

C O S M I

Is the joke on Honda in the Superstars face-off? Paul Lewis pitches Honda's RC30 against Suzuki's GSX-R750J to find out



This was where the gaff got blown. All around the UK — probably all over the world — racers and street cowboys alike have been hoping that Suzuki's J-model answer to the old GSX-R750's shortcomings would be a match for the RC30's megabucks. On the face of it there were realistic grounds for guarded optimism: race results in five continents have repeatedly shown that there

wasn't very much wrong with the Suzuki; on the other hand Honda's last attempt to buy proddy success, the VF1000R, was a complete lemon.

There was only one way to find out — pitch the two in head-to-head confrontation in the hands of a pair of top-class riders. Paul Lewis was chosen for his rare talent, his experience of both Suzuki and Honda works machinery, and for being an all-round good bloke. Eric McFarlane,

runner-up in the '87 *Bikel* Honda CBR Challenge, picked himself by happening to turn up when the intended second rider couldn't get his act together. The venue was Cadwell Park.

To watch Lewie race you'd think he knows more about picking bikes up than setting them up. Not so. The Angry Ant talks more coherent sense on the subject than anyone I've met, with the possible exceptions of Kenny Roberts

cuts



and Ron Haslam. I can think of at least one current mis-resourced racing team who'd do a damn sight better with him in their ranks.

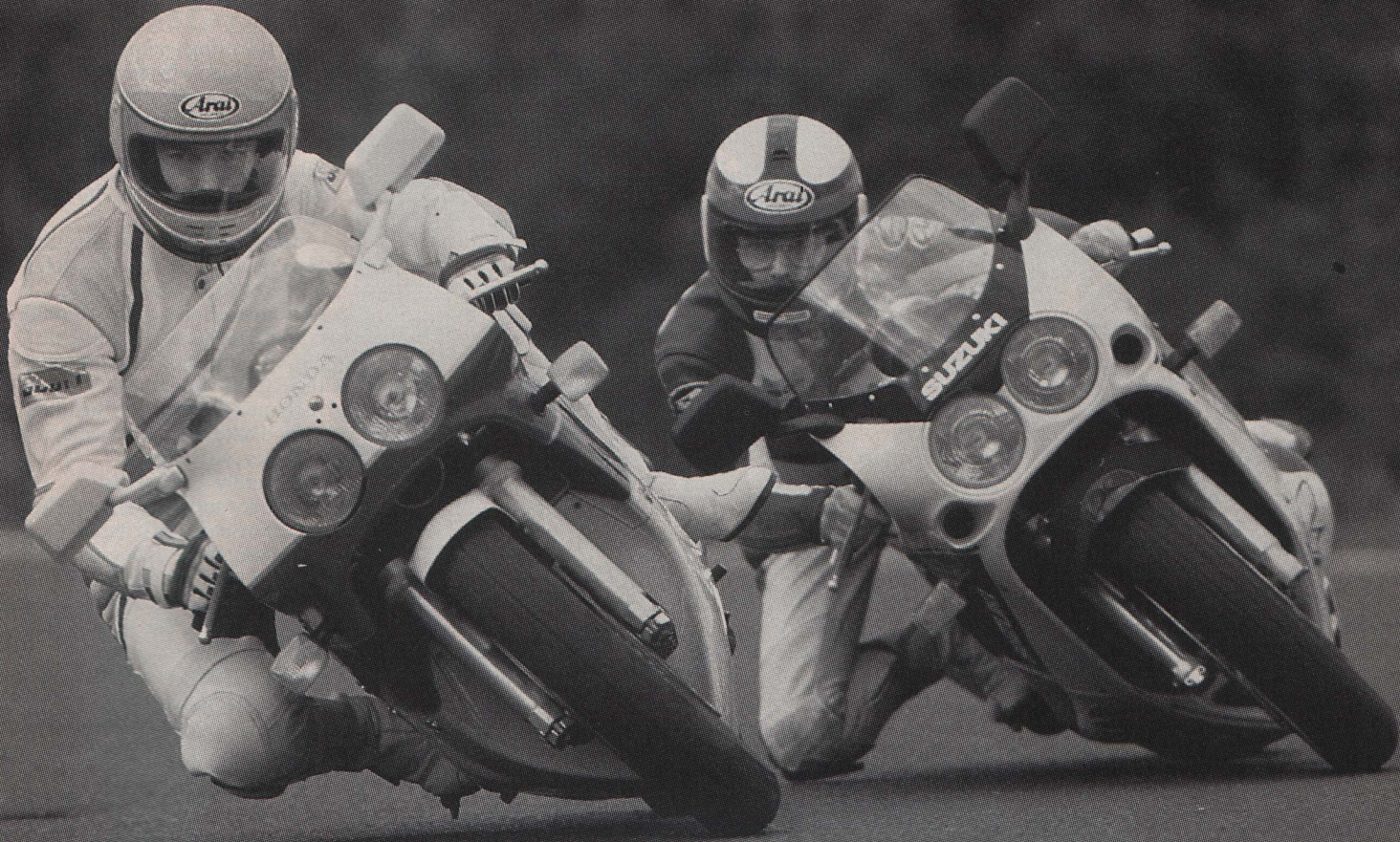
Having said that, it was Eric, who'd just bought a GSX-R for proddy racing, who made the most telling remark of the day. After his first session on the RC30 he pulled in with his chin visibly sagging out of his helmet: "I've wasted my money — glad I haven't had the tank painted yet. I'll give it



Lewis gives the low-down to McFarlane: "If you ain't got one of these, mate, forget it!"

PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID GOLDMAN

Cosmic Cuts

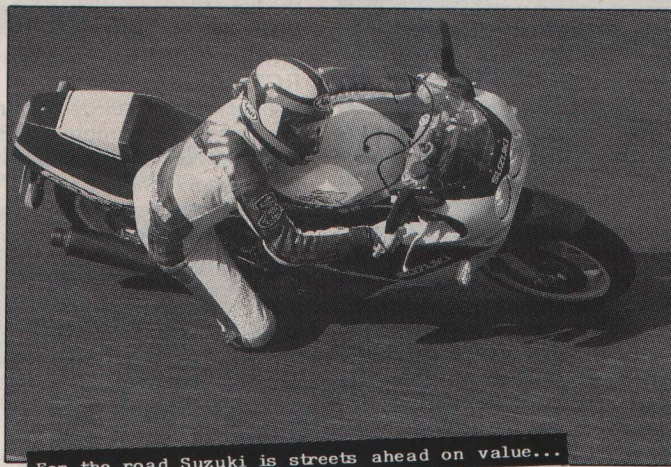


"Scuse me, cobber - are you looking for a race or a pedicure?"

100 per cent at the Donington round then, if we get nowhere, it's up for sale."

Lewie's comments tended to be more detailed, and pithy: "Those tyres are complete shithouse; fancy building a bike like that then putting junk on it." Although show models wore Dunlop radials, stock Hondas sit on a pair of Bridgestone Exedras which show the weirdest wear characteristics. At both front and rear only the crowns showed the desired 'orange peel' texture; the shoulders were still smooth and not working at all but had clear lateral scratchmarks — like razor cuts — as evidence of every slide. Not good enough, Honda — anyone paying 8½ grand to put one of these on the road is entitled to something up to the job.

Having got that off his chest, Lewie grew enthusiastic: "I had to come in 'cos I was getting carried away, but this thing's fantastic, it just feels so right. For a start the riding position's brilliant — just like modern GP stuff, nose down with the rider really in control and dominating the machine instead of the other way round. The Suzuki, with that humungous tank, you sit in —



For the road Suzuki is streets ahead on value...

really old-fashioned."

Similarly, Lewie was hugely impressed by the balance and geometry of the RC30 and didn't think a huge amount of setting-up would be needed. Even on Bridgestones the forks were clearly using their full travel to the extent of kissing the fairing on full bounce. Lewie reckoned that some riders would just increase the compression adjustment, but predicted that this would tend to produce patter under braking. Far better to go for fork springs one increment stiffer, possibly reduce the air gap to reduce brake dive progressively, then click up the

rebound damping to compensate for the stronger return effect of the new springs. While on the subject, he commented that the damping adjustment marks — S(oft) and H(ard) — should more logically be F(ast) and S(low).

It wasn't so easy to evaluate the rear shock due to the reluctance of the tyre to lay down any worthwhile power out of corners, but if felt good. There were no complaints about the hop and patter under braking which is sometimes associated with single-sided swing arms. Lewie speculated that swing arm

'drop' — how far the rear wheel spindle is below the swing arm pivot — must be somewhere near the ideal of 11 degrees to be giving such good action under power and braking.

If the Honda has a weakness it's in the unlikely choice of a 90mph first gear which, allied to the tyres' deficiencies, made it no quicker than a TZR250 Yamaha for the first few yards out of Cadwell's ultra-tight hairpin. Anyone looking for a quick profit would do well to snap up the RC30 clutch plate franchise, sharpish.

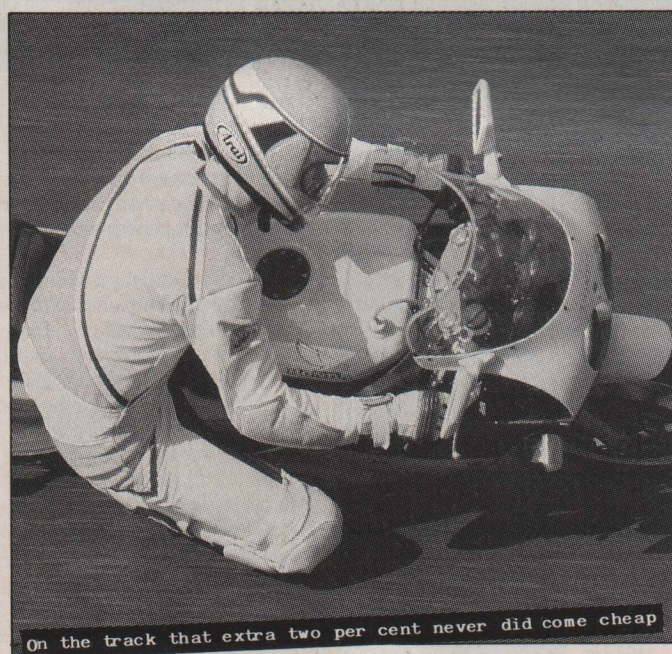
(This sentence turned out to be unusually prophetic; at the instant it was being typed the RC30 was lurching its clutch, terminally.)

The Honda is also "amazingly stable — it doesn't shake its head or do anything silly" even without a steering damper and with the 50mph cross-winds which were lashing Cadwell. This also suggests good aerodynamics. Despite the naff tyres both riders found the steering predictable enough to make even front end slides easily retrievable.

Eric was most impressed by the Honda's "superb riding position, smooth power, brakes just out of this world —



This economy measure only works if front tyres cost more than clutch plates



On the track that extra two per cent never did come cheap

pity about the tyres." The four-pot Nissin stoppers are "really savage initially, but with plenty in hand, even with two fingers. Super feel — minutely adjustable, like a throttle in reverse — so you can really control your entry into corners."

Lewie had been sure of the Honda's massive superiority merely by following a couple of Suzukis. Even just a few laps on the GSX-R convinced him he'd been right: "It squirms, yaws and wallows all over the

place — it'd take a month's work to get it as good as it's ever going to get and then it'd still be no contest." Eric thought the RC30 far superior but acknowledged that the J-model Suzuki is "more stable — a lot more stable — than the old one but steers easier, too, with the smaller wheels. And its broader power will be better in the wet. The throttle is smoother and lighter and the brakes possibly a bit better but there's not much in it. It's a bit like riding a ball-point pen,

though — dropping in and picking up on the corners all the time."

Whilst there are good grounds for believing that the RC30 is around 8 bhp stronger than the GSX-R, our specimens dyno'd more-or-less equal for both peak power and midrange. Honda gave the bike the once-over and pronounced it OK despite our doubts. Lewie, on the other hand, said it felt "a bit flat" and at Cadwell tell-tales of smoke on the overrun suggested a valvegear or piston ring problem. A slightly erratic tickover might also have indicated a spark plug on the verge of oiling-up from the same fault.

Lewie's response was typical: "a bit of revs cures most things — if it don't run right low down, don't go down there." But the amazing thing was that the possibly ailing Honda, despite its tyre-induced sloth out of corners, was still marginally quicker than the equal-power Suzuki on top-end. Eric, not surprisingly, was stunned when he heard of the RC30's possible handicap.

But there's a lot more to racing than sheer top-end. Lewie spoke of the importance of the way an engine comes "from off-the-power onto the power" — a must for rear-

wheel steering technique. "You can see why works RVFs go so well in endurance racing — they're less critical on power — it must be dead easy to glide through lapped traffic. The RC30 doesn't feel fast, but it is."

Maybe, at £3749 dearer, the Honda ought to be that much better than the Suzuki. The bottom line, I suppose, is could you spend the difference on a GSX-R and make it as good as the RC30? "Not really," reckoned Lewie, "the Suzuki's a good bike but it's basically a roadster, so it needs completely re-working, geometry and everything. The RC30 is a racer so it has all the chemistry there to begin with — same geometry as the RVF, give or take a degree here and a few mm there. The Honda also feels 50lbs lighter (actually around 20lb), whether it is or not. GSX-Rs are just old-fashioned. And the Honda has miles better ground clearance. I don't suppose it's fair, Eric, but if you ain't got one of these, forget it."

Eric, meanwhile, was doing a little mental arithmetic. "In the UK proddy championship there'll be Brian Morrison, Ian Duffus, Colin Gable and John Gainey — all on RC30s. If I'm going to be spending money fighting for fifth place all the time it's hardly worth going out, is it?" Assuming the Suzuki's first gear advantage gives it the holeshot over the Honda, its riders are going to need bloody big elbows to stay ahead. ■

RC30 SECOND OPINION

At £8500 this isn't a bike, it's a fantasy. But what a fantasy! Half a mile after boarding the RC30, and still in the thick of City traffic, I already felt like Patrick Igoa diving into the final turn on the the works VFR at last year's Bol. The riding position — nose down, bum up, the steering head like a rapid-response joystick in front of you — is sheer, shameless evocation. This is as close to a works ride as most of us are likely to get. For as long as you're holding the throttle the ethics of Honda's 'buying' success, much less the morality of a machine worth about six years' dole money, doesn't enter your head. Maybe it should but dreams, at least, are free.