the KX might be better, but as long as there are turns, the CR will win.

The KTM amazed us, though. It proves that Kawasaki and Honda haven't been paying much attention to the 500s. The KTM's motor is the most modern, and by far the best. The only reason it didn't win the MX phase of this comparison was because it didn't try. The KTM is set up for off-road riding and the suspension simply isn't up to the task of MXing.

But that can be fixed. ◻



*If you get this high on the KTM, you will suddenly remember that its suspension isn't tuned for motocross. Don't do this in the vicinity of earthquake faults.*

◀ *The KTM's muffler was modified before we ever rode it. Stock, there is a little pre-muffler upstream from the main silencer. It was removed before it could remove itself.*

Turning on the Honda is excellent—the best of the bunch. Roger DeCoster said he doesn't think the CR turns as well as in past years, but the rest of us honestly can't remember. The bike drops into the turns without effort. On most other bikes (not just 500s) you have to be aggressive to make the bike turn well. On the CR, you can be lazy; it turns just as well with the throttle off as on. Stability, though, isn't that great. Headshake isn't as much a problem as just wandering. When you have the throttle open and are aiming for a narrow line, things can get hairy. Rough terrain can make the bike head just about anywhere—you might have to let off just a little.

The KX is just the opposite. It has a

great fork, great stability and poor cornering manners. The fork is sprung more softly than the Honda's (0.38 kg/mm springs as opposed to 0.40 springs), and yet feels more secure. It absorbs the little stuff as well as the big stuff—a rare combination. The rear end is good, too, although it probably doesn't offer any real advantage over the Honda. Where the KX really shines is in any high-speed section. It can hit that narrow line that the Honda has to back off for. The KX is even more stable than the KTM simply because the KTM is so soft-feeling.

If you plan on riding tight tracks, however, the KX will be the wrong machine. It needs to be forced into turns. Part of this is slow steering geometry; the bike







## *Off-road & play-riding with entirely too much power*

**Y**ou could argue that the glory days of 500cc two-strokes in motocross are gone. You could argue that 250s go around most tracks more quickly and that 125s are more fun. You might even say that 500s are good for the start and bad for the finish in motocross.

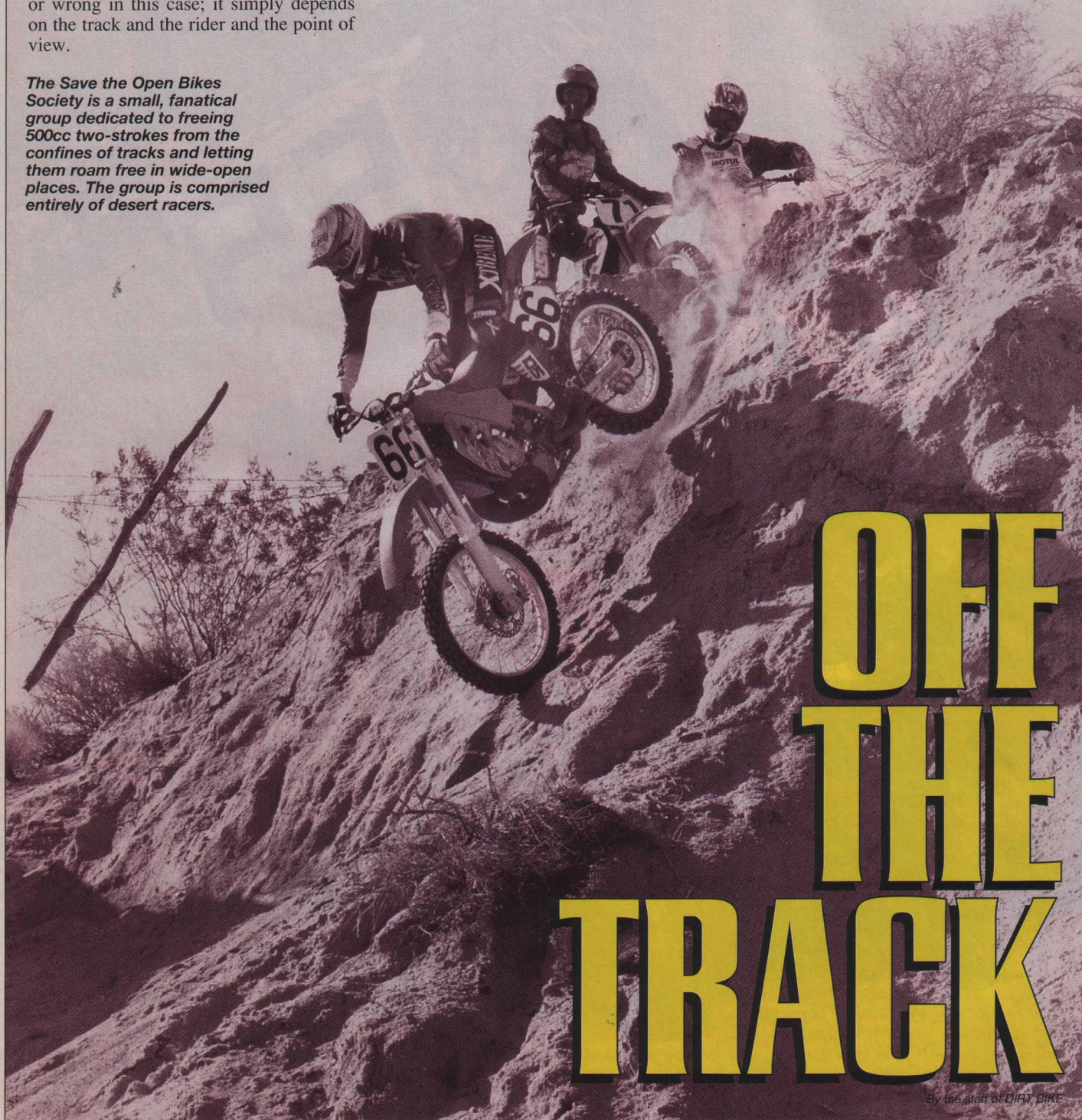
If you decide to argue the case against 500 in MX, you will find plenty of people to argue with, and have to find plenty of time to argue the point. There's no right or wrong in this case; it simply depends on the track and the rider and the point of view.

*The Save the Open Bikes Society is a small, fanatical group dedicated to freeing 500cc two-strokes from the confines of tracks and letting them roam free in wide-open places. The group is comprised entirely of desert racers.*

However, just try to argue against 500cc two-strokes when it comes to off-road racing, or even just play riding. You will be blown right out of the water.

Consider that no 250 has ever won overall in the Baja 1000. Consider that no 250 has ever won the series overall in the

National Hare and Hound Championship. Also consider that the best off-road riders in the world all are 500 riders. This is one environment where the big two-stroke still is king. It's doubtful that this will ever change.



# OFF THE TRACK

By the staff of DIRT BIKE











**THE PLAYERS**

For years, the most popular bike in the desert has been the Honda CR500R. That might come as a surprise to anyone who hasn't been to a desert race: "Hey, aren't KX500s winning everything?" Yes. The KX is the most successful bike in the desert, but any objective polling will show that Hondas still outnumber everything. Honda doesn't sponsor riders to race off-road on CRs because the company would rather promote its XR line for that. Kawasaki, on the other hand, does promote its KX for off-road racing, so the best riders all wear green.

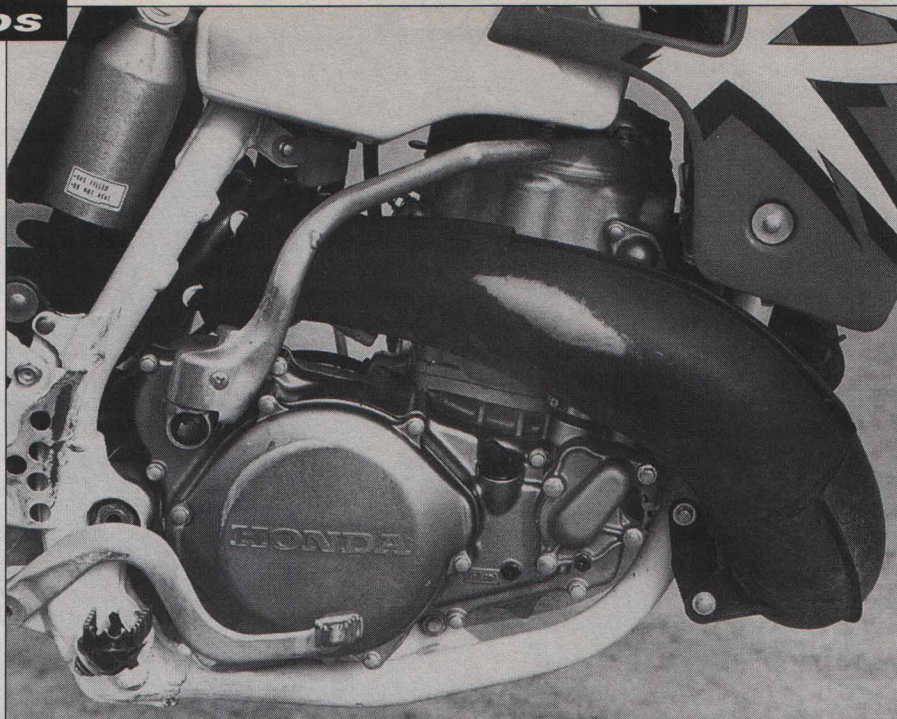
Then there's the KTM 550, the only big two-stroke currently designed and marketed for off-road racing. Of course, it might be a bit of a stretch to say the 550 was designed for off-road only. The differences between it and the two Japanese 500s that make it an "off-road" bike, are that the KTM holds more fuel, has a spark arrester, is equipped with an O-ring chain, comes with a kickstand and has slightly wider spacing between gear ratios. With the KX and the CR, owners have to buy that stuff, which gives the KTM owner a head start, especially considering that all three bikes start off at nearly the same price. Also, the KTM comes with a good set of aluminum handlebars and heavy Metzeler inner tubes, stuff that any bike, MX or off-road, would be better off with. Altogether, the KTM gives you about \$400 in the bank.

There are certain things you will have to do to all three bikes before you go desert racing. They all need handguards, for one, and they all need to be regared. That's right, even the KTM with its wide-ratio gearbox will need a new sprocket. Why? Because the bikes all are geared to go about the same speed on top; it's just that the KTM has a lower first gear. Once you do gear them higher (let's say you put a 15-tooth countershaft sprocket on each of them) then they all will get close to 90 mph or so. You are thinking, "These guys are nuts, I don't want to go that fast." Maybe so, but taller gearing lets the engine work a little easier even if you never go past 60 mph on your widest fire road. With the Honda and the Kawasaki, first gear gets a little high, but they still will be usable on all but the tightest trails. The KTM still will have a good, low first gear.

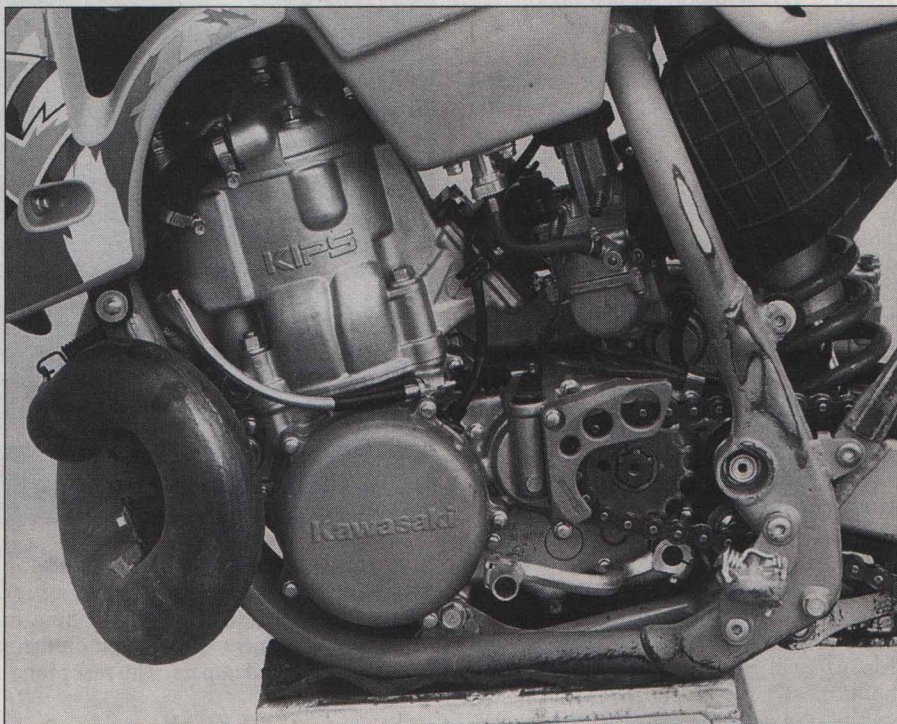
**MOTORWORLD**

So the KTM wins the initial bout just because it's cost-effective and is sold with off-road use in mind. That lead gets bigger when you get into the engine's power delivery. The 550 has the smoothest of the three motors. That's

◀ **The Kawasaki is a great jumper for a couple of reasons: One, it has the best suspension; two, it vibrates less when it's in the air.**



*This motor has been around for a while. Several years ago, Honda detuned it slightly with "eyebrows" over the exhaust port that made it smoother and easier to start.*



*Kawasaki's KX motor is the least docile of the three. The KX wins races because of its stability and suspension, NOT because its motor is easy to use.*

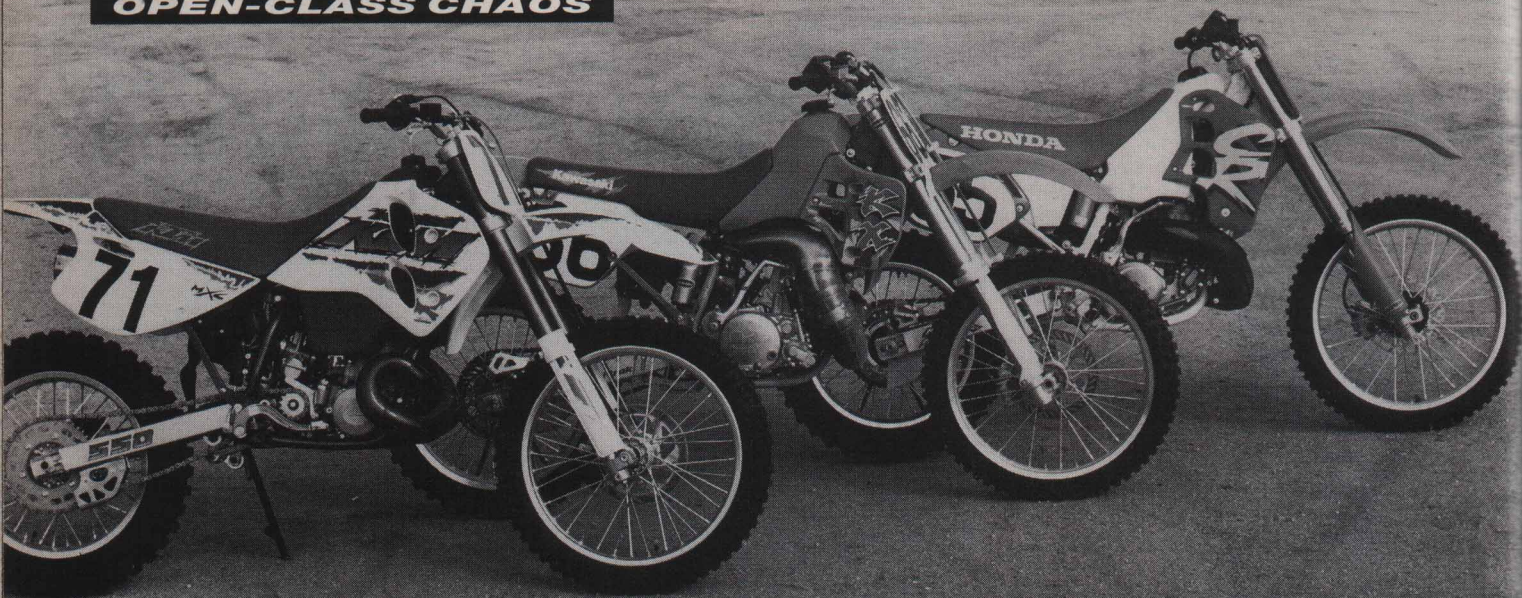
kind of weird. You would think the 550 would be a brute. It is, after all, the biggest two-stroke engine sold in this country for anything. It should stretch your arms, scare you silly and make you go to church. That's not how it is, though. The bike is mellow and relaxed, but it can get up and move out when you twist it hard enough.

The Honda motor is similar, just not quite as seamless. If it weren't for the KTM, you would think that the CR was

the most docile Open-classer around. The power comes on low and strong, but controllably. The midrange is potent, then the CR tapers off on top. The KTM and Honda motors are very much alike, it's just that the KTM is smoother at low rpm and makes more power at high rpm.

The Kawasaki makes most of its power on top. Overall, the KX is more like what you would expect from a 500cc two-stroke. It hits hard and carries you away. On top, it goes as fast as the KTM, but it





vibrates so much more in that region that you don't want to ride it up there.

**AT SPEED**

So if the Kawasaki motor is such a mannerless brute, how come it has won a zillion Baja 1000s in a row? The KX is outrageously well-behaved at high speed, that's why. If the race has a lot of fifth-gear sections, a KX is going to win. That's all there is to it. The chassis is rigid and secure-feeling, and once you are on course, you feel like you are going to blast through anything dumb enough to be in your way. That feeling is reinforced by the suspension, which is excellent. The KX proves that when suspension is good in motocross, it's good anywhere. The fork sucks up rocks at low speed and handles whoops at high speed. The rear works no matter where you take it, too.

The KTM is a little more skatey at speed. In sand, particularly, it hunts around and overreacts to soft ruts and grooves. KTM made the fork and shock soft on the theory that it would be good for off-road racing. The theory doesn't hold true. The front end dives too much, and is probably the cause of that skatey feeling. The rear end always is buried in the last half of its travel. The suspension feels like it was set up for a beginner, but how many true beginners start off on a 550cc Open classer?

The Honda suspension is stiff and works great in whoops. Rocks and little bumps, however, give it fits, primarily in the front. Honda never has quite figured out how to get its fork to work, even in motocross. Maybe they have some test riders in Japan who have bad taste and actually like it this way. The real limiting factor for the CR in desert racing is stability, though. The bike still has a little

	<b>KTM 550 M/XC</b>	<b>KAWASAKI KX500</b>	<b>HONDA CR500R</b>
<b>Engine type</b> .....	Reed-valve, liquid-cooled..... two-stroke	Reed-valve, liquid-cooled..... two-stroke	Reed-valve, liquid-cooled..... two-stroke
<b>Displacement</b> .....	548cc.....	499cc.....	491cc
<b>Bore and stroke</b> .....	92.3mm x 82.0mm.....	86.0mm x 86.0mm.....	89.0mm x 79.0mm
<b>Carburetion</b> .....	39mm Keihin PWK.....	38mm Keihin PWK.....	38mm Keihin
<b>Fuel tank capacity</b> .....	3.0 gal. (11.3L).....	2.6 gal. (9.8L).....	2.4 gal. (9.0L)
<b>Gearing</b> .....	14/48 .....	14/47 .....	14/49
<b>Lighting coil</b> .....	No.....	No.....	No
<b>Spark arrester</b> .....	Yes.....	No.....	No
<b>EPA-legal</b> .....	No.....	No.....	No
<b>Running weight w/n o fuel</b> .....	253 lb.....	233 lb.....	233 lb.
<b>Wheelbase</b> .....	58.3" (1481mm).....	58.7" (1490mm).....	58.5" (1484mm)
<b>Rake/trail</b> .....	27.5"/NA.....	27"/4.6".....	27"/4.6"
<b>Ground clearance</b> .....	15" (381mm).....	14.6" (350mm).....	13.5" (343mm)
<b>Seat height</b> .....	38" (965mm).....	37.4" (950mm).....	38" (965mm)
<b>Tire size and type:</b>			
<b>Front</b> .....	90/90-21 Metzeler Unicross.....	80/100-21 Dunlop K490.....	80/100-21 Dunlop K490
<b>Rear</b> .....	130/90-18 Metzeler Unicross ..	110/100-18 Dunlop K695.....	110/100-18 Dunlop K695
<b>Suspension:</b>			
<b>Front</b> .....	White Power inverted cart., ..... adj. reb./comp., 11.8" (300mm) travel	Kayaba inverted cart., ..... adj. reb./comp., 12.2" (310mm) travel	Showa inverted cartridge, adj. reb./comp., 12.2" (310mm) travel
<b>Rear</b> .....	White Power alum. piggy- ..... back, adj. prel./reb./comp., 13.6" (346mm) travel	Kayaba alum. piggyback, ..... adj. prel./reb./comp., 13" (330mm) travel	Showa alum. piggyback, adj. prel./reb./comp., 12.6" (320mm) travel
<b>Country of origin</b> .....	Austria .....	Japan.....	Japan
<b>Suggested retail price</b> .....	\$4898.....	\$4849.....	\$4899
<b>Distrib./Mfr.</b> .....	KTM Sportmotorcycle USA, ..... 1906 Broadway Lorain, OH 44052 (216) 246-1060	Kawasaki Motors Corp. .... 9950 Jeronimo Rd. Irvine, CA 92718 (714) 770-0400	American Honda 1919 Torrance Blvd. Torrance, CA 90501-2746 (310) 783-2000

headshake and still wanders around too much at speed. Some things never change. Sure, there are a lot of them in the desert. The guys who go fast on them all have steering dampers. The rest probably don't care.

**AT PLAY**

Okay, so you don't want to go racing. Join 90% of the dirt bike riders in the world. DB tester Darren Hoefft, who basically only gets on a bike when he's about to go racing at some supercross somewhere, spent a day just goofing around on the 500s with us. "Hey, these are a blast!" No kidding. Open bikes make outrageous play bikes because they can do anything you can think of. Climb that? Sure. Jump this? Absolutely.

In the hillclimb category, the KTM wins just because it has the widest usable powerband. The Honda doesn't have as much on top and the Kawasaki vibrates

too badly. In the "let's go this way until we run out of gas" category, we don't know which to call a winner. Yes, the KTM will go a little farther because of its bigger tank, but it has an enormous appetite for gas. The Honda tank holds 2.4 gallons, the Kawasaki holds 2.6 and the KTM holds 3.0, yet they all run out within a few miles of one another. So is the Honda a winner because it gets the best mileage, or is it the KTM because it goes the farthest? All we know is that we ended up walking after about 40 to 50 miles.

Next is the "let's splash through this water and see who gets the wettest" category. We couldn't properly determine which bike was the best tool with which to splash your buddy, but we did notice that the KTM allows water into the airbox before either of the other two. The Kawasaki has two closeable airbox holes that prevent water from pouring in. We could



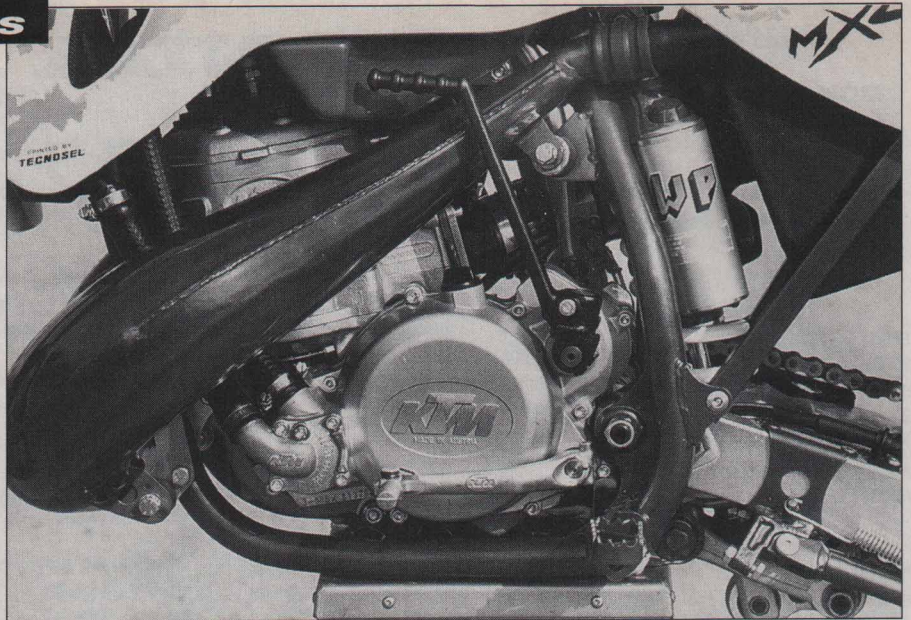
## OPEN-CLASS CHAOS

tell absolutely no difference in the way the engine ran with the vents open or closed, so why bother putting them on in the first place?

In the "let's see how long they last" department, they all win. We have determined that these three machines are the most reliable dirt bikes made. We rode the KX to a 24-hour world record two years ago, and the KTM went all the way through the Nevada Rally without any engine work. The Honda we raced into the ground every year—no problems. There are several things you need to watch out for, though. The KTM has two mufflers (one in front of the main one). They break. Either remove the little submuffler and replace it with a straight piece of tubing, or replace the whole thing with an aftermarket silencer. The KX and the CR have crummy chains and handlebars. Don't wait until the parts break or bend, just replace them right away. The KX has a 19-inch rear wheel. Danny Hamel, Paul Krause, Larry Roeseler and the rest of the Team Green guys all race with 18-inch rear wheels because they are less prone to flats.

### HIGH-PLAINS DRIFTERS

When the smoke from the bomb clears, it's certain that the KX will win more desert races than either of the other two. Even if you ignore the fact that virtually



*It's apparent that KTM is the only company that has continued development of its big two-stroke motor recently. The 550 has an awesome motor. On the last day of testing the KTM burned up a clutch. Kawasaki plates fit in and are more durable, but also more susceptible to heat-fade.*

every fast off-road racer rides green, the KX still is the best racer because of its stability and suspension.

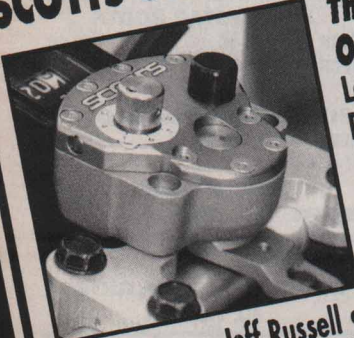
However, no one on the staff has ever won the overall in a desert race. Chances are, neither have you. We ride for kicks and giggles, and that's why we would rather ride the KTM. It's just more fun

than the other two. In fact, if we were serious about winning races, we would still choose the KTM. We would simply take the money saved by not having to buy a tank, a chain, bars, etc., and spend it on suspension, and maybe even a steering damper. Then we might win a race or two—and we would even enjoy it. □



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 David Rhodes  
 Marty Smith  
 TEAM GREEN

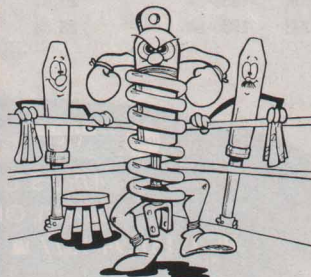
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