

THE "600" CLUB

Dual-purpose bikes face a curious dilemma. On one hand, they must be comfortable for long freeway rides out to the country; on the other hand, they have to be nimble in the dirt without feeling too heavy. Yet when you're talking about the biggest engines available in dual-purpose bikes, "nimbleness and lightness" are words usually said in jest.

For this shootout, the *Dirt Rider* staff compared the Yamaha XT600L, Honda XL600R and Kawasaki KL600A1. They're the biggest, meanest and best dual-purpose bikes we've ever tested.

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

When Honda's first item on their list of "changes and improvements" for the 1984 bike is "new graphics," you know you'll have to look long and hard for any startling technical information. Actually, the '84 bike is virtually identical to last year's XL600R. The seat height, wheelbase, ground clearance, footpeg



DUELING DUALS

height and weight are all the same this year, and neither the suspension components nor the tires have changed.

Other than a new shift lever design that now allows for adjustment and a piece of felt soaked in heavy grease above the fork seals to help prevent stiction and lubricate the tube, the only changed items on the 1984 XL600R relate to starting the bike and keeping it from stalling.

First, Honda tossed the old kickstarter and borrowed a less awkward one from the XR500R. Next, they changed the ignition timing to aid idling. The carburetors (the same ones as on the XR500R) were also tweaked a bit to help both starting and idling on the monster 600.

Last year, XL600R owners had trouble getting the crankcase drain plug loose while using the Honda-supplied tool kit wrench. Honda has modified the wrench for 1984, so you won't have to dig through the hopelessly inadequate toolbox in your garage.

Early morning riser Mark Kariya is hot to get on the trails, while Mercedes Gonzalez and Karel Kramer take time out to enjoy the scenery. View of the San Fernando Valley; photo by Rich Cox.



OPINIONS

After spending years as a serious racer, dual purpose bikes have won my heart. They are extremely nimble on the street and they are, well... a lot of fun in the dirt.

Nobody expects a 600cc dirt bike with lights, battery, etc. to handle like a YZ250, but you don't want it to handle like a BMW either. All three of these bikes handle fine on the street, but the Honda feels the closest to a motocross bike once off the highway. Since I'm more concerned with how the bike will perform in the dirt, I'll have to say that the Honda is my choice.

I'd love to be able to say that the Kawasaki is the best, but I can't since the engine

doesn't thrill me. A 600cc single-cylinder four-stroke should have so much torque that you can hardly keep the front end down when leaving a stop light. Wheelies on the KL600A1 are more work than they are fun; the engine just isn't as powerful or torquey as the Yamaha and the Honda.

I feel the same way everybody else on the staff does—put some horsepower in that Kwacker and I'd ride it anywhere.

—Bob Carpenter

Age/Ht./Wt.: 24/5'9"/185 lbs.

Motorcycle(s) currently raced/ridden:

Suzuki RM250E, Yamaha YZ490L

Riding ability: Pro motocrosser



PHOTOS: MARK KARIYA

Tough choice here. Each of the three 600s is loads of fun and possesses characteristics that make it the best in one particular area. The Kawasaki probably has the most potential; its suspension and handling outshine those of its rivals by a fair margin on either street or dirt. However, our test bike was terminally slow and had a comparatively weak front brake, traits that were undoubtedly peculiar to our test bike in talking to some satisfied owners. Also, for a liquid-cooled bike, the engine seemed to get pretty hot, passing the heat back to our legs.

Our Honda was probably the best dirt bike of the bunch. It had a good, strong front brake, handled fairly well and seemed to have the most horsepower, though it was mostly on top. But I didn't like the way it died unpredictably in slow traffic or trail work. It also leaked oil in my garage and the seat was too soft.

By comparison, the Yamaha was great at low speeds: It would chug down or idle practically all day without a cough and felt stronger down low than the Honda. Its tires seemed better than the ones on the XL or the skinny-feeling ones on the KL. However, it definitely needs stiffer fork springs. Oh yes, the XT is the winner in the clear-mirrors-while-freeway-flying category.

—Mark Kariya

Age/Ht./Wt.: 27/5'10"/165 lbs.

Motorcycle(s) currently raced/ridden:

Jawa DT500, Yamaha RD350H,

Yamaha YZ250L

Riding ability: Intermediate motocrosser

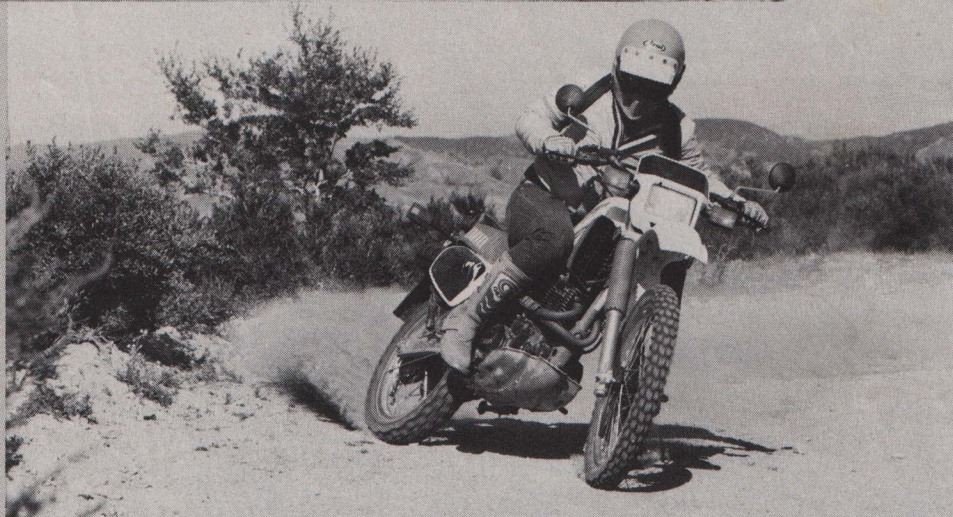


PHOTO: KAREL KRAMER

We took these three bikes out on a head-to-head major trail ride, traveling on freeway sections on the way there and back, and curvy canyon pavement in the middle. We lived with them on a daily basis as commuters and trailsters as well. They are all good for their intended purpose.

I would buy the Kawasaki and hope to find some ponies somewhere. The KL had the best comfort and suspension. I enjoyed it even though it was slow. The Yamaha has a neat motor and good dirt tires, but the imbalance in the suspension ruins the handling. Passengers were happiest on the rear of the Yamaha. It started and carbureted the best. Honda has been building D-P bikes for a

while, and it shows. Funky carburetion leaves you nervous in traffic, and the Honda's seat is so soft it makes long rides a bummer. Of the three, it does work the best in the dirt and, considering the KL's power, in the street, too.

If you didn't get to ride them all, any one would make you happy. For me, a good dealer would greatly influence my choice.

—Karel Kramer

Age/Ht./Wt.: 29/6'1"/185 lbs.

Motorcycle(s) currently raced/ridden:

Husky 400WR, Yamaha IT200L,

Yamaha YZ490L

Riding ability: B enduro rider

Yamaha's offering in the big-bore department of the dual-purpose world is the XT600L. Compared to last year's XT550K, the 600's new engine displacement was achieved by increasing the bore from 92.0 to 95.0mm, though the same 84.0mm stroke is used on the 600. Yamaha did trim some weight off the piston, the piston pin and other related parts to keep the reciprocating mass equal to the weight of the 550. A larger, three-gallon gas tank is partially covered by the new extended seat. Yamaha says the "safety seat" is for better control in traffic; you know the *real* reason.

To shave the weight that rides high on the XT600L, Yamaha changed the instrument panel on the new model. Yamaha wanted to lower the amount of weight held up high on the bike. The passenger footpegs are now frame mounted for a more comfortable ride and a new scoop directs cooling air to the cylinder head.

Kawasaki's all-new KL600A1 is a bold new bike, bringing water-cooling to dual-purpose bikes for the first time. Not only is the KL600 water-cooled, it also has a small electric fan to help out when the going gets tough. The four-stroke engine uses four valves and a double overhead cam. A double rotating counterbalancer cuts down on vibration, and a "silent" cam chain with automatic tensioner helps keep engine noise down. The handlebar-mounted choke makes starting easier, as does the automatic compression release.

ON THE GAS

These dual-purpose bikes are three of the best Open class DP bikes ever built. Each has some quality or personality trait that makes you want to say "Wow!"

The best dirt bike is the Honda. When the pavement ends, the XL600R feels the most like a dirt bike in both body positioning and handling characteristics. It has the shortest wheelbase of the three; that is readily apparent on the trail. Brake slide turns and other motocross-inspired antics were also performed best by the Honda. Both brakes were excellent and never a source of complaint.

Being the best dirt-handling bike doesn't come without sacrifice, though, and in this case, the payoff is substantial. The Honda is the worst street bike of the three. The short wheelbase (55.9 inches) makes the Honda uneasy on the freeway when compared to the Yamaha and the Kawasaki. The passenger pegs on the Honda are mounted on the swingarm, which means every time you hit a bump, your partner's pegs move. If you bottom out the rear suspension, your passenger is going to be very uncomfortable (that's if the pegs didn't already skyrocket your friend).

The engine on the Honda is very strong, but it performs best when revved high. The clutch was never a problem, and all the controls—well, almost all—were usable and durable. After an un-

named *Dirt Rider* editor tossed the Honda away on a high-speed fire road (he said the corner came up too quickly and he certainly wasn't going to take a ride down a cliff with the Honda) the left-hand rear turn signal was DOA. The rubber signal ripped off the metal bolt to which it had been molded. But considering the speed of the crash, it wasn't a significant loss.

The best street bike of the bunch is, far and away, the Kawasaki KL600A1. It's stable, handles better than a lot of pure street bikes and the tires let you lean it way over on canyon roads. The seating position and seat (in both shape and density) are the best out of the three bikes tested. Yet the front brake, surprisingly, doesn't feel as strong as the brakes on the other two bikes. It's progressive and positive, but just not all that strong.

In the dirt, the Kawasaki is very predictable and confidence-inspiring. At first glance, you would think the Kawasaki is a lot heavier than either the Honda or the Yamaha. It isn't. On the street or in the dirt, the Kawasaki felt no heavier than the other two bikes.

It was slower, though. Much slower. It could be that we got a lemon for a test bike, but our KL600A1 was decidedly slower than the Honda and the Yamaha, making it hard work staying up with the other two bikes—a pity since the Kawasaki's suspension is much more balanced and of better quality.

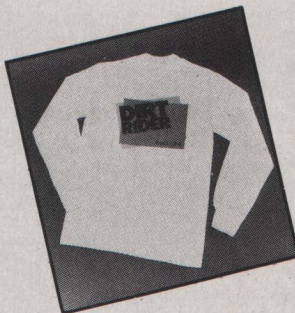
We also learned to keep the Kawasaki

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KAWASAKI KL 600AI

Price\$2449
 Number of dealers (U.S.)1400 (approx.)
 Warranty12-month, unlimited mileage
 Customer serviceKawasaki Motor Corp.
 P.O. Box 11447
 Santa Ana, CA 92711
 714/540-1600

ENGINE

TypeWater-cooled, four-stroke single with dual overhead cam.
 TransmissionFive-speed
 Displacement564cc
 Bore x stroke96 x 78mm
 Compression ratio9.5:1
 Horsepower/rpm (measured)28.5 @ 6500 rpm
 Torque/rpm (measured)24.6 @ 3500 rpm
 CarburetionKeihin CVK40
 ExhaustSteel, single into steel silencer/spark arrester
 IgnitionCDI
 LubricationForced lube, wet sump
 Air filtrationOiled polyurethane foam

CHASSIS

FrameDiamond, detachable rear section
 Rake/trail29.5°/4.8 in.
 Front suspensionKYB leading axle air/spring fork
 Rear suspensionUni-Trak suspension with KYB shock
 BrakesFront—Single-piston caliper disc
 Rear—Single-leading shoe drum
 WheelsFront—1.60-21 Takasago
 Rear—2.50-17 Takasago
 TiresFront—3.00-21 Dunlop K750A
 Rear—5.10-17 Dunlop K550

MEASUREMENTS

Weight (wet, tank full)344 lbs.
 Wheelbase57.9 in.
 Fuel capacity3.0 gal. total
 Ground clearance11.0
 Seat height34.3 in.

HONDA XL600R

Price\$2346
 Number of dealers (U.S.)1700
 Warranty12-month
 Customer serviceAmerican Honda Motor Corp.
 100 W. Alondra Blvd.
 Gardena, CA 90247
 213/327-8280

ENGINE

TypeAir-cooled, single cylinder four-stroke engine with Radial Four Valve Combustion Chamber
 TransmissionFive-speed
 Displacement589cc
 Bore x stroke100 x 75mm
 Compression ratio8.6:1
 Horsepower/rpm (measured)32.0 @ 6500 rpm
 Torque/rpm (measured)27.4 @ 6000 rpm
 CarburetionTwo Keihin PH64A, 28/30mm
 ExhaustSteel, two exhaust headers into one steel silencer/spark arrester
 IgnitionCDI
 LubricationDry sump
 Air filtrationOiled polyurethane foam

CHASSIS

FrameSemi-double cradle
 Rake/trail29°/4.6 in.
 Front suspensionShowa telescopic fork, leading axle
 Rear suspensionHonda Pro Link with Showa shock
 BrakesFront—Single disc
 Rear—Drum
 WheelsFront—1.60-21 D.I.D
 Rear—2.50-17 D.I.D
 TiresFront—3.00-21 Dunlop K750A
 Rear—5.10-17 Dunlop K550

MEASUREMENTS

Weight (wet, tank full)327 lbs.
 Wheelbase55.9 in.
 Fuel capacity3.2 gal. total
 Ground clearance10.6 in.
 Seat Height33.9

YAMAHA XT600L

Price\$2399
 Number of dealers (U.S.)1700 +
 Warranty12-month
 Customer serviceYamaha Motor Corp.
 6555 Katella Ave.
 Cypress, CA 90630
 714/761-7439

ENGINE

TypeAir-cooled, single cylinder four-stroke, single overhead cam
 TransmissionFive-speed
 Displacement595cc
 Bore x stroke95 x 84mm
 Compression ratio8.5:1
 Horsepower/rpm (measured)32.5 @ 6000 rpm
 Torque/rpm (measured)28.9 @ 5500 rpm
 CarburetionMikuni Y27PV
 ExhaustSteel, two exhaust headers into one steel silencer/spark arrester
 IgnitionCDI
 LubricationDry sump
 Air filtrationOiled polyurethane foam

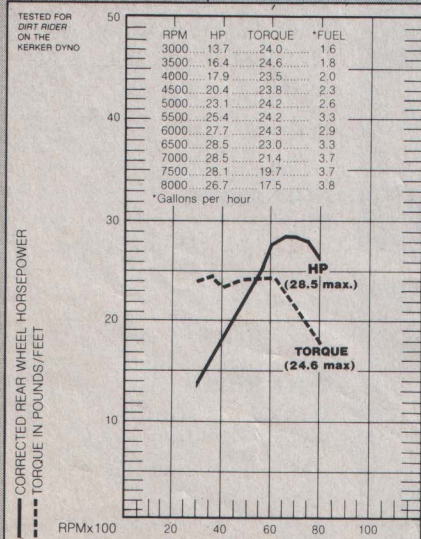
CHASSIS

FrameSteel, single down tube
 Rake/trail28°/4.2 in.
 Front suspensionKayaba telescopic fork, leading axle
 Rear suspensionYamaha monocooc
 BrakesFront—Single disc
 Rear—Drum
 WheelsFront—1.60-21 Takasago
 Rear—2.50-18 Takasago
 TiresFront—3.00-21 Bridgestone Trail Wing-25
 Rear—4.60-18 Bridgestone Trail Wing-26

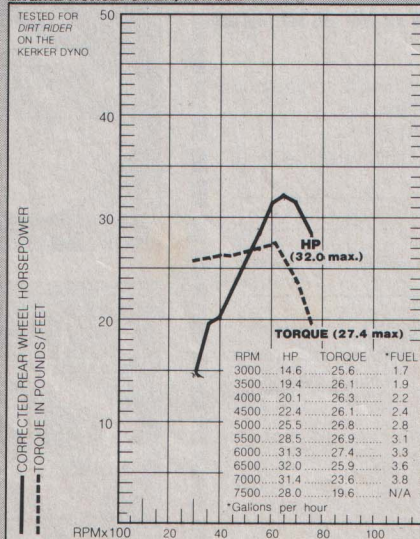
MEASUREMENTS

Weight (wet, tank full)330.5 lbs.
 Wheelbase56.7 in.
 Fuel capacity3.0 gal. total
 Ground clearance10.2 in.
 Seat height33.9 in.

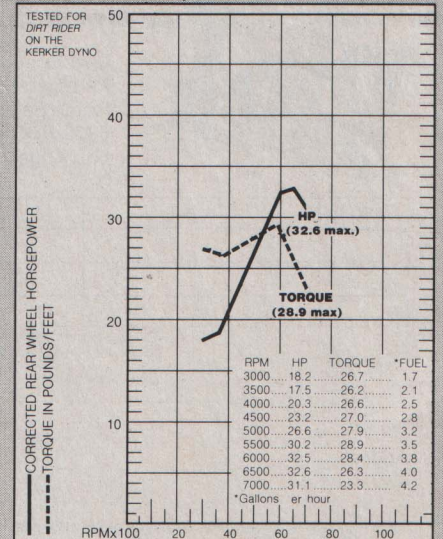
ENGINE HORSEPOWER/TORQUE



ENGINE HORSEPOWER/TORQUE



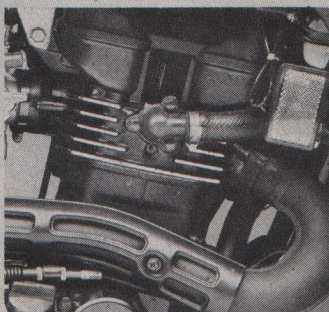
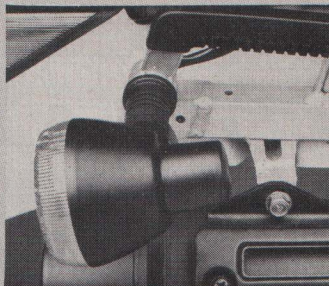
ENGINE HORSEPOWER/TORQUE



KAWASAKI KL 600A1



PHOTOS: BRIAN WAINGROW

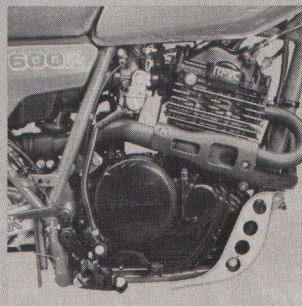


(Clockwise from top left) Kawasaki's KL600A1 has heavy-duty passenger grab handles. The water-cooling is helped with an electric fan that only works when the bike is really hot. Tool kit is extensive, but it couldn't help us when water kept the KL from running.

HONDA XL600R



PHOTOS: PAUL MARTINEZ

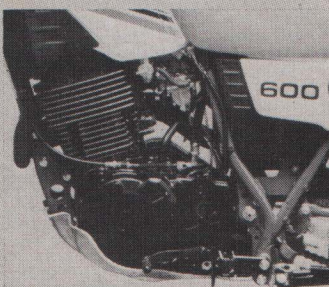
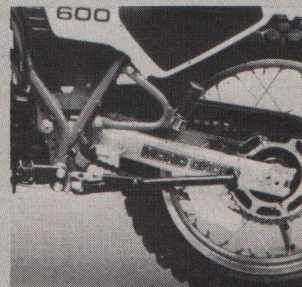
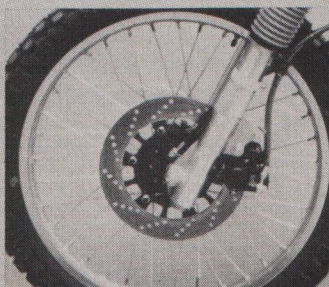


(Clockwise from top left) The Honda is the best in the dirt and has very strong brakes. The XL600R has a very torquey engine and is wheelie prone due to the short wheelbase. A high-speed slide out ripped the left-hand turn signal from its mount.

YAMAHA XT600L



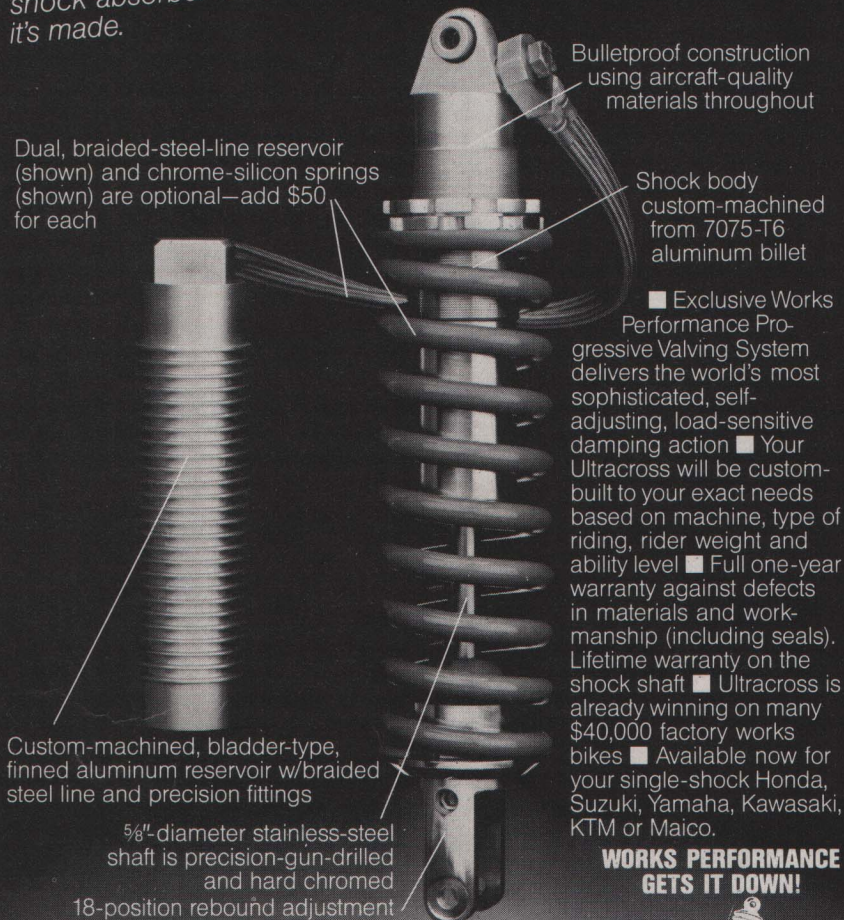
PHOTOS: BRIAN WAINGROW



(Clockwise from top left) Front brake on the XT600L is a high-quality item, as are the frame-mounted passenger pegs. The seating position is typical Yamaha, with a sway back feel to it. The XT has excellent low-end torque and plenty of brute horsepower.

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away from water. After two river crossings and medium-sized sprays, the KL600A1 decided it didn't want to run anymore. The electrical system died abruptly, and we couldn't get the bike running again. Since we were in the middle of nowhere, we left the KL in some bushes with additional camouflaging and picked it up the next day. After drying out some, the bike started and ran fine.

The Yamaha XT600L found praise heaped on its chugging motor. It had the best all-around tires, too. The XT was by far the easiest to start. It kicked through easily and fired up after two or three kicks. In comparison, the Honda didn't always want to go when you did, while the Kawasaki needed even more kicks before it could be persuaded to start.

The front fork springs on the Yamaha need to be stiffer to balance out the suspension. While the rear suspension doesn't need to be changed for dirt riding, it was the harshest of the three bikes on the street. The way the Yamaha handled in the dirt was probably its weakest area. Either because of the unbalanced feel of the suspension or because of the extra weight up high, the XT600L was not exactly a treat to throw into a big, sweeping, fire road corner. You have to get way up over the front end to keep it from washing out, and you can't depend on the rear end to do the same thing every time. High-side swaps were a grim reality during our action photo session. Beyond these complaints, the Yamaha did everything else well. The brakes, the seating position, the controls and the riding comfort are all fine.

So all three bikes have some relatively minor problems, but they've also got some pretty impressive characteristics. They are all excellent dual-purpose bikes, capable of tackling just about any obstacle (speaking from experience), and they are all great on the highway. We'd almost like to call the Kawasaki KL600A1 the winner of our comparison since it handled the best under all conditions and has the best suspension, but it's just too darn slow for a 600cc motorcycle. The Honda could be the winner, too, because it handles more like a dirt bike (and, after all, we are called *Dirt Rider* Magazine), but the Honda's seat is uncomfortably soft, and it is hard to start and periodically sputters and dies. Perhaps the Yamaha should win by default. It doesn't do anything all that exciting as far as performance goes, but it isn't a death trap, either. It starts easily and didn't break down, but we can't seem to forget those high sides and the fact that the engine occasionally coughed and sputtered under heavy loads.

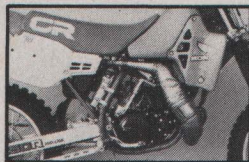
So, the Honda XL600R will take the laurels this time, but we're going to investigate why the KL600A1 was so slow. It could be that some simple changes might bring the Kawasaki back to life. We hope so. Then the KL would earn the title of "the ultimate dual-purpose machine." **DR**

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