

TESTS: Harley-Davidson FLH Classic, Yamaha IT175, Honda FT500 Ascot, Suzuki GS550M, Honda Motocompo, MR30 Pocket Racer

SPECIAL EDITION

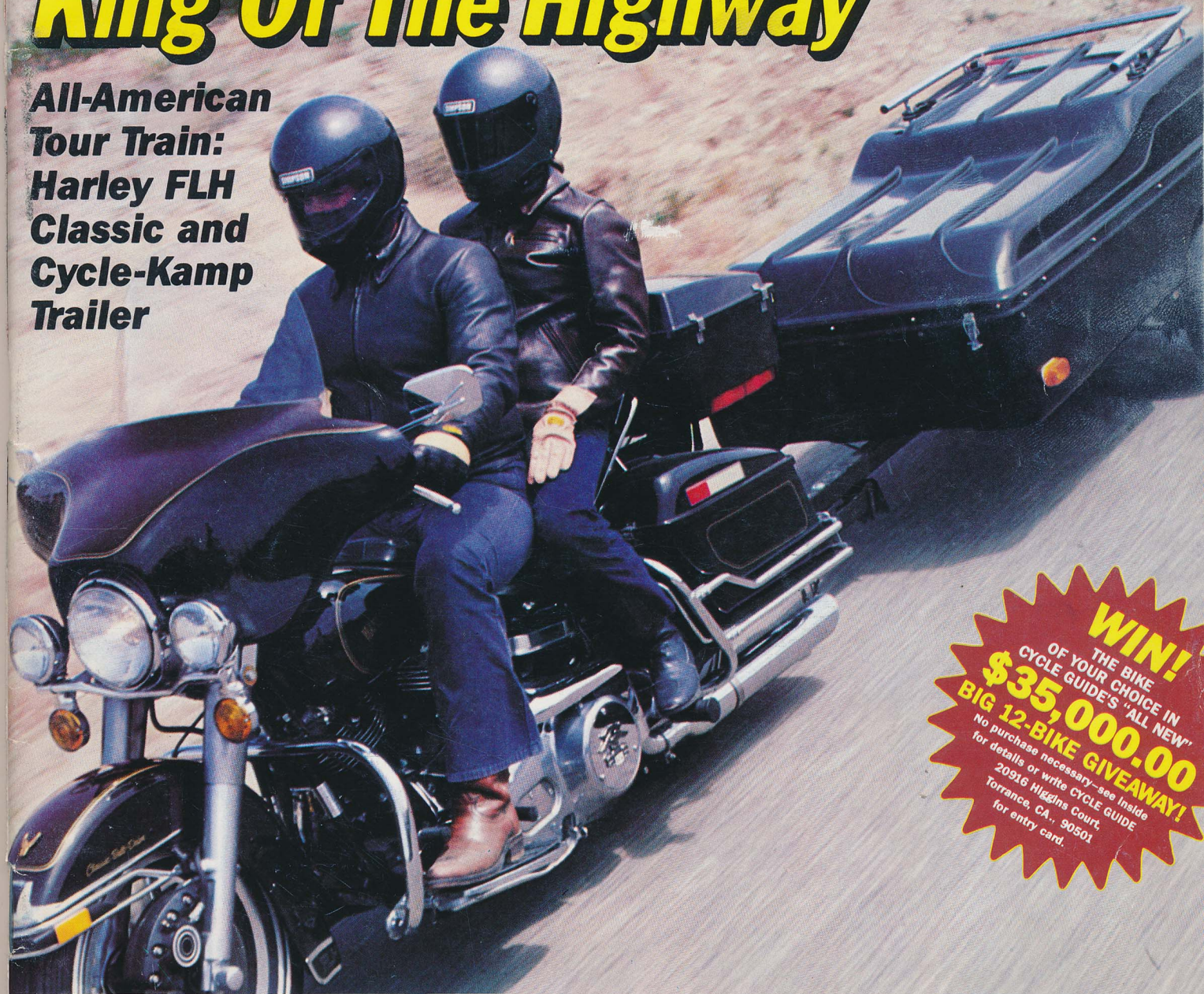
CYCLE GUIDE

SPECIAL EDITION:
Saddlebag Buyer's Guide

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QUOTE:

"Harley's FLH Classic is nothing less than tradition on wheels. It might have been born in a shower of sparks between some great hammer and anvil at the dawn of the Motorcycle Age."

—Pg. 18

ON THE COVER:

Chris Eastman captured the All-American Tour Train challenging the notion that you can get away from it all by taking it all with you. It's turn-key touring, with one hitch. But don't underrate the rig; it's a real sleeper.

CYCLE
GUIDE



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ROAD TEST:



PHOTOGRAPHY © 1982 PATRICK BEHAR

Big-bore singles have been mesmerizing motorcyclists since the very dawn of the Castrol Age. The brutal simplicity of a lone piston the size of John Wayne's balled fist pounding out power drums a primitive message to us, a message that no combination of smaller or more numerous Toshiro Mifune-sized fists can match.

Until its demise in 1981, Yamaha's SR500 was the last lure for those lovers of street singles, and even that bike's relatively high weight, lackluster performance and cranky manners couldn't prevent its elevation to cult-bike status. Conventional wisdom held that the reason was its close kinship with the Britbikes of the Middle Castrol Age; those Fifties bangers like the BSA, Matchless and Norton 500s, whose graceful curves of bodywork and handling the SR mimicked as faithfully as it did their boneshaking vibration. Because of this, no one was very surprised when the SR faded away; the only people interested in big singles, so the reasoning went, were the Brit-bike-clone folks—and they already had their bikes.

The advent of the Honda FT500 Ascot shakes this tidy little notion like a gun-fighter crashing a tea party. Both the name and the styling tell you this bike is patterned after nobody's café racer; it's a straight-out, all-American vision, uncluttered by a single Britishism. The name on the tank says "Made in Japan," but like all those boulevard bombers, it's as American as Reaganomics, and not just in styling. The refusal of the bulk of America's riders

to tolerate hard starting or serious vibration has resulted in the Ascot's main achievement: bringing together the counterbalanced big single and electric starting.

Designed and fostered by Honda Research, an arm of American Honda, the FT 500 (that's right: "FT" stands for "Flat Track") began life as a styling exercise glued onto a 1981-vintage XL500S. The dual-purpose mission of the XL wasn't suitable for the FT, though, so the hallmarks of that bike—23-inch front wheel, long-travel suspension and high pipe—were tossed out. The FT was to be slightly sporty, but not for the blue groove, despite its dirt-racy handle. It was to be a gutsy, tall-in-the-saddle alternative to equiv-

alently priced (circa \$2000) bikes like 400cc twins, a lure for both neophyte and experienced rider alike.

To translate the words into hardware, Honda did not turn to startling leaps of engineering. The 498cc overhead-cam engine sucks and blows through the same four-valve head used on the XL500, each valve being worked by its half of a forked rocker arm. And each rocker is fitted with screw-type adjusters that are reached easily through O-ring-sealed caps. A self-regulating cam-chain tensioner eliminates manual adjustment, and the FT uses the same cam timing and valve lift as the XL. The Ascot breathes differently, though; a 35mm Keihin constant-vacuum carb with accel-





Honda FT500 Ascot

*Electric starting and the
blue groove bring
Thumping to Everyrider.*

BY STEVE THOMPSON

erator pump replaces the XL's 32mm slide-needle Keihin. Exhaust header size is the same, but the FT's slightly less restrictive muffler and bigger carb give it a concomitant increase in torque.

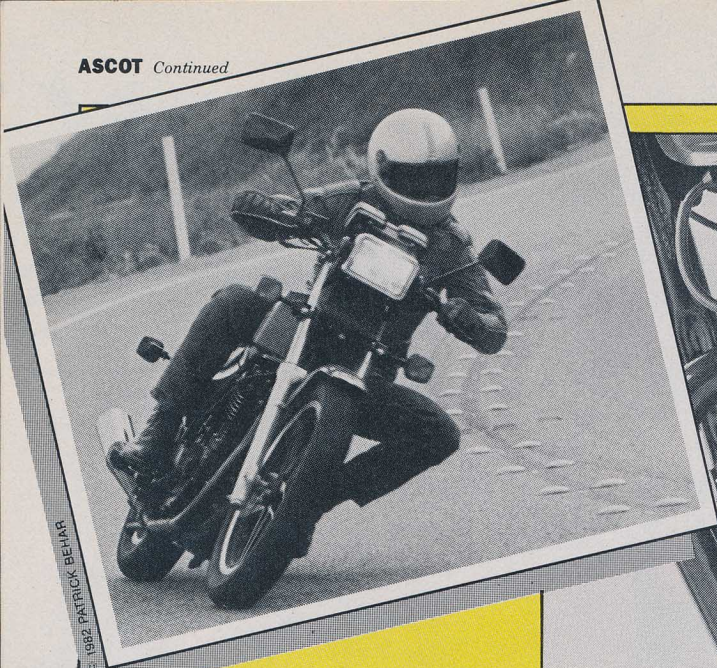
To handle both the greater torque and what Honda expects to be the FT's more arduous street life, the drivetrain was strengthened. Gear ratios are common to FT and XL, but the Ascot's teeth are wider and have a higher-grade heat-treatment specification. The steel plates in the 14-plate clutch are thicker, up from 1.2 to 1.6mm, and the final-drive chain was upgraded from a conventional No. 520 to an O-ringed No. 530. To keep the engine running cooler, oil capacity grew from 2.1

to 2.4 quarts and the sump sprouted fins.

It was the thumper's massive power strokes, though, that presented the engineers with their biggest challenge: adapting electric starting without forcing a redesign of most of the major engine components. It took no less than four separate gear reductions to connect the starter motor to the alternator's large external flywheel (which has gear teeth machined around its outside diameter) at the required ratio of almost 30 to 1. The pivotal component in the system is an automotive-style Bendix-gear mechanism that engages the flywheel teeth and also incorporates a roller-sprag one-way overrun clutch to prevent the starter motor from accidentally being overrevved when

the engine fires up. On a car, that function usually is handled by the Bendix itself, since it is inherently designed to "kick out" once engine speed exceeds Bendix-gear speed; but because a big single's engine rpm varies so drastically while being cranked over (the engine rotation slows as the huge piston pushes against compression, then speeds up considerably once past Top Dead Center), the FT employs a solenoid-actuated locking device that holds the Bendix in the engaged position as long as the starter button is depressed. Otherwise, the normal rpm fluctuations would cause the Bendix to engage and disengage constantly while cranking, ultimately damaging the mechanism.

Continued

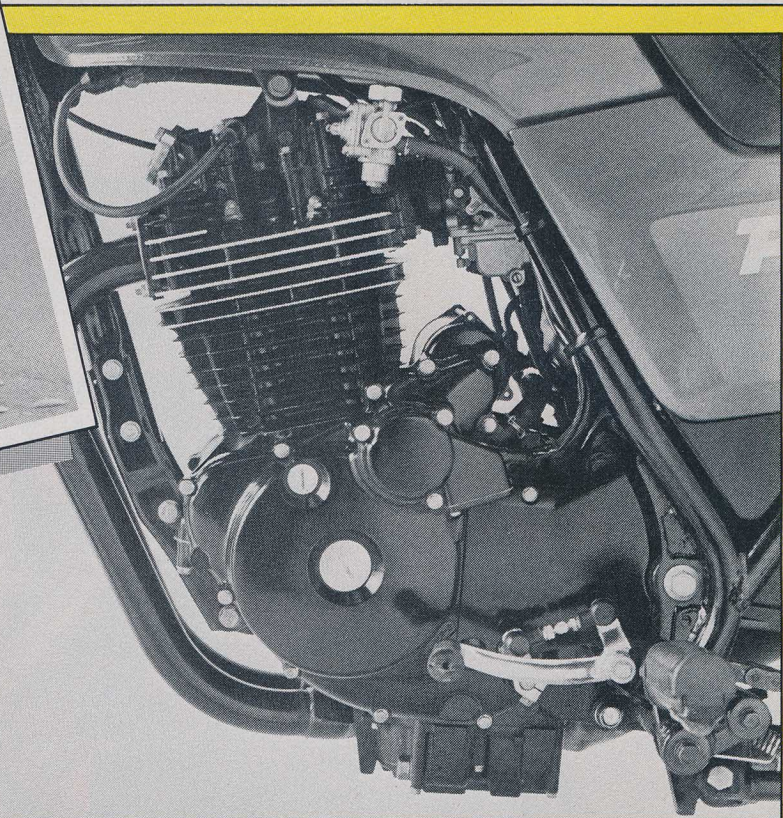


© 1982 PATRICK BEHAR

No Britbike nostalgia for this Honda; the FT500 has a pure American flavor.

Honda's four-valve, 498cc, four-stroke single takes its act on the road

The XL powerplant is redesigned to excell on American pavement.



PHOTOGRAPHY © 1982 VIC HUBER

All this electric-start paraphernalia, in conjunction with the CV carb and larger oil sump, adds 11.6 pounds to the FT's engine weight, bringing it to 103.6 pounds. But it also alleviates the need for a kickstarter, at least in Honda's opinion, and so the FT does not have one, nor the associated exhaust-valve "compression release" that is standard on kick-only XL/XR500s. We didn't share Honda's opinion, though, when four teeth sheared off of the pinion that drives the Bendix shaft on our test bike, rendering the starter inoperable. And without either a kickstarter or a compression release, starting the thumper using the run-and-bump method was just short of impossible. Honda's tech people swore that they had never heard of any FT500 electric-start failures, so one can only hope that our problem was not typical of the breed.

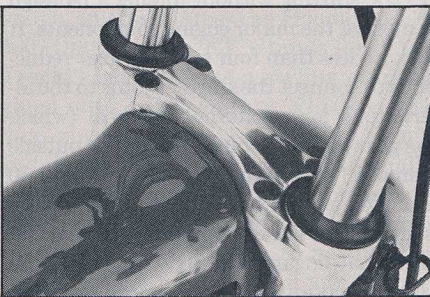
Cradling the not-too-different engine is a frame that is itself similar to the '81 XL's. With the exception of the welded-on passenger footpeg brackets, at first glance the frames might be mistaken for one another. But in addition to differing geometries, there are tubing differences: The FT's frame is thicker in virtually all areas, with greater outside tube diameters.

However much the frames are similar, though, the XL and FT suspensions are



FT instruments are mounted high

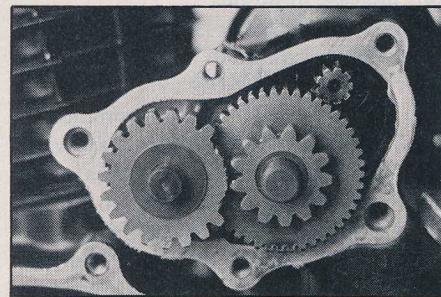
Hinting at a dirty bloodline.



FT fender/fork brace combination

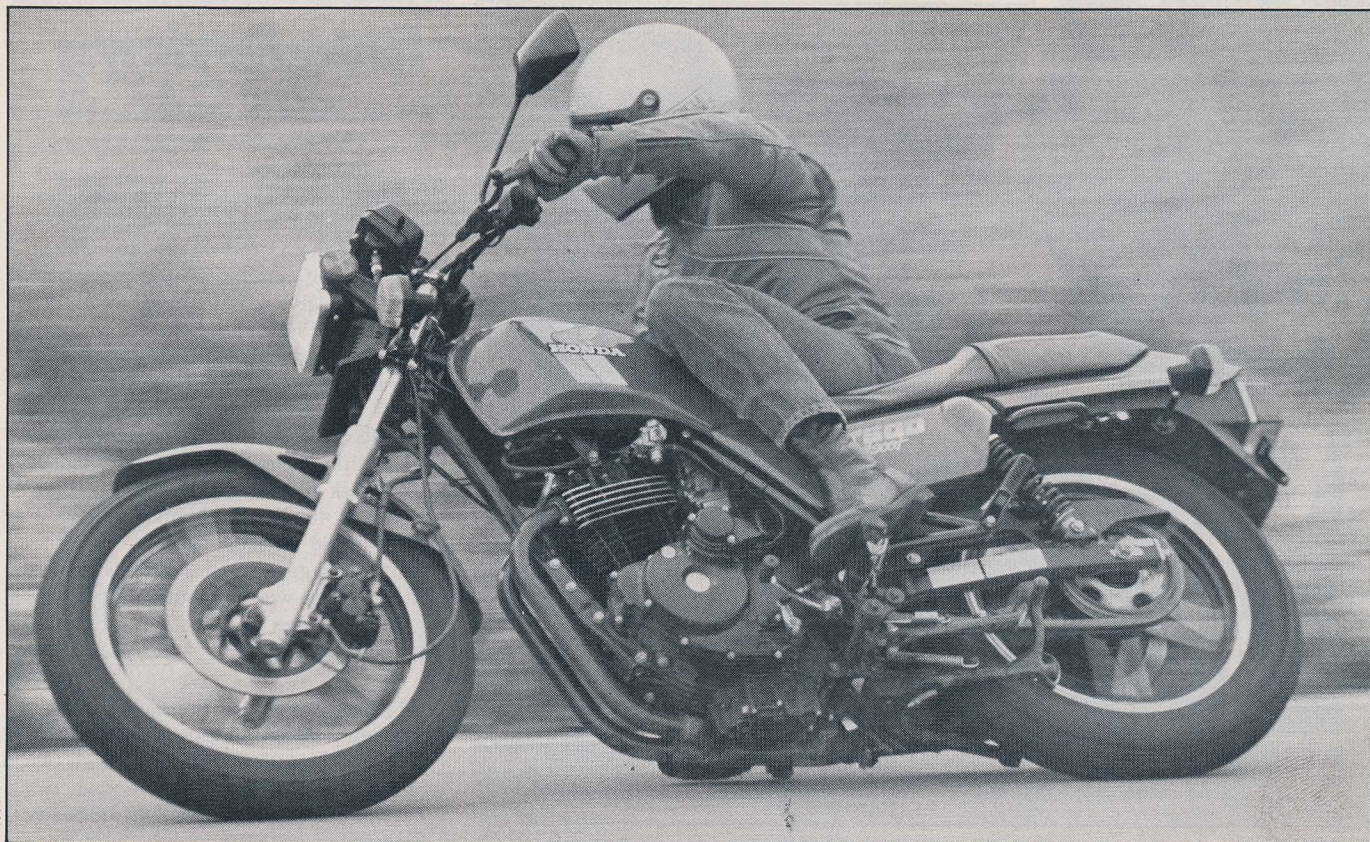
An aluminum link for long legs.

not. The FT's Showa fork uses an air assist through separate fittings on each fork cap, with 37mm fork tubes and slightly more than six inches of travel, the latter being a dead giveaway of the bike's street intentions. Likewise, the two gas-charged Variable Hydraulic Damping (VHD) shocks, delivering 4.6 inches of travel and offering five spring preload settings, echo that intended use. The box-section swingarm is new, its end-cap axle adjusters a product of CR motocross experience. And the FT500's alloy bolt-on fork brace can also be seen on certain other 1982 Honda models, as can the Enkei cast aluminum wheels. And although Honda spokesmen admit that these one-piece "mags" offer no functional advantages over Honda's ComStar composite wheels, their styling—and subse-



First-year electric starter

Teething pains for the young FT.



The Ascot's designated mission for America is a Japanese interpretation of a very old British-born concept

A big single can take to European twisties, but its power and suspension are more suited for city riding.

quent sales appeal—mandates their use.

The aggregate of all this adaptation and styling, this mating of push-button starting and John Wayne propulsion, is a motorcycle that seems to promise something different from the mainstream. It's a promise fulfilled, as well, and you know that from the moment you first swing a leg over it. A high steering head, a fairly low seat and a small fuel tank produce a strange but not uncomfortable riding position. The seat's step is not too far forward for tall riders, and the seat-to-pegs distance is well within standard figures. The strange part is where your hands rest: The handlebar itself is low-rise, almost BMW-style, but the steering head is so tall your hands are still almost dirt-bike high. The XL500S served up the same feeling, for the same reasons.

Nothing about the FT's behavior under way will intimidate a novice street rider; it is a friendly motorcycle. Control efforts are low, the clutch in particular being docile and linear, the gearbox neither a paragon of slick virtue nor a clunky nuisance. Generous use of rubber in the footpegs and under the handlebar, allied to the dual chain-driven counterbalancers, keeps the vibration level low, both at idle and any speed thereafter. And cannon-like shape notwithstanding, the black-chrome exhaust megaphone emits a Fed-pleasing note more akin to Toro than Thunderbike.

Because the vibration is so low and the power delivery so gentle, the FT's novelty quickly wears off and its predictable braking, light steering and precise tracking soon are taken for granted. The little things, too,

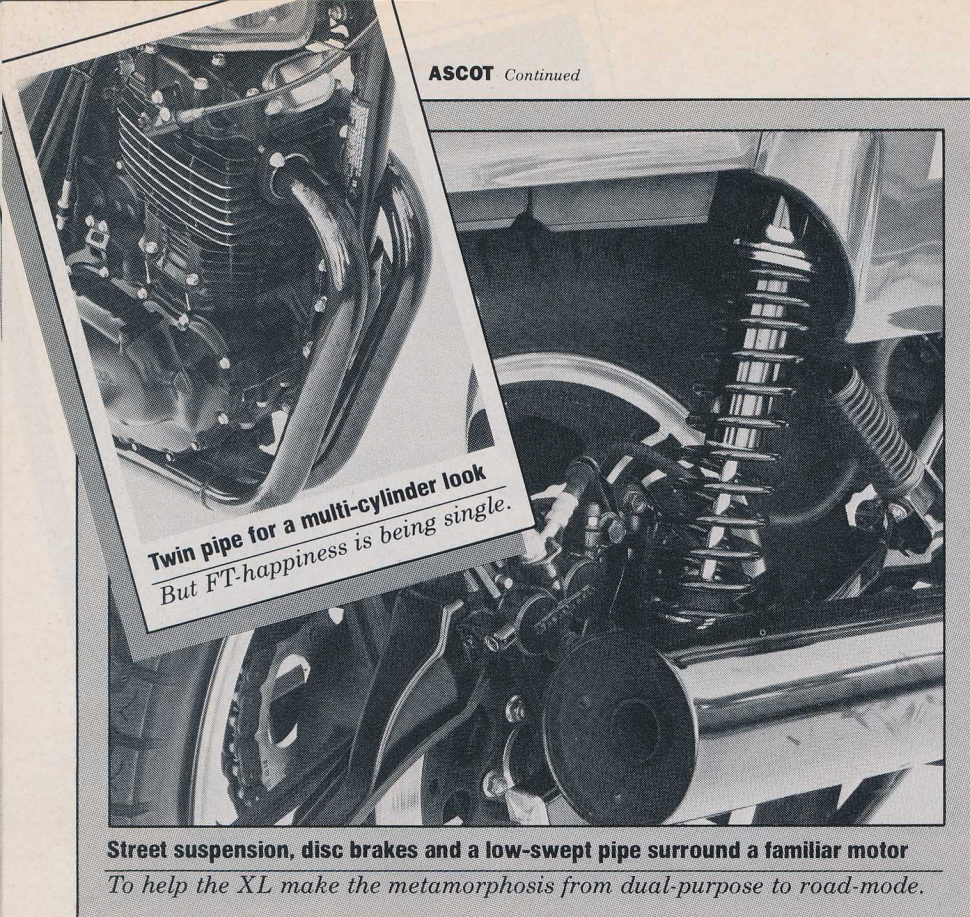
are all reassuring; the mirrors are easy to adjust, hardly ever blurring, the rectangular halogen headlight's beam is broad, full and well-defined for nightwork, and the instrumentation's backlit numerals and needles are crystal-clear. At low and medium speeds, it is a pleasant ride, and except for its exhaust note and narrowness, not so much different from any other middleweight.

But the sportbike allusions of the styling hint at apex-strafting as a legitimate pursuit for the FT, so inevitably, higher speeds beckon. As they're reached, it's obvious that the Yokohama S-rated tires grip moderately well; and with the fork air pressure set at maximum (range: 6-12 psi) and shocks on max preload, the Ascot wheels crisply into any turn, switchback to

COMPARATIVE TEST DATA:

Make and Model	Quarter-Mile, sec/mph	Top Speed, mph	Weight, lbs	Stopping Distance From 60 mph, ft.
Honda FT500 Ascot-'82	14.91/83.7	97	360	146
Yamaha SR500-'78	14.98/84.2	92	364	132
Honda CB400T Hawk-'80	14.37/88.6	100	391	139
Honda GL500 Interstate-'81	14.88/86.4	96	517	140
Kawasaki KZ440D-'81	14.59/89.1	107	383	135
Suzuki GS450S-'80	14.09/92.5	100	397	127

Continued



Street suspension, disc brakes and a low-swept pipe surround a familiar motor

To help the XL make the metamorphosis from dual-purpose to road-mode.

sweeper. And once there, the narrowness insures that pegs ground only when quite serious lean angles are attained. With sport-touring speeds, however, comes the conclusion that the Ascot is no Manx-beater. The reasons lie in its power delivery and its behavior on rough pavement.

Although the engine has bagfuls of torque, the FT just isn't very fast. Like the SR500, it is a high-14-second, mid-80-mph quarter-miler. It revs willingly and likes being wrung to redline; power builds rapidly from 4000 rpm, but below that, response is mushy. Consequently, the FT pilot, like an RD400 rider, must hoard his speed and rpm judiciously. In that way, the bike is a good trainer for sport riding.

In its rough-road manners, though, it is not. The front end dances and jiggles when it hits a Bott's dot or stone or rough patch during cornering. Further, regardless of suspension setting, the bike pogos on choppy road even when going dead-ahead. These are not dangerous traits, but they notch the FT down out of the SR500 league in handling and reveal its dual-purpose heritage, since this kind of pavement behavior is much like the XL500's.

So the FT500 is not a repli-racer. Does it matter? Not much. What matters in the FT context are its peculiar virtues—its maintainability, its 50-mpg-under-any-conditions economy, its ability to slice through traffic like an urban guerilla, and, of course, its styling.

Taken in this, its own context, the bike has few serious flaws. It needs a better, easier-to-reach toolkit, better access to shock preload adjusting rings and someplace to hook bungee cords. The seat strap is nearly useless, and while the forklock mounted under the horn isn't hard to use, an ignition-integral forklock would eliminate even the chance to forget locking such a desirable motorcycle. Further, Honda should find a way to make use of the space under the seat and ABS tailpiece, now wasted. The seat is bolted in place rather than hinged, and so the capacity is useless.

Neither these niggles nor the bike's failure to carve canyons like a GPz550 should obscure the importance of the FT500, which lies in the way Honda has made the big-single experience available to Everyrider, without pain. Purists may scoff at the electric starter and counterbalancers, café racers may chuckle at its performance, and SR500 owners may snicker at its All-American styling. If so, they will all miss the point—and a good ride. The Ascot's styling is already a sensation, the aftermarket will surely explode with power kits for it, and if the name on the tank were "Norton," purists would be genuflecting in awe at its technical achievements. The Ascot is not perfect, by a long shot. But like The Duke, it's absolutely American and absolutely unique. And that, as they say in singles' bars, is thumping worth getting excited about. ●

Ride Review

• In this business it's easy to become jaded. The reasons are simple, and a quick look into the test-bike garage shows why. Hyper bikes, fuel-injected bikes, turbobikes, computerized bikes; you name it, one's out there. And stacked up against that kind of competition, what chance could you give a 500cc, single-cylinder streetbike? Plenty, actually.

The operative word here is fun. The little Ascot never failed to bring a smile, because the same kind of corner-strafting that becomes a do-or-die proposition with a literbike turns into a slower-speed, lower-risk giggle with the FT. It's road-racing at 45 mph. This bike makes me think I'm 16 years old again.

Our garage might be filled with the latest techno-wonders, but when Honda comes and takes away the Ascot, I for one am going to miss it. —*Joe Kress*

• I have a classic recurring daydream that goes something like this: Someday I'm going to be well-off enough to afford two of everything. Two cars, two houses, two dogs and two sportbikes. And I already know what one of those bikes will be—a Honda FT500. I could ride my multi-cylinder canyon-strafer six days a week and save the Ascot for Sunday fun-rides. The FT has the ability to supply all the excitement of wide-open street racing, but at speeds that would hardly cause a Highway Patrolman to turn his head.

But, unfortunately, this is reality and the Ascot won't be the one machine in my one garage. If all my riding were restricted to the FT, the novelty of its low-speed raciness soon would wear off and I'd be left with a slow single. And I could go and buy the two dogs for a lot less money.

—*Ron Lawson*

• As a confirmed thumper crazy myself, I awaited the FT500's arrival with high anticipation. On paper, it promised to have conquered the pain/pleasure syndrome that's always afflicted big street singles. It showed all the riding advantages of a big, torquey thumper, without the need to master a complicated starting drill.

The on-paper appraisal was right—as far as it went. The Ascot lets you forget everything you once had to know about tickling carbs, monkeying with compression releases and steeling yourself for the stiff-leg approach to single-starting. It's the pleasure without the pain.

But for all its easy-start capabilities, the FT is not the complete thumper sport machine. Instead, it's an ideal sport trainer, an accessible single that doesn't require current membership in a thumper marque club to reap the benefits. —*Larry Works*

CYCLE GUIDE SPECIFICATIONS

Honda FT500 Ascot

street

IMPORTER: American Honda Motor Company, 100 West Alondra Boulevard, Gardena, California 90247

SUGGESTED RETAIL PRICE: \$2198

ENGINE

Type four-stroke vertical single
 Valve arrangement single overhead camshaft,
 four valves per cylinder
 Bore and stroke 89.0mm x 80.0mm
 Displacement 497.7cc
 Compression ratio 8.6:1
 Carburetion one 35mm Keihin constant-vacuum
 with accelerator pump
 Air filter disposable paper element
 Lubrication wet sump
 Starting system electric only
 Ignition magneto CDI
 Charging system 12-volt; alternator,
 voltage regulator, rectifier

DRIVETRAIN

Primary drive straight-cut gears; 2,379:1 ratio
 Clutch wet, multi-plate
 Final drive #530 chain (5/8-in. pitch, 3/8-in. width);
 2,800:1 (42/15) ratio

Gear	Internal gear ratio	Overall gear ratio	MPH per 1000 RPM
I	2.462	16.402	4.7
II	1.647	10.972	7.0
III	1.250	8.328	9.3
IV	1.000	6.662	11.6
V	0.840	5.596	13.8

SUSPENSION/WHEEL TRAVEL

Front air-spring, 37mm stanchion tube diameter/
 6.1 in. (155mm)
 Rear 5-way adjustable spring preload/
 4.6 in. (117mm)

BRAKES

Front single-action hydraulic caliper,
 11.7-in. (296mm) disc
 Rear single-action hydraulic caliper,
 10.9-in. (276mm) disc

TIRES

Front 3.50S19 Yokohama Y-994 tubeless
 Rear 4.25S18 Yokohama Y-993 tubeless

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES

Weight 360 lbs. (163kg)
 Weight distribution 43.2% front, 56.8% rear
 Gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) 725 lbs. (329kg)
 Wheelbase 56.1 to 57.3 in. (1425 to 1455mm)
 Seat height 31.5 in. (799mm)
 Handlebar width 29.2 in. (742mm)
 Footpeg height 13.5 in. (344mm)
 Ground clearance 6.8 in. (173mm), at engine oil sump
 Steering head angle 29.0 degrees from vertical
 Front wheel trail 4.72 in. (120mm)
 Frame tubular mild steel, single front downtube

Oil capacity 2.5 qt. (2.4l)
 Fuel tank steel, 3.6 gal. (13.5l),
 including 0.9 gal. (3.5l) reserve
 Instrumentation speedometer, odometer, tripmeter
 resettable to zero, tachometer

PERFORMANCE

Fuel consumption 47 to 54 mpg (20 to 23km/l)
 Average fuel consumption 49 mpg (21km/l)
 Range, maximum 169 to 194 miles (272 to 312km)
 Range, reserve only 42 to 49 miles (68 to 79km)
 Speedometer error, 30 mph indicated 30 mph actual
 Speedometer error, 55 mph indicated 56 mph actual
 Best 1/4-mile acceleration 14.915 sec., 83.72 mph
 (135 kph)
 Top speed (calculated) 97 mph (156 kph)
 Stopping distance from 30 mph 32 ft. (10m)
 Stopping distance from 60 mph 146 ft. (45m)

WARRANTY: 6 months unlimited mileage

AVAILABLE COLORS: Monza Red or black

All weights and measurements are taken with machine unladen and fuel tank empty

