

australasian DIRT BIKE

APRIL 1982

\$2.00 (\$2.65 NZ)*

**YAMAHA
YZ250J**
PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

**KTM495, HUSQVARNA WR250,
HONDA XR250, YAMAHA IT465,
KAWASAKI AE80**

WE SALUTE QUAD JUMPERS

**JOHN HALL: FATHER OF
THE FOUR-DAY ENDURO**

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PEOPLE ENJOYING LIFE IN THE WRITE LANE

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 TYPESETTING: Novagraphics, who react well to prompting by temperamental editors

COVER: There's a bright feature ahead for this bike. It's got everything which appeals to buyers, let's be honest, and one of those things is that it works as a package.

Dargle track supplied by Alan Smith.
 Dave King photo



***Recommended maximum retail price. You can get it cheaper by subscribing, but the way the postal workers carry on it's a bit suss.**



two wheeled Chev Bel-Air XR250 HONDA

Dear sir, I own a Honda XR250. How can I make it go fast and handle good?

If you have read ADB before, you will have probably noticed that we recommend not spending money modifying a bike that is nowhere near competitive. As far as we're concerned, the XR250 falls into the "nowhere near competitive" category (I bet we get some mail about that statement), but this is one bike that we're not going to tell you you shouldn't modify. Not that what we say will make much difference. The army of four-stroke fans will see to that. Some people worship four-strokes and to these people, the pro-link XR Honda is the new Messiah. If these people were at all open minded on the subject, and had the opportunity to ride the bike in the company of a year-old enduro Husky and a new Suzuki motocrosser (as we did), they would realise the foolishness of their ways.

The XR test wasn't a comparison with the Husky and Suzuki but when the three test riders changed back onto the XR, the truth was painfully obvious. And it surprised everyone. You see, each rider had ridden the XR previously at a club-day/gymkhana and loved it. It had been fun to ride, easy to ride, handled well, steered accurately and set good times on the small grass-track and cross-country (equal fastest) special tests. On top of that, it didn't get blown-off too shockingly in the "let's swap and try again" drag races against a Maico and Husky. Best of all, like a lot of four-strokes, the XR250 was a good wheelie bike.

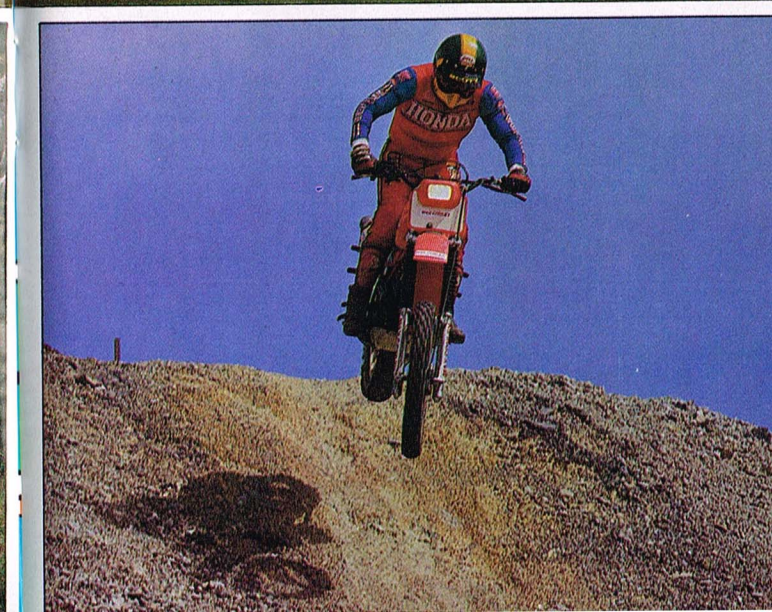
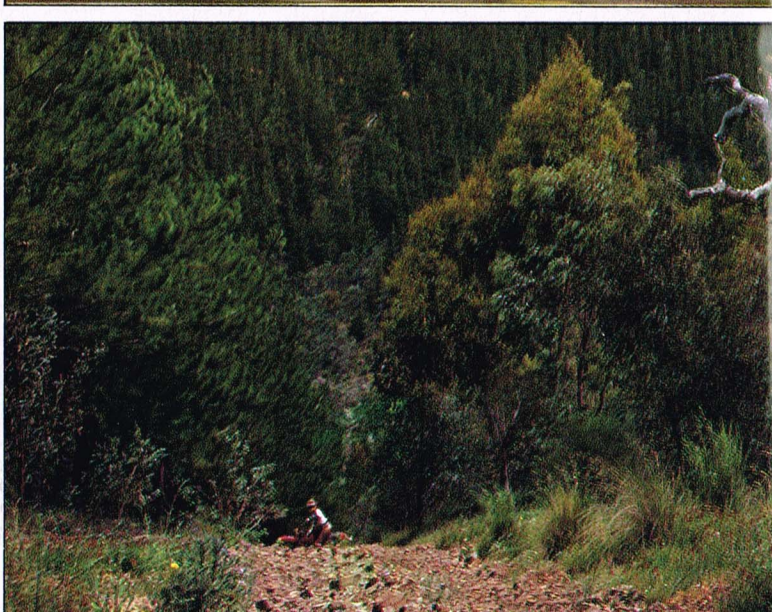
The club day even encouraged talk of racing one seriously (meaning seriously going for a class win in open enduros). But it was obvious you would first have to change the shock. The rear suspension on the XR was bad. Better than your average chrome-spring, K-Tel twin shock trailbike suspension, but any halfway decent twin shock set-up will look after you better.

The Pro-Link works well at low speed across large rocks or over log after log through tight bush, but the claimed versatility of the progressive-linkage suspension is a myth as far as Honda's XR250 is concerned. We don't believe it can be adjusted out either. Ask a Honda motocross rider about his shock and he'll probably tell you it needs replacing.

A good shock and nothing else would make the XR twice the bike. You find yourself coming into those metre wide, 500mm-deep dips in the trail (we're right into metrics here at ADB) and trying to decide if you're going slow enough to run the front wheel through and absorb part of the blow or to heave back on the bars and let the back end take everything (and give nothing in return, apart from a giant wallowing kick of disapproval). Then, of course, if you decide you must wheelie through, there is the problem of getting the front light enough to perform the manoeuvre successfully. The XR is a great wheelie bike but getting the front up in the first place is a muscle job if you're in a high gear. One test rider pulled the skin off his hands trying to get the



by Murray Watt





HONDA XR250 TWO WHEEL CHEV BELAIR

front wheel up all day. If you're moving fast and hit something like a river bed or a road that crosses the trail, and give both ends of the suspension a full workout, you'll wish you were wearing your St. Christopher medal.

The faster you went, the worse it got. The Husky we had with us was just the opposite. Small terrain obstacles disappeared as the speed increased. Sorry about the comparisons again.

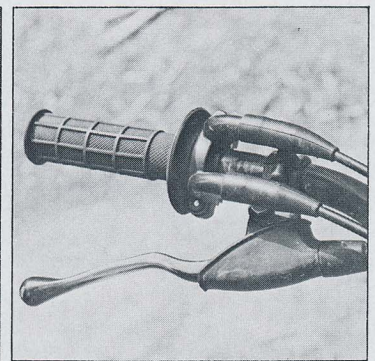
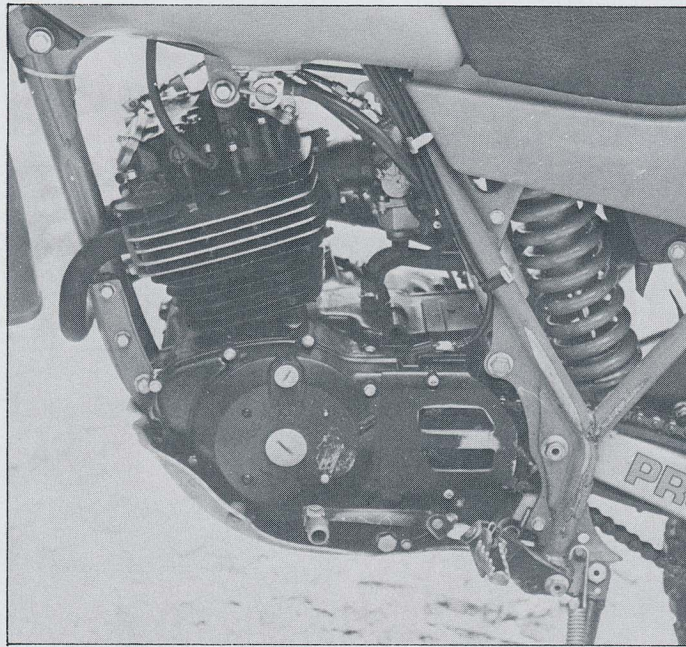
Getting back to the problem of lifting the front end we just mentioned brings us to the touchy subject of four-stroke power. As things stand at the moment, two-strokes make better power than four-strokes (here comes another two sackfuls of mail).

I read somewhere that the most remarkable feature of two-stroke motors was not that they produce so much power (i.e., more than a four-stroke) but that they produce power over such a wide range. The truth of this became exhaustingly obvious on one particular hill we rode up and down many times. It was a steep hill about 150 metres long (tall?). The surface was dry dirt and clay, some loose gravelly rock and a few very shallow rain ruts. Looking at it, you would doubt if anything could get up there but we were assured it was possible so we decided to have a crack at it on the XR. It took seven attempts before the bike finally made the top.

A rough 90° turn approach to the climb meant the attack speed was slow (second gear) but the XR's suspension across the rough slowed it down more than the turn itself. The steepness of the climb soon had the XR into first and from then on the whole performance would deteriorate into a clumsy balancing act: balancing your weight far enough forward to stop the bike looping, but keeping far enough back to stop violent wheelspin (instant stop). Balancing the throttle with the varying traction, and balancing the bike along the smoothest line to try to avoid a rock or rut bouncing the rear wheel and breaking traction.

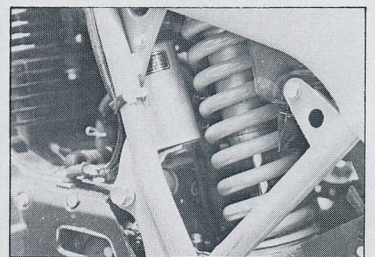
Once you shut off momentarily and let the revs fall a little to grab traction, that's it, you stay at those lower revs. You can't power up again should you strike a patch of good traction. Back off a little about three times and the XR is clawing desperately at its last handful of revs: Bonkbonkbonkbonkbonkbonk. One more mistake and you've done your dough. You can't help but admire the motor in its last desperate attempt to press on but it's like one of those people you quickly get sick of. You really like them at first but they soon start to annoy you and although they "mean well" you end up disliking them like hell.

You could always modify the motor to get enough power to blast the revs up anytime you liked but



ABOVE
All the controls, cables, buttons and switches worked beautifully (of course).

LEFT
Four-stroke power. The stuff dreams are made of. Four-stroke lovers(?) need not take any notice of our attitude that four-stroke freaks are all dreamers, and playing around on the XR will convince them that their way is the right way.



ABOVE
Changes from the original (rare) XR Pro-Link include number plates, front guard, front and rear chain guide and a different shock.

BELOW
Chain guide gave us a little trouble and we're not really sure what you can do about it apart from carrying something strong enough to straighten it.



experience with horsepower four-strokes (admittedly limited) is that they are nothing but a handful of drama, especially in the bush. The only thing they do well is crack good, big, long, 60 foot roost, full lock, front wheel floating, crowd pleasing slides. There's definitely something there with four-stroke power but life isn't one big full-lock slide, unfortunately.

Eventually we got the XR to the top with a wild, front guard biting, slamming knee into triple clamp, over revving, scrub clearing charge. Even the appearance of a black snake in front of the bike couldn't make ADB's resident snake paranoiac back off, once success was in sight.

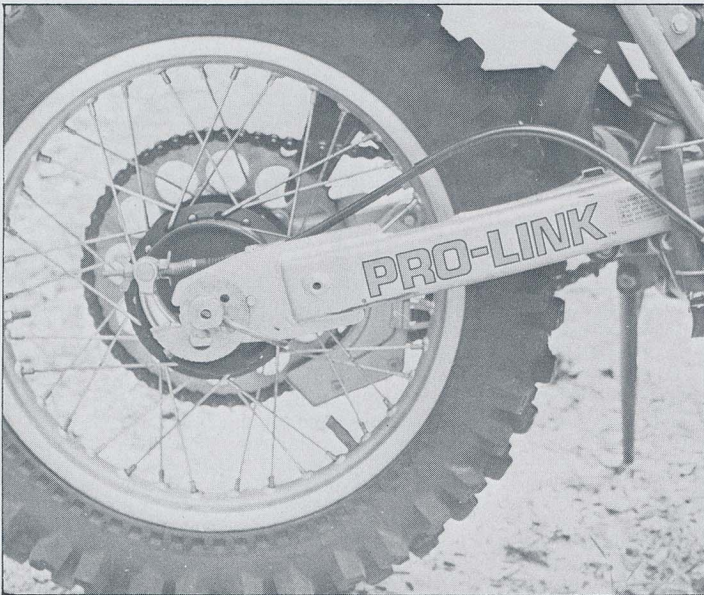
Then AJ wanted to have a go. He took the XR and we followed on the Husqvarna. Now, the inside of AJ's 250 Husky hasn't seen the light of day since it left the assembly line in Sweden. It's got so little compression that the only way to tell if it's in gear when the motor is stopped is to push the bike forward. If the motor starts, then it's in gear.

Despite this, and despite a big fumble at the bottom of the hill, the Husky kept moving and accelerated away. Dropping the back wheel into a rut stopped the bike, but once the wheel was lifted out the Husky got moving again. A hopelessly executed climb but a first time success just the same.

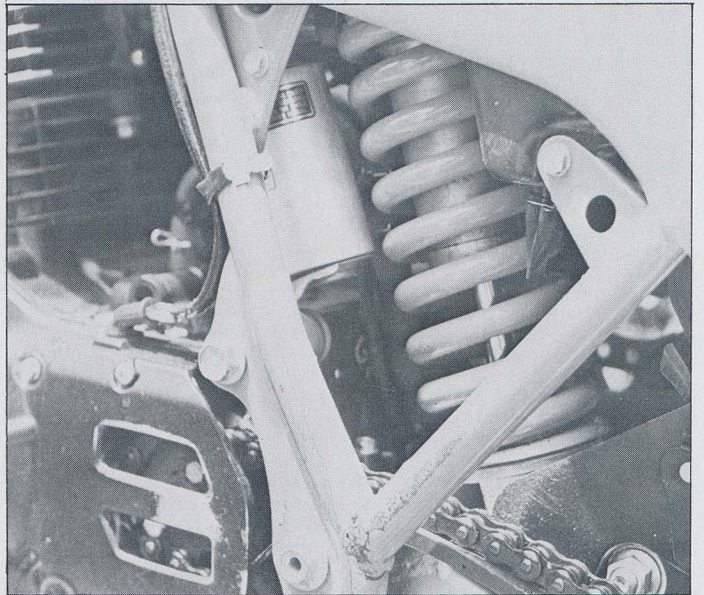
Do you see what we're trying to say?

Coming down showed up another problem on the Honda apart from the worst "feel" I've ever come across on a dirt bike's front brake. The gearbox was very stiff, and should you stall it going downhill while you're in first gear, that's it. You slide to the bottom. You can't bump the XR back to life in first, and changing into a higher gear was out of the question until you came to a standstill and could rock the gears free of load. All bikes experience this problem to a certain extent but the Honda was plain impossible.

On top of that, the gearlever,

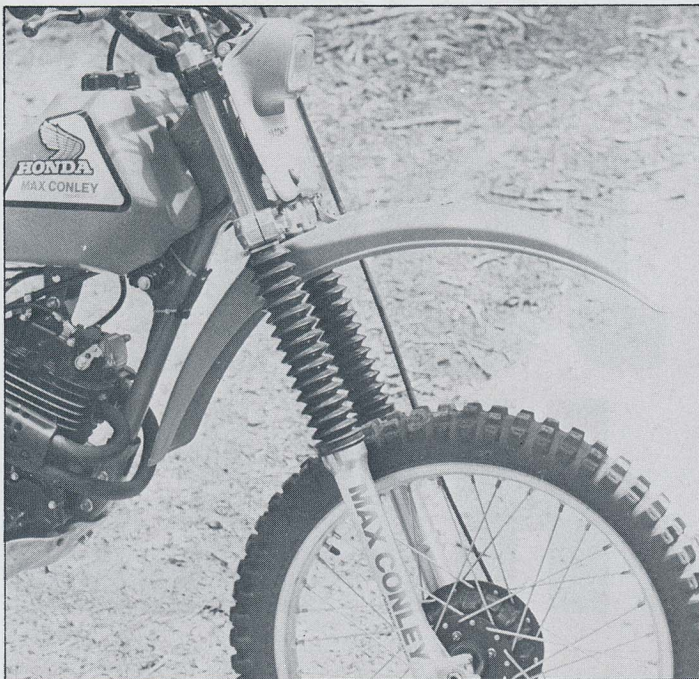


ABOVE
Honda wheels. Much the same as nearly everything else these days: good and strong. Just keep an eye on the spokes during the first few rides.



ABOVE
Here is the biggest disappointment of the whole bike: the rear suspension. Apparently the shock is the culprit. The XR needs a better shock like a bird

needs to fly; like a fish needs to swim; like a flower needs...



Chevy Chase

despite folding tip, was repeatedly bent into the cases, holding you in one gear. At least such a soft lever should ensure no internal gearbox damage when you slam into a stump.

We bent the rear chain guide, too. It had to be straightened before the bike was rideable again. We couldn't straighten that by hand like we did with the gearlever, so make sure a good solid lever is somewhere in the toolkit before those long trail rides.

What else can we mercilessly slam about this fine XR250 Honda? The forks? Nothing special. They would be fairly high on the shopping list of the idle rich XR owner. Second item in fact. Straight after the new shock. That should give you a good idea of their quality.

Now this is the part where you wonder why you even bother to buy bike magazines. The opinion of one test rider was different to another on the subject of the XR's steering. Who's right? I am of course, because I'm writing the test and I rode the bike the most.

Comments like "It feels like a Harley" and "It's a pig" were heard.

I always like to divide steering and turning into two different categories. (You've noticed the change from "we at ADB" to "I" — we're so bitchy here at the office). Some bikes steer and turn well. Others just run well: chuck 'em into a hairpin and they lurch around and head off in a new direction. The only thing is, if you require an accurate line through that hairpin to miss things like rocks and stumps, then you're out of luck with the bike that only turns well.

The Honda steers precisely. It is reluctant to dive-in on a tight line in a smooth corner and trying to make it turn tight in that situation will frustrate you. It turns badly but it steers well. Kind of like a five-year-old Husky. Find a tiny little edge to hook into and the Honda will hit it accurately every time. Flicking through the trees along a narrow trail you can judge how far to miss every obstacle very precisely. Just make sure you steer clear of anything that will take advantage of the suspension and bounce you into disaster.

Accurately picking lines to ricochet around an enduro loop seems a better bet than vague "somewhere in that direction" sliding around the inside line.

Tyres would make a big difference, too. At the risk of being accused of blatant favouritism we'll recommend a set of Metzlers. A 3.75 on the back. "Real Men" may fit something like a 5.50 but small tyres are the go and a 3.75 should suit the XR250 just fine.

THE XR HONDA IN COMPETITION

After all our criticism we'd best have a look at the other side of the coin. Four-stroke Hondas are a force to be reckoned with on the

New Zealand enduro scene and always have been. The Kiwis got the Pro-Link XRs way before we did and they are very popular over there. Enduros are packed with XRs and they are proven winners. At least that's what we have been led to believe. Ever since ADB's editor got the doors blown off his KTM at a New Zealand enduro, we've had nothing to do with the place. Papua New Guinea has much easier pickings.

Admittedly the events over there are much tighter and tougher than your average Australian six-day replica protest rally, but even in their push-it-through-the-bush-and-mud, and carry-it-across-the-river events, the inadequacy of the rear shock makes itself apparent.

Go a step further and look at the ISDE in Italy. Gerritt Wolsink took out a class win on a bike that was well within the financial reach of any keen four-stroke freak. Gerritt fitted a different carb, head and pipe to his XR500 motor but found the bike was still dead-equal in a drag with a stock bike.

He fitted a set of factory special motocross forks (it's handy to be on the Honda factory motocross team) and a rear shock he had built/modified himself (it's handy to know what you are doing). Everything else, right down to the wheels, brakes and controls, was stock XR500.

It was good enough to win the Over 500/Compulsory Four-Stroke class (we assume the bike was bored to an over-500cc capacity). Sure, he was only racing against other four-strokes but his overall score was better than Phil Lovett's. Who are you planning to race against?

CONCLUSION

I reckon I know why a lot of people like four-strokes. It's because they fit in better with their biorhythms. When you feel detuned and easy going the XR250 feels like the best bike in the world. I only feel detuned and easy going half of the time and it's during that time I really like the Honda. But when I want to race, the XR doesn't want to, and in standard trim it will punish any serious attempts you make to push it too hard.

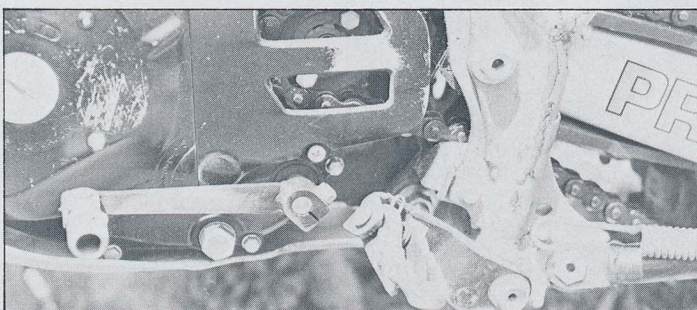
Like I said, ADB is never real keen on extensive bike modification but I can see that an XR with a good shock and forks and decent tyres could be one of the most enjoyable bikes you'll ever ride. The cost of quality suspension is enormous, especially if you are just planning on indulging yourself rather than pressing the bike to its limit in competition, but I can understand someone doing just that.

I reckon any decent two-stroke enduro bike will blow the XR250 to the weeds in competition. Just so long as Gerritt Wolsink or some Smart Alec Kiwi doesn't turn up at that particular competition.

Maybe I'm looking at the whole thing from the wrong angle. I keep thinking about what Wolsink said just as he finished his winning ride at the Six-Day: "That's the best fun I've ever had."

ABOVE
The forks didn't feel too bad but then again we didn't have much time to pick fork faults. We were too busy worrying about the rear end.

Whatever else you may think about the XRs, you can't deny the fact that they look GOOD. In fact we know someone who bought one six months ago and just keeps it inside and looks at it.



ABOVE
Gearlever is vulnerable and gets bent often, despite folding tip. Maybe lift it up a little or add on something in the way of protective bars, otherwise you will spend a lot of time pulling it away from the cases.

ABOVE
Stationary front chain roller is now more stationary than ever. On top of that it's not even a roller anymore, it's a stationary chain-tensioning rubbing block. Much quieter than the roller on the first Pro-Link XRs.