

# RICH *bitch*

Is the RC30 the Alexis of Honda's vee-four dynasty? At 8½ grand Roland Brown thinks it ought to be.





**S**melly taxis, clip-on handlebars, jaywalking pedestrians, lines of immobile traffic, gesticulating despatch riders, ridiculously tall first gear, potholes, big red buses, 30mph speed limits, lines of diesel on the road... *God, I've got to get out of London.*

Midday on a Friday afternoon and my first miles on the born-to-blast RC30 were almost enough to make me want to trade Honda's pricey showpiece in for a tube ticket. I pobbled it five uncomfortable, hazard-filled miles across town to meet a friend for lunch and returned to find a parking ticket tucked neatly inside the Honda's screen. Joey Dunlop just doesn't have this problem.

Any direction would have done; I chose west and set course to chase the weak setting sun down the A40. Gradually the traffic and the frustrations eased. Speeds grew, the urban sprawl fell away, the Honda's exhaust gave out its distinctive bark as I began to make use of the close-set upper ratios in the gearbox.

Clear of the Smoke at last, I took the A413 towards Aylesbury and gave the Honda its head down a long, sweeping hill. The bike hesitated a little just below seven grand, vibrating through seat and footrests, then pulled hard to eight, wind tugging at my head and chest as speed rose to three figures and kept rising past 120mph.

I pushed my bum against the seat-hump's thin padding and crouched down with my chest against the flat-topped petrol tank, helmet almost touching the fairing's low screen through which the road began to unwind faster, like a scene from the *V4 Victory* video. A car far ahead was suddenly not so far ahead; then I was right on it and brushing the brakes before flashing past in a blur of aggressively-styled red, white and blue.

A roundabout loomed and I pulled the brakes, then released them, surprised by the stopping power's ferocity even by current high standards. Four blips, then belatedly a fifth; this was no roadster gearbox. The bike arced into the tight roundabout fast, flopping left-right-left and away with such effortless, nonchalant precision that I somehow felt totally at one with it yet at the same time like some unnecessary appendage, clinging to its back.

Riding the RC30 is like riding no other mass-produced ►

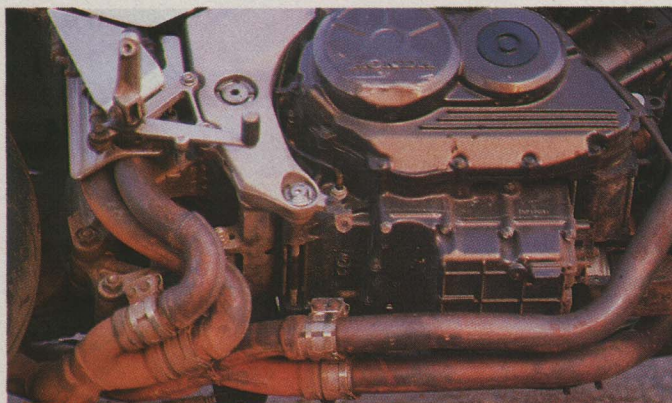
**Helmet: Arai  
Astro Vent.  
Leathers: Scott  
FS racing,  
£239.95. Gloves:  
Frank Thomas  
SEG21 Pro-racer,  
£26.95. Boots:  
Frank Thomas  
SE24 Race  
Europa, £49.95.**



"Thrash me, thrash me." This temptress simply cries out for a good caning

motorcycle — not that its initial run of 1000 machines will be churned out of Hamamatsu *en masse* like just any other Honda motorcycle. Corporate statement or hard-nosed homologation special, call the VFR750R what you will. But don't call it a racer-replica. This is a racer, full stop. Afterthoughts like indicators, ignition lock and a street-legal pipe should not be allowed to suggest otherwise.

Just as Suzuki's new 750 shares the dimensions and styling of that firm's F1/endurance GSX-R, so the RC30 matches the RVF750 raced to glory over the years by the likes of Dunlop, Gardner, Coudray and Igoa. But whereas the Suzuki tempers its



Grubby-looking plumbing's a bit lavatorial but its low-grade stainless should ensure it doesn't rot

alloy frame and radical geometry with road riding concessions like a dual-seat, a widely-spaced road gearbox, a

twin-silencer exhaust, the Honda is diluted by none of those things. A stubby aluminium subframe bolts to

the massive main structure, its rear portion supporting nothing more weighty than a silencer made of a couple of joined-up beer cans. It's as though the Honda resents even having to carry a number-plate.

Its main frame is stunningly simple, and different from the RVF's, we're told, only in that it has been *reinforced* slightly for the road. From the thick steering head a pair of alloy beams runs parallel straight down to the cast swing arm pivot section, suspending the V4 motor without help from downtubes. The rear shock sits vertically as usual, worked via linkages by a swinger that definitely ain't usual unless you're a fully paid-up factory Honda pilot.

Whether the single-sided Pro-Arm is "more rigid than conventional designs... on a weight for weight basis", as Honda's brochure says, starts off doubtful and becomes pure bullshit with the courage of three pints of Brakspears inside you. Said Pro-Arm is definitely well handy for rapid rear wheel changes (which is what it was designed for), and thus should save a few bob in fitters' wages when the back Bridgestone wears out, but it has to be very strong — and thus heavy — to withstand the twisting loads fed into it.

Who cares, though, when it's such a brilliant pose. Inboard disc; tiny rear sprocket, lockwired on; enormous white wheel suspended — from the right, at least — as if by magic... rarely before can anything so unnecessary for road riders have appeared so wonderfully purposeful. Even when I didn't want attention the Honda wouldn't give up. Paranoid about getting the bike stolen from outside my flat, I tried to hide it beneath a plastic cover. But that white wheel shone out below the sheet shouting "£8500, £8500" all night long.

Suspension is equally wondrous. Like Suzuki's new 750J, the RC wears indecently hefty 43mm forks which are adjustable independently for compression and rebound damping. Turning screw adjusters at the slider bottoms (compression) and at the top of the stanchions (rebound) gives a choice of 12 positions for each. The range of adjustment is less than the GSX-R offers — quite firm to very firm, rather than soft to solid — but it's more useable. To save aching wrists I backed the compression damping right off for the road, and lightened the rebound by a couple of clicks: the front end didn't once

misbehave.

The shock's just as fab, with compression damping tunable at the traffic lights via a knob on the remote reservoir tucked within reach beneath the seat. The rebound knob's on the shock body and requires a bit more grovelling, especially when the screwdriver's missing from an otherwise brilliant toolkit (including socket set with ratchet, would you believe?). But you don't need to bother for the road — even backing both off to number

four of about 15 positions, then steering my outsized carcass over the bumpiest roads I could find, failed to make the little Honda lose its cool.

The RC30 simply steers and handles brilliantly; the bike's almost frustrating in its refusal to shake, wobble or weave whatever you throw at it while at the same time remaining as chuckable and easily steered as a 250. Perhaps the frame's stiffness explains how Honda can get away with rake and trail figures at 25 degrees and 91mm

(the GSX-R's are 25 and 99) in conjunction with the 17-inch front wheel.

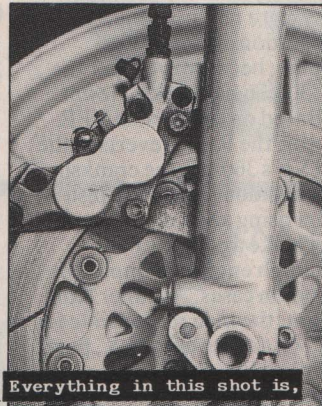
Brakes, too, are quite stunning: four-piston calipers drilling into 310mm rotors with as much force as any I've used on the road. You can come barrelling up to some anonymous A41 roundabout south of Warwick, dig a trench with the front Bridgestone, dip a shoulder to whistle round a dawdling tin box as you flick-flick-flick down the gearbox and then just nudge the bike down until its handlebar feels like it's touching the tarmac.

Suddenly it all comes together: the road, the scenery, the feel of the bike, that droning exhaust. You're at Le Mans, powering onto the pit straight half a lap in the lead as the crowd prepare to invade the track at the end; or you're blasting towards the Waterworks having destroyed all opposition in the TT. On the RC30 you don't just compete in such races in your head — you win them all, too. The RVF always did.

Life isn't always so good on the VFR750R. In town it's a nightmare thanks partly to a riding position which, although it cramps legs less than, say, Suzuki's 750J, puts lots of weight on your arms. The thinly padded seat I didn't find a problem but the tall first gear I certainly did. It redlines at a monstrous 82mph, ruins the standing quarter time (if not the clutch too) and loses pose points with every stall away from the lights. The close-ratio

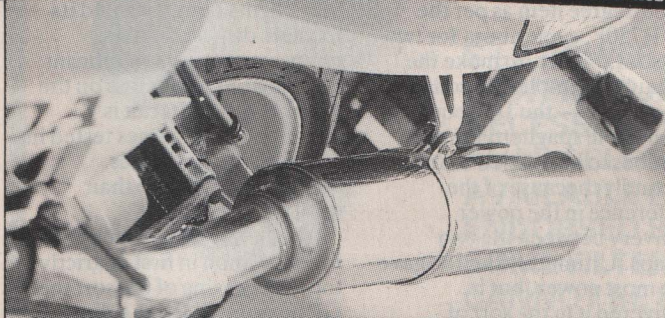
box is not necessary — Superbike rules allow gear ratio changes, anyway — and I'm not convinced it will always be desirable even on the track. Get off the line slowly in a 10-lap proddy race and you've lost before you've reached the first bend.

Other ergonomics are a mix of good, bad and indifferent. Clocks and switches are fine, the former split into the foam-mounted vitals — tacho, temp gauge — and the speedo and warning lights which are separate for easy binning. Twin headlamps are brilliant, literally. Mirrors are great, at least for picking out sponsors' logos on your forearms. At four gallons the petrol tank is too small (barely 100 miles at 35mpg) and its tap so buried in

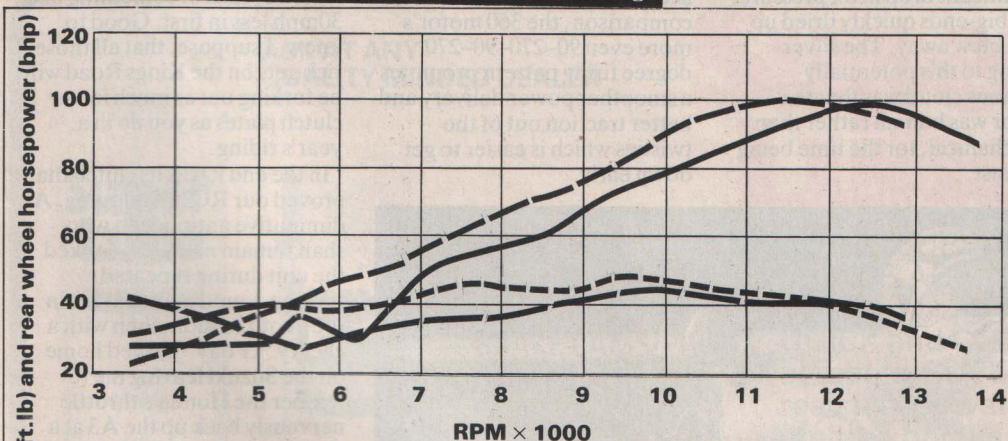


Alternative uses for a Moulinex carrot-slicer: number 30 in a series

Everything in this shot is, quite simply, the business



Can't imagine how works lookalike can get through the noise test — unless it's that ultra-high gearing. Sounds good, though



Maximum horsepower: HONDA VFR750R 100.6bhp @ 12,500rpm —  
 SUZUKI GSX-R750J 101.2bhp @ 11,600rpm — — — —  
 Maximum torque: HONDA 44ft.lb @ 11,500rpm — · — · —  
 SUZUKI 49ft.lb @ 9800rpm. · · · · ·

Tested on Bosch LPS 002 dynamometer at Motad Ltd., Unit 2, Maverton Road, London E3

I've no doubt that the RC30 is a stronger engine than Suzuki's GSX-R750J, so its consistent dyno inferiority on both power and torque is veiled in mystery. Honda offered all manner of theories, the last of which was that it had been jetted-up for its early miles and simply became too rich as it freed up. My bet is that the poor lump was simply cooked on a previous magazine's dyno run and was no longer properly seating its valves, rings, or both. Either way the RC30 shows that numbers aren't everything — even an apparently ailing RC30 is demonstrably quicker on top end and at least as amenable on midrange as a GSX-R. The pronounced flat-spot at 6000rpm, though, is probably genuine — it saves the Honda's noise-test bacon.

Mac McDiarmid

## SPEX HONDA VFR750R

Price.....	£8499
Importer.....	Honda UK Ltd, Power Road, Chiswick, London W4
Warranty.....	12 months/unlimited mileage; 24 months on engine and transmission
Engine.....	Watercooled 16-valve dohc, 90-degree V4 70 x 48.6mm
Bore x stroke.....	748cc
Capacity.....	11:1
Comp ratio.....	4 x 35mm Keihin CVs
Carburation.....	6-speed
Gearbox.....	12V 8Ah battery; 350W alternator; 2 x 60/55W headlamps
Electrics.....	

## CYCLE PARTS

Tyres.....	Bridgestone Exedra 120/70 V 17
Front.....	170/60 VR 18
Rear.....	2 x 310mm discs; 2-piston calipers
Brakes, front.....	220mm disc; 4-piston calipers
Rear.....	twin-piston calipers
Suspension, front.....	43mm telescopic; 12-way compression and rebound damping adjust
Rear.....	Pro-Link monoshock; infinite preload and 12-way compression and rebound damping adjust

## DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....	1405mm (55 1/2 ins)
Weight (dry).....	185kg (407 lb)
Fuel capacity.....	18 litres (4 gal)

## PERFORMANCE

Top speed in 1/2 mile, prone.....	128.8mph
Upright.....	125.5mph
Best one-way.....	133mph
Standing 1/4 mile mean.....	12.89sec/116.5mph
(one way).....	12.75sec/117.5mph
1/4 mile roll-on from 50mph (mean).....	12.84sec/110.3mph
One way.....	12.80sec/110.4mph
Top gear.....	12.2mph/1000rpm
Fuel consumption, overall.....	35.5mpg
Worst figure.....	33.2mpg
Speedo accuracy At ind 30mph.....	30.6mph
At ind 50mph.....	50.3mph
At ind 70mph.....	67.0mph

the seat unit that, ludicrously, I always had to stop to turn it. And the fairing and screen, although aerodynamically superb and a big part of the VFR's top speed, do little for protection unless your chin's interfering with the top fairing bracket. At anything much above a ton you have a choice of either suffering neck-ache or crawling under the petrol tank paintwork like Dominique Sarron on the Mistral straight.

The factory RVF750s top 180mph at the end of the Mistral at Bol d'Or time (so that's why our GSX-R couldn't hold the tow last year) but the VFR testbike never felt as though it would reach the low-150s top speed recorded by a couple of other magazines. On the way up to MIRA the speedo needle wouldn't budge over 140mph on a flat-out bit of A5; at the test track the Honda's speed after half a mile was slightly down on its Suzuki rival's figures last month.

More worrying was the V4 motor's general lack of smoothness and urge. A horrible flat-spot just below 7000rpm was followed by most un-Honda-like vibration through pegs and seat from seven to just over eight thou. After that things smoothed out, and the engine pulled more cleanly towards the 12,500rpm realine, but the RC30 just didn't have the sweet, grunty feel I'd expected. Motad's dyno showed why: a nasty, jagged curve, with a big dip around 7000rpm, that peaked at barely 100bhp instead of nudging 110 horsepower as we might have expected.

It was the sort of curve that is often dramatically improved by a change of spark plugs. Motad's man took one look at the VFR's deeply-hidden engine and ran, but a plug-

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change and quick once-over at Honda's Chiswick HQ merely made matters slightly worse back on the dyno next morning. It was all starting to get rather puzzling not just for us, but Honda too. They suggested that it might be the carbs becoming progressively out of synch combined with a couple of sets of dodgy plugs. Due to the lack of previous complaints, plus the fact that two other publications had had their pound of flash(sic) out of it prior to our turn suggested that we'd just been landed with a rather tired example of an otherwise potentially brilliant bike.

However, the Australians seemed to be having their fair share of problems with the RC30 too. Just around the same time as we started to experience grief, a stop-press reported that several race-kitted RC30s had fried their internals on their first outing down-under. Apparently the RC30s in question had been pre-production models that had been race-kitted without being thoroughly checked. The resultant internal sloppiness had given rise to such a significant drop in oil pressure, the big-ends quickly dried up and blew away. The silver lining to this potentially ruinous cloud was that the error was human rather than mechanical, for the time being at least.

Even the suggestion of a reliability problem must have been greeted with horror by Honda, just as they thought they were restoring their reputation after the VFs. Shame, because on paper the RC30's engine looks a jewel.

Based on the normal VFR motor, the RC30 reverts to the old VF's 360-degree crankshaft arrangement which has piston pairs rising and falling together much like a couple of old Triumph engines mounted on common cases. As tuner Ron Grant, the man responsible for the 360 degree crank 6X, put it "It's just like a twin, mate."

The return of the 360 degree crank on the RC30, in place of a 180 degree item as per the VFR750F, came about for two reasons. Firstly, to make the exhaust as simple and compact as possible — the 180 requiring a veritable spaghetti junction of tubes to be efficient. And secondly, because of the difference in the power delivery between the two lumps. Ultimately the 180 gave the most power, but it delivered it in the sort of kamikaze way which promoted wheelspin under hard acceleration out of corners. By comparison, the 360 motor's more even 90–270–90–270 degree firing pattern promotes a smoother power delivery and better traction out of the twisties which is easier to get down early.

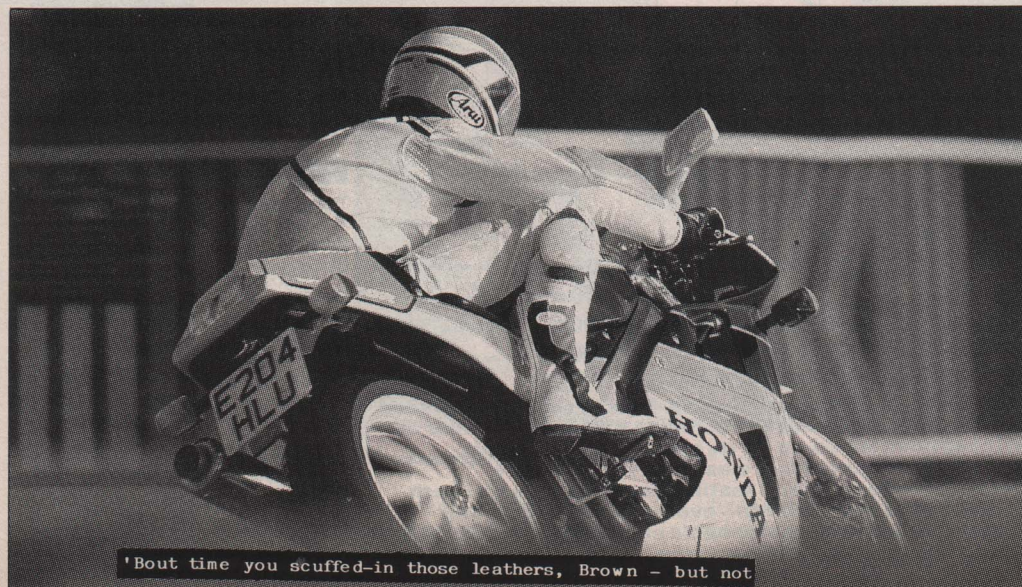
Another side-effect of the 360 crank's smoothness is its psychological effect on the rider. Paul Lewis, no stranger to this particular engine, noticed that "riders always come in (off the track) saying they're slower on 360s than on the 180 degree crank jobs — until they see the stop-watch. Then they're convinced the 360 is the business."

Compared to the stock VFR, rocker-arms and tappets are abandoned for bucket-and-shim valve operation, all worked by a pair of gear-driven cams running in a mix of needle-roller and ball bearings. The new system saves weight and friction as well as space. Inlet valves and carbs are bigger but the cylinder heads are significantly smaller: vital in slimming the bulky VFR lump into RC30 proportions.

A vague question mark still lingers over the engine's ability to dispose of its massive heat production, though. Despite the two massive, fan-assisted radiators curving round the forks, and the rather novel water cooled oil filter, the V-four engine demonstrated its resolute disgust for high temperatures via a significant heat-related power loss on the dyno. Whilst this trait is common to all engines tested in this way, the RC30 was demonstrably worse than most.

Then there's those gearbox ratios. 90mph in first is strictly top-end gearing of the sort the GP boys use at Rijeka. For most UK circuits even works GP-type projectiles would be aimed at max of something like 30mph less in first. Good to know, I suppose, that all those rich gets on the Kings Road will be forking out as much in clutch plates as you do in a year's riding.

In the end it was its clutch that proved our RC30's undoing. A diminutive antipodean who shall remain nameless cooked the unit during repeated turning-round manoeuvres in the photo session; then with a cheery "G'day" flashed home on the Suzuki leaving me to feather the Honda's throttle nervously back up the A3 at a slip-dictated max of 50mph. God knows what the middle-aged pilot of the Honda Stream must have thought as he overtook this garish racetrack refugee, its leather-clad jockey straining to tuck down behind the screen for those last few miles an hour, but I hope he enjoyed the experience. Somehow I don't think many riders will find passing a VFR750R quite so easy in the future. ■



'Bout time you scuffed—in those leathers, Brown — but not

on the RC30, please