

Cycle

OCTOBER 1980 75P

● Fast And Snappy
Kawasaki KZ550

● Suzuki's Get-Around
SP400T Four-Stroke

THE \$20,000 KAWASAKI FACE-OFF AMERICA'S MYSTERY SHIP MEETS ITALY'S BIMOTA KBI



● Comparison: Nine Tank Bags

● Yamaha's Plucky IT175G Enduro

● Two Tales Of 500 Grand Prix Motocross
Carlsbad Burn-Down And Canadian GP





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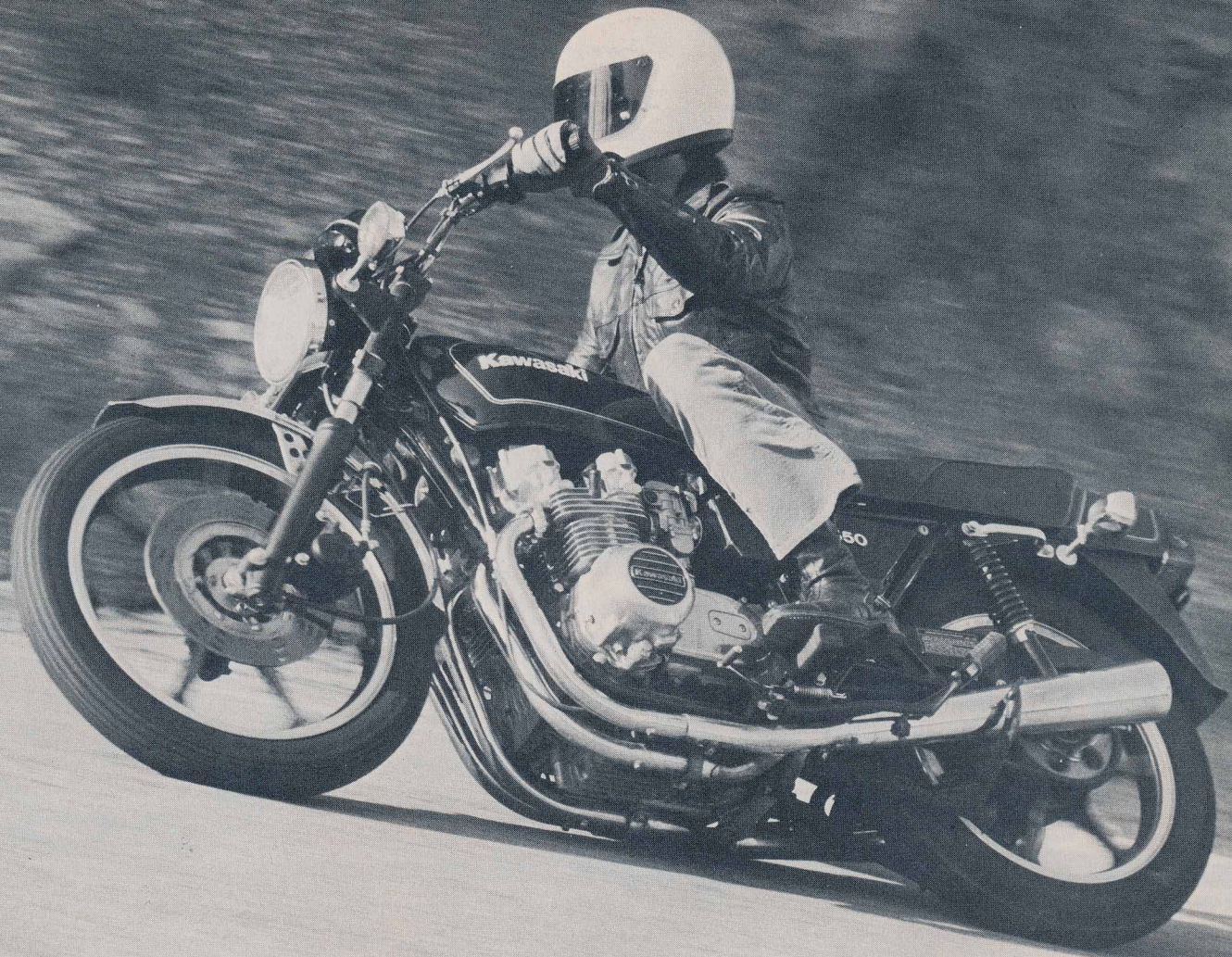
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This Month's Cover: Yes, Virginia, these are street bikes. Both the Bimota Kawasaki KB1 and Craig Vetter's Mystery Ship may look a little spacey and a lot racey, but mere ordinary folks with \$10,000 loose change in their knickers might buy one or the other for a street tooter. Please refer to page 52 for the answer to the question: Can \$20,000 buy happiness? Robin Riggs charged only slightly less to shoot this cover with his Magic Brownie and 147 birthday candles with backing mirrors.



PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVE HAWKINS, ROBIN RIGGS

KAWASAKI KZ550

Kawasaki's recipe for backroad cooking is a winner: the KZ550 is lighter and quicker than the 650, it has plenty of ground clearance and it steers lightly without being twitchy. But the 550 is one ingredient away from perfection: the brakes.

● KAWASAKI THINKS MOTORCYCLES ARE FOR fun and further believes that with motorcycles, fun equals fast. So Kawasaki has built a solid tradition of making fast bikes. First came the 500cc H-1, a crude but rapid little two-stroke jet that captured the hearts and minds of motorcyclists in a decidedly go-fast era. Next came the 750cc H-2, another two-stroke triple that was more of the same. Then, in 1972, Kawasaki unveiled the first Z-1, which seized the title of King of the Superbikes. No pretense was made about these old H-types being "well balanced." But fast? Undeniably.

More than 10 years after the first Mach III, Kawasaki has returned to the concept of light, small "giant killer" bikes. We saw this approach again in September's KZ750, and it earned the distinction of quickest in class by virtue of its horsepower and its weight; it weighed 50

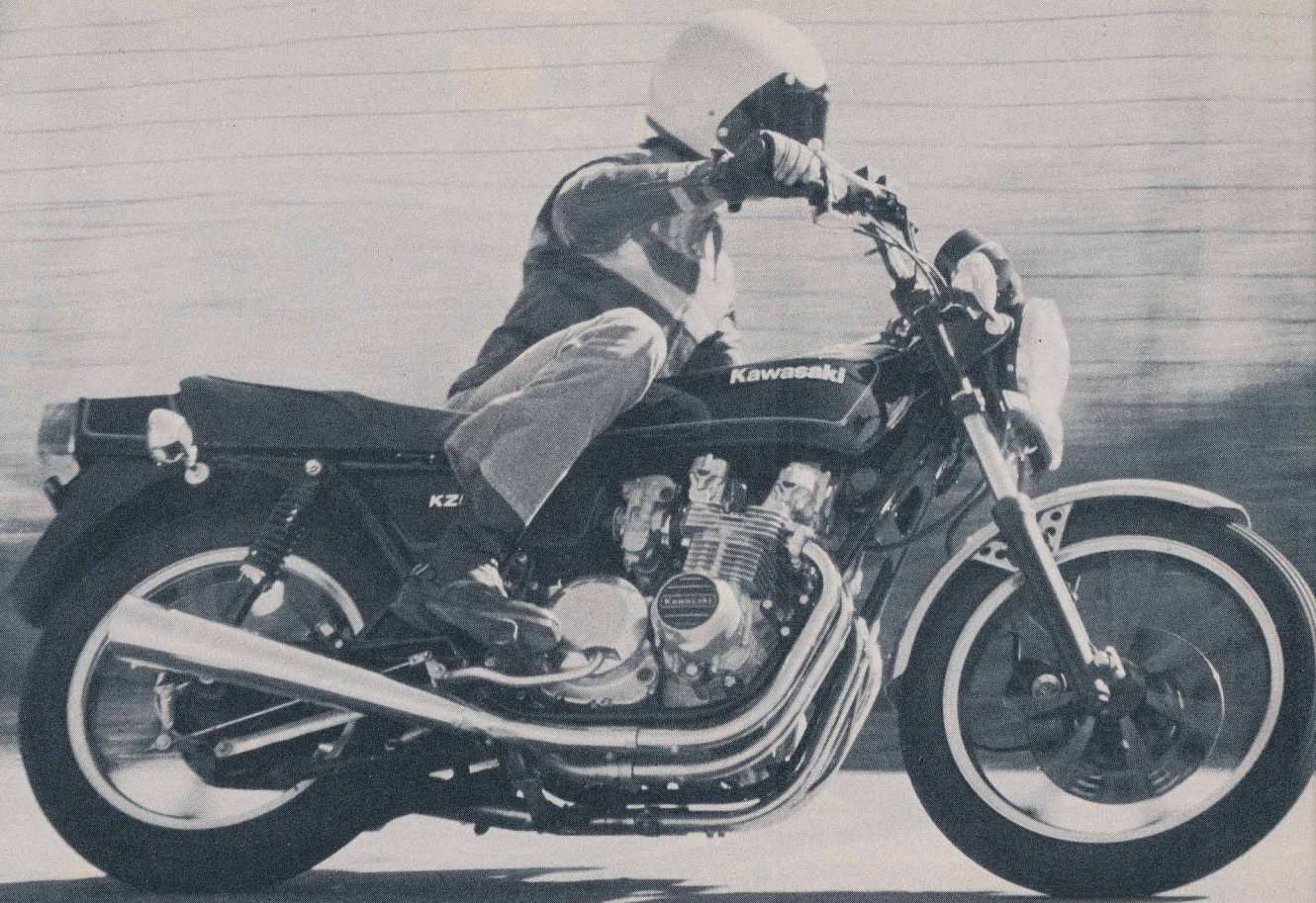
pounds less than the Honda and Suzuki 750s. We're happy to report that the KZ550-A1 is fashioned to the same pattern. It's a slimmed-down, all-muscle middleweight that emphasizes performance above all other traits, and that makes it more fun, though not more balanced, than any other machine in its displacement class.

Dyno figures of 43.47 horsepower and 30.06 pounds-feet of torque put the KZ550 in the middle of the 550/650 class, but there's a kicker: The 550 weighs just 447 pounds, 51 pounds less than the KZ650, 30 pounds less than its head-on rival, the Suzuki GS550, and over 20 pounds lighter than the next lightest Japanese middleweight, the Honda CB650. And the KZ550's very favorable power-to-weight ratio pays off in all kinds of real-world situations.

Our hip-pocket accelerometers regis-

tered abnormally high readings for a 550cc bike, and indicated a strong powerband coming on from 7000 rpm and lasting well into redline. These perceptions were proven at the drag strip, where the KZ550 sprinted 440 yards in 13.38 seconds, quicker than every other bike in its class except the new four-cylinder Yamaha XJ650.

Comparing dyno charts reveals some reasons for the KZ's impressive quarter-mile showing. We recorded only 0.8 more peak horsepower than the KZ550 for our 1980 CB650, and the 650 actually made less peak torque than the smaller KZ did, losing out with 29.20 pounds-feet. The Kawasaki handily out-powers the Suzuki 550 by almost two horsepower and over four pounds-feet of torque, an edge that makes a quarter-mile showdown no contest at all; the KZ out-ran the GS550 we tested in July '79



KAWASAKI KZ550 TEST

by a very impressive one-half second.

This high-rpm performance is all the more impressive because it doesn't come at the cost of chopped-off mid-range and low-end oomph. In fact, our 550 edges the larger Honda 650 in both power and torque from 2000 rpm all the way up to 8000 rpm, where the Honda finally squeaks by. Out on the road the Kawasaki pulls willingly from just below 2000 rpm in sixth gear, and it also performs briskly in top-cog passing. Dropping a gear or even two will get the job done even faster.

Kawasaki built a new scaled-down 553cc version of the KZ650 engine rather than modifying an existing design as they did with the new 750. The 550 features a bore and stroke of 58.0 x 52.4mm, a deviation from the 54.0mm stroke of the two larger four-cylinder bikes. Chain-driven dual overhead cams actuate two valves per cylinder and, as on the 750, a stronger, quieter Hy-Vo-type chain replaces the 650's roller chain. An automatic cam chain adjuster lightens maintenance chores, but the bucket-and-shim method of valve ad-

justment virtually mandates a dealer's attention. It's simply not feasible for the average owner to maintain a complete selection of shims on hand. Although the 550's arrangement places the shims under the buckets to keep them secure at deep-redline engine speeds, that setup also necessitates removing the cams for routine adjustment.

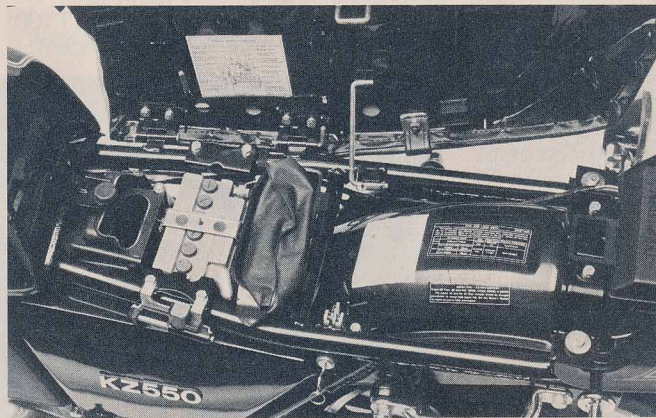
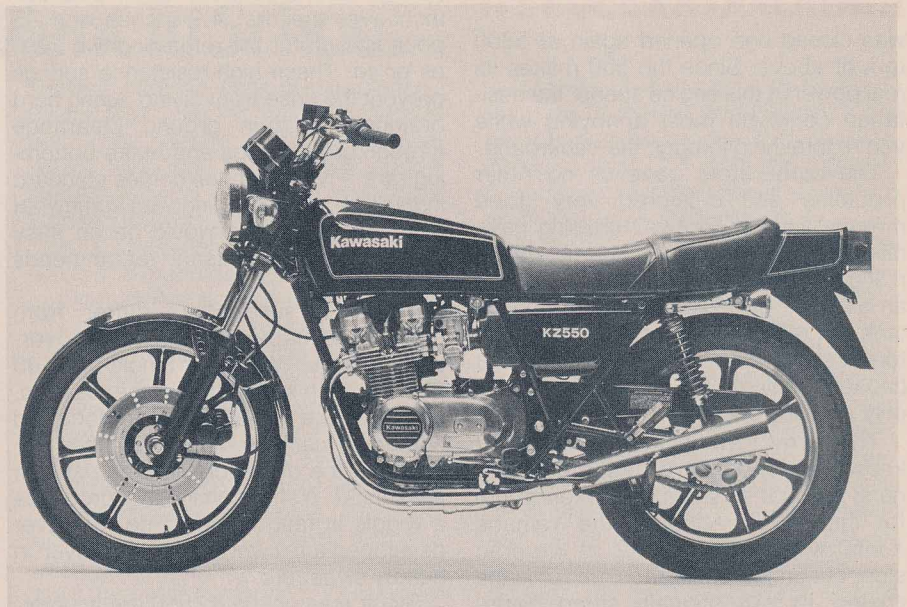
Mechanically minded owners should be able to do most other maintenance tasks with the tools Kawasaki supplies with the bike. The only exception is the need for a continuity tester, feeler gauge and a strobe timing light, low-cost items needed because—apparently to cut costs—Kawasaki equipped the A1 with breaker points instead of a capacitor-discharge ignition system. The more expensive LTD Custom 550 does have a CDI. Spark plugs and the oil drain plug are readily accessible, as are the air filter and battery located under the seat. The 550 manual states that the paper air filter can be cleaned with solvent and reused, and Kawasaki spokesmen back this up, provided Stoddard solvent or another non-oily cleaning fluid is used. We've heard of this procedure for emergency conditions but never as regular practice.

In light of the filter's reasonable \$7.62 price tag, we recommend replacing the filter and skipping the cleaning job.

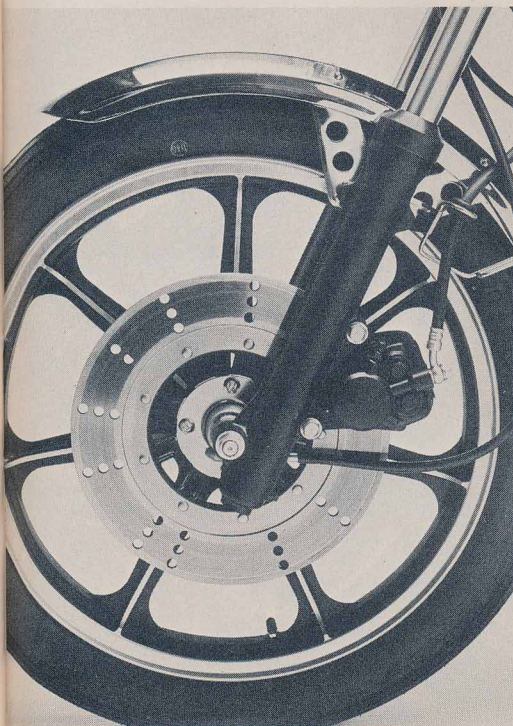
The transmission offers six closely set ratios, but the KZ's power spread gives the rider the luxury of wider steps than those in the Suzuki 550. Each step feels just right: there are neither gaping holes in the gearing nor two ratios set too close together. Good shifting action complements the well-staged gearbox, making it easy and fun to use the engine. Missed shifts will be rare and usually the fault of the rider, not the bike.

The 550 suffers from a gearbox-related problem: excessive driveline snatch. Overly large engagement slots for the gear dogs cause the gearbox backlash, making the bike buck and pitch when you roll the gas on or off. Only with the most delicate of throttle touches can you avoid this quirk.

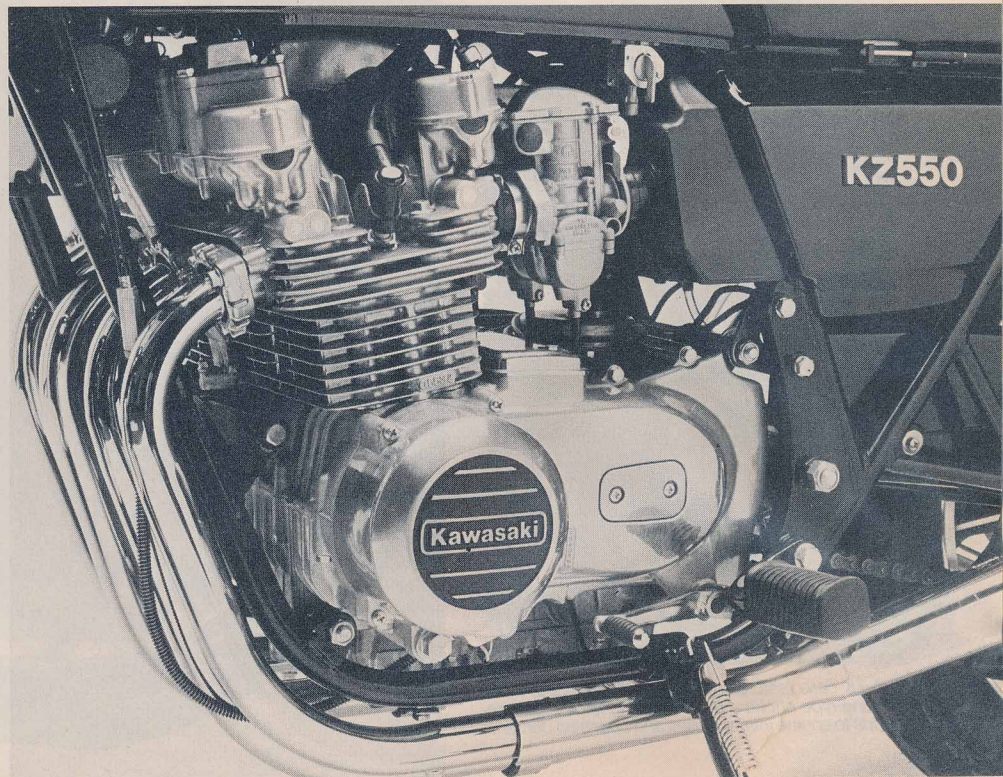
Fortunately, no low-speed carburetion glitches complicate the drive-lash problem. The 22mm slide-type mixers made by TK, a small but well-established carburetor manufacturer in Japan, performed well under low-speed and mid-range conditions. Their only fault was a high-speed hesitation when the throttle



The seat lifts for easy maintenance of the paper air cleaner and the battery.



Our front brake faded heavily enough with hard use that we could pull the lever back to the handlebar.



KAWASAKI KZ550 TEST

was closed and opened again at 5800 rpm or above. Since the 550 makes its real power at this engine speed, the hesitation could be most annoying while you're thrashing through the backroads.

The carburetors gave us no other problems and delivered very good mileage figures. Freeway cruising gave mileage in the low-60-mpg range; mixed riding dropped figures to the low 40s. At an average of 49.6 mpg the 4.0-gallon tank will take you almost 200 miles before it's dry. Beware the small reserve capacity, though: 1.5 liters will take you only 20 miles or so.

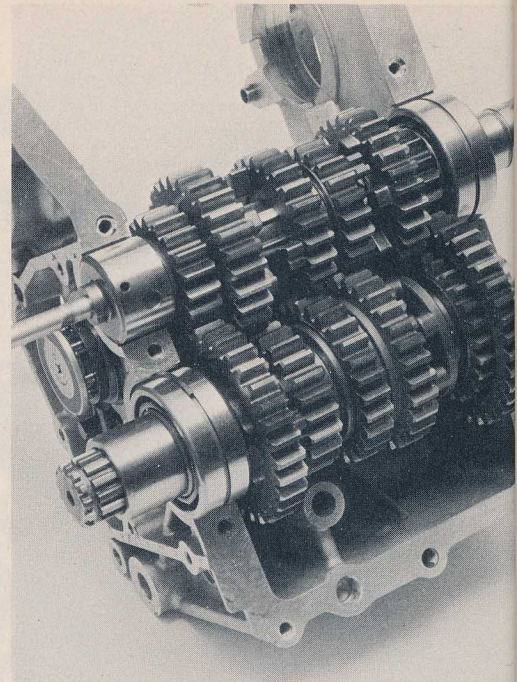
The early Kaw-rockets were never known for exemplary backroad manners; but that situation has taken a turn for the better. Although the Yamaha XJ650 will trounce the KZ at the drag strip, out on the backroads the KZ is the champ. Its exceptionally steep 26-degree head angle and short 98mm (3.9 inches) of trail make the 550's steering extremely quick. The KZ is reminiscent of the Yamaha RD400 and ably fills the position of Middleweight Backroad Gun, left vacated by the Yamaha's demise. The RD's ultra-quick steering figures of 27.5 degrees of rake and 109mm (4.33 inches) of trail appear conservative in comparison. A 1395mm (54.9-inch) wheelbase helps tame potential twitchiness and the three-inch increase makes the 550 less sensitive than the RD to body movement. As a result, the KZ steers lightly but remains stable even at high speeds.

Both ends of the KZ are stiffly sprung, which helps to steady the bike for the rigors of hard canyon-riding. The fork offers a generous 6.8 inches of travel and settles only 1.8 inches under the bike's weight. The Kawasaki has dual-rate

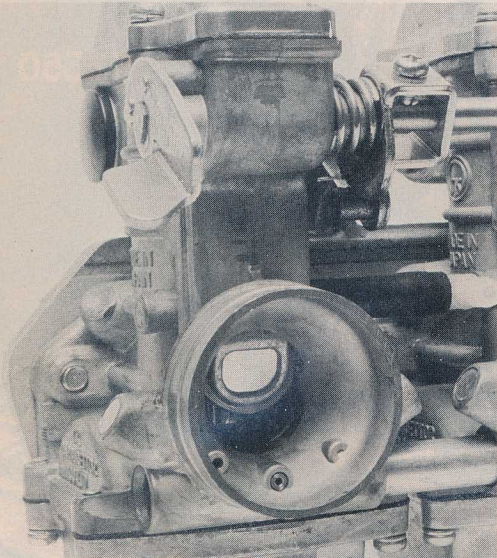
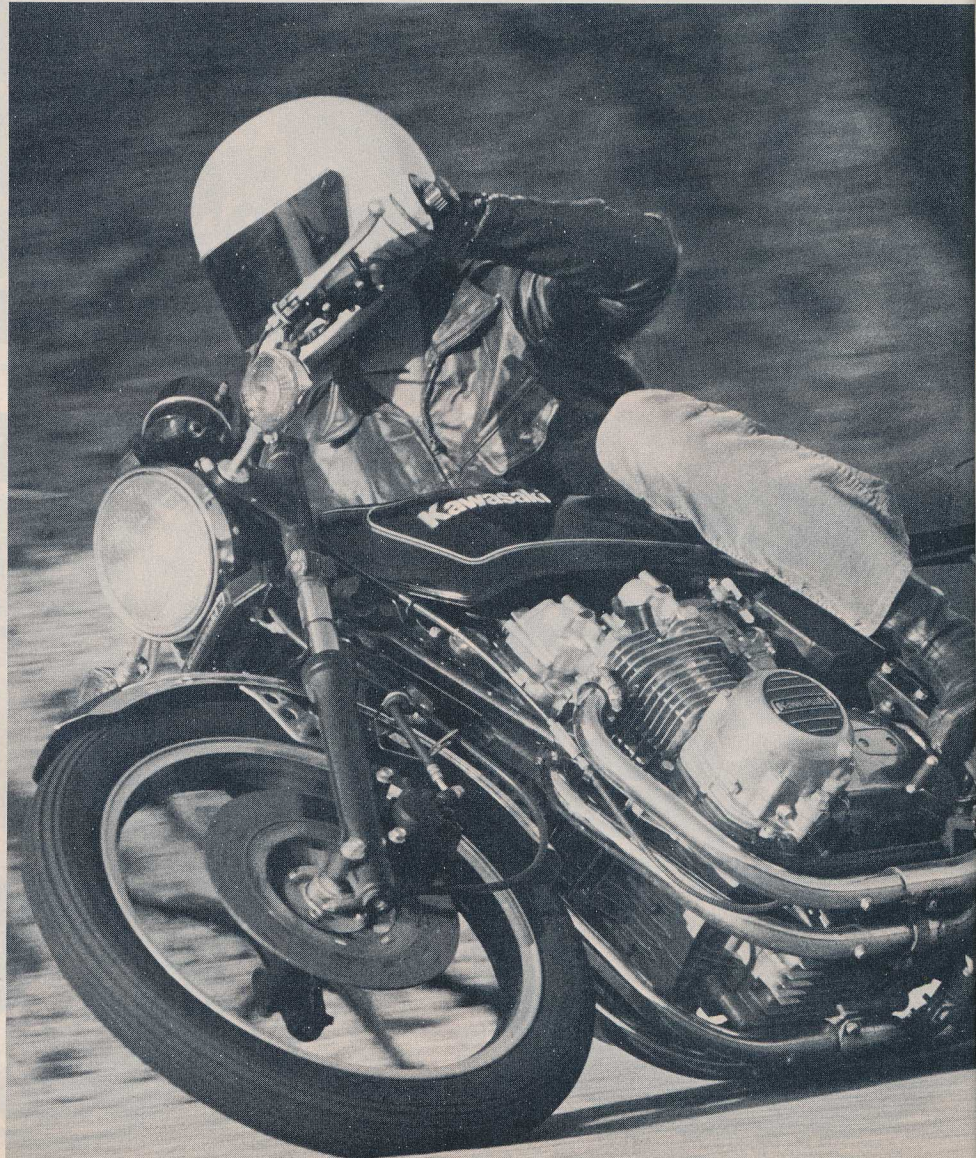
springs with a stiffness of 51 pounds/inch over the first 4.9 inches and 85 pounds/inch for the remaining two inches or so. These high-resistance springs prevent the nose from diving during hard braking, maintain ground clearance through gradual dips and make bottoming rare. Five-weight oil comes standard in the fork, and damping was somewhat light. An oil change would be an easy improvement; Kawasaki recommends 220cc per leg.

The rear suspenders suffer from the classic Japanese malady: "oversprung, under-damped." Single-rated 85 pounds/inch springs grace the rear end, and they're a bit too stiff even for good cornering manners. Moreover, they accentuate the decidedly limp damping in the shocks, a shortcoming that produces a wiggle in fast corners. The KZ never developed a full wobble, though, even in bumpy sweepers.

Stock tires on the KZ550 are an interesting compromise. We can't fault the excellent action of the Dunlop TT100 (Story continued on page 74; specs on page 72.)



The six-speed gearbox suits the KZ550's powerband.



Each TK carb features a vacuum-demand gate in the quillotine-type choke slide. The spring-loaded gate responds to engine intake pulses and opens on demand.

The 550s That Went To School

• The fast, good-handling KZ550-A1 that works so well on backroads is no stranger to the racetrack. In its first-model year, the KZ has already dramatically impacted, if not dominated, Southern California club racing. KZs regularly place in the top three in the 430–600cc box-stock and production classes and often score the hat trick. If you venture out to Riverside Raceway you'll see people trucking their midsize rockets to the track; if you drop by during the week you're in for a different show: students learning proper riding techniques aboard KZ550s.

Riverside Raceway is the home of the California Superbike School, a high-performance motorcycle operator's school headed by Keith Code and Richard Lovell, two individuals with broad backgrounds in both racing and race tutoring. While they operate the school at Riverside, their mailing address is separate: P.O. Box 3743, Manhattan Beach, CA 90266. Although they had their choice of any bike on the market, Code and Lovell selected KZ550-A1s for their students.

Why did they choose KZs? "First of all, we needed a bike to fill the Superbike concept. It had to have four cylinders and look like a race bike; the KZ

satisfies both of these requirements." Power was another major consideration. They needed a bike which produced enough horsepower for a student to work with, yet wasn't unmanageably fast. The KZ seemed to offer a good balance. Similarly, they wanted a machine with light steering but substantial high-speed stability, a combination which the Kawasaki has. According to Code, "The bike is very responsive, and with just a few modifications there are virtually no limitations to lean angle."

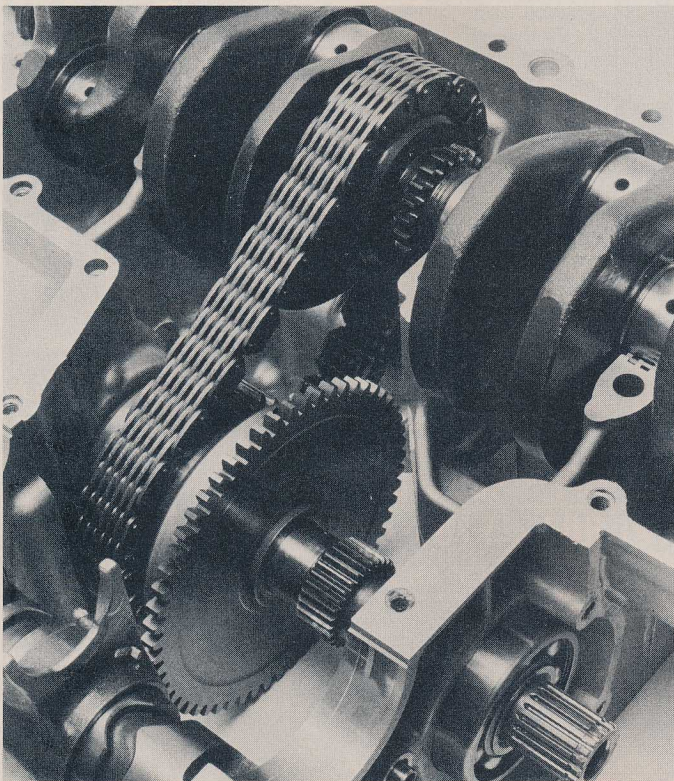
As Code decided how best to set up the 550s, one modification led to another. First he replaced the stock tires with Michelins—an S41 on the front and an M45 on the rear—both of which used the PZ-2 compound. These tires allowed such extreme lean angles that Code had to modify the bike so it wouldn't scrape viciously. He removed the centerstand and sidestand, and then discovered he had to trim the sidestand mounting tab a little to prevent it from touching down. Both two-into-one pipes dragged, so Code replaced the stock units with a Bassani four-into-one system. As a final refinement to help eliminate the rear-end wiggles, he substituted S&W shocks for the stockers.

Because of the nature of Riverside Raceway, not one of the students has complained about the KZ's brakes. There's plenty of distance between corners, so the riders never subject the 550s to prolonged braking. Also, the corners are fast, so most of the students scrub off relatively little speed going into them. The brakes simply never get hot enough to fade.

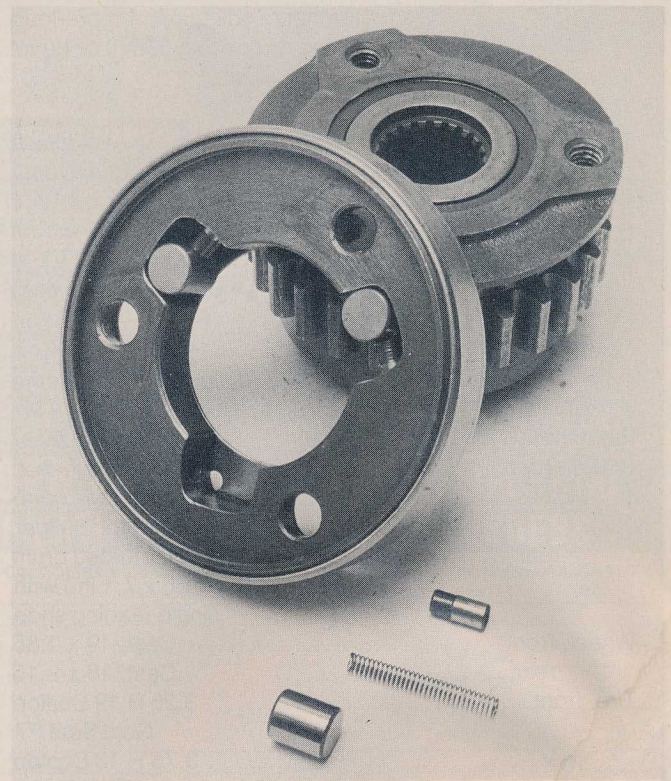
Code and Lovell have another reason for choosing Kawasakis. "One of the best things about the KZs is that they're just about impossible to break," laughed Code. "You just know the students are out on the track over-revving those things like crazy, but we haven't had any problems at all. The KZ1000s are bulletproof when they're stock. We added Lockhart oil coolers to help keep engine temperatures down, but we haven't done anything else."

As testimony to the effectiveness of the 550s that went to school, Code cites an interesting trend. "Many students come to the school already owning middleweights. After they've completed the course they get back on their own bikes and just hate them. We've had quite a few graduates dump their machines and pick up KZ550s."

Not a bad report card. ●



A strong Hy-Vo-type chain transfers power from the crank to the jackshaft.



A spring-loaded drive cushion on the jackshaft smooths out power delivery.

Make and model Kawasaki KZ550-A1
 Price, suggested retail (as of 7/17/80) \$2179

PERFORMANCE

Standing start ¼-mile 13.38 @ 96.56
 Engine rpm @ 60 mph, top gear 5004
 Average fuel consumption rate 49.6 mpg (21.1 km/l)
 Cruising range, main/reserve 179/20 mi
 Load capacity (GVWR less curb weight) 156.9 kg
 (346.0 lbs.)
 Maximum speed in gears @ engine redline
 (1) 37.7, (2) 54.4, (3) 70.2
 (4) 85.7, (5) 100.8, (6) 113.9

ENGINE

Type Four-stroke transverse
 four, air-cooled with two
 overhead cams, chain-driven
 Bore and stroke 58.0 x 52.4mm (2.28 x 2.06 in.)
 Piston displacement 553cc (33.73 cu. in.)
 Compression ratio 9.5:1
 Carburetion (4) TK 22mm slide-type
 Exhaust system Four into two
 Ignition Battery-powered, inductive,
 breaker points
 Air filtration Paper element, disposable
 Oil filtration Paper element, disposable
 Oil capacity 3.0 liters (3.2 qts.)
 Bhp @ rpm 43.47 @ 8500
 Torque @ rpm 30.06 @ 6500
 Suspension, front Leading-axle, coil-spring fork
 with 173mm of travel
 rear Swing arm with (2)
 dampers adjustable for pre-load
 producing 97mm of travel

TRANSMISSION

Type Six-speed, constant-mesh, wet clutch
 Primary drive Hy-Vo-type chain, spur
 gears, 2.94:1
 Final drive #530 chain, 2.50:1
 Gear ratios, overall (1) 18.89 (2) 13.08 (3) 10.14
 (4) 8.31 (5) 7.06 (6) 6.25

CHASSIS

Type Twin downtube, full-cradle frame
 Wheelbase 1395mm (54.9 in.)
 Rake/trail 26°/98mm (3.9 in.)
 Brake, front Hydraulic, single-disc
 296mm rotor (11.65 in.) with
 single-piston caliper
 rear Rod-actuated drum
 40 x 180mm (1.6 x 7.1 in.) with
 single-leading shoe
 Wheel, front Cast, 19 x 1.85
 rear Cast, 18 x 2.15
 Tire, front 3.25 H 19 Dunlop
 Gold Seal F7
 rear 3.75 H 18 Dunlop
 Roadmaster TT100 K81
 Seat height 803mm (31.6 in.)
 Ground clearance 152mm (6.0 in.)
 Fuel capacity, main/reserve 13.5/1.5 liters (3.6/0.4 gal.)

Curb weight, full tank 202.8 kg (447.0 lbs.)
 Test weight 275.3 kg (607.0 lbs.)

ELECTRICAL

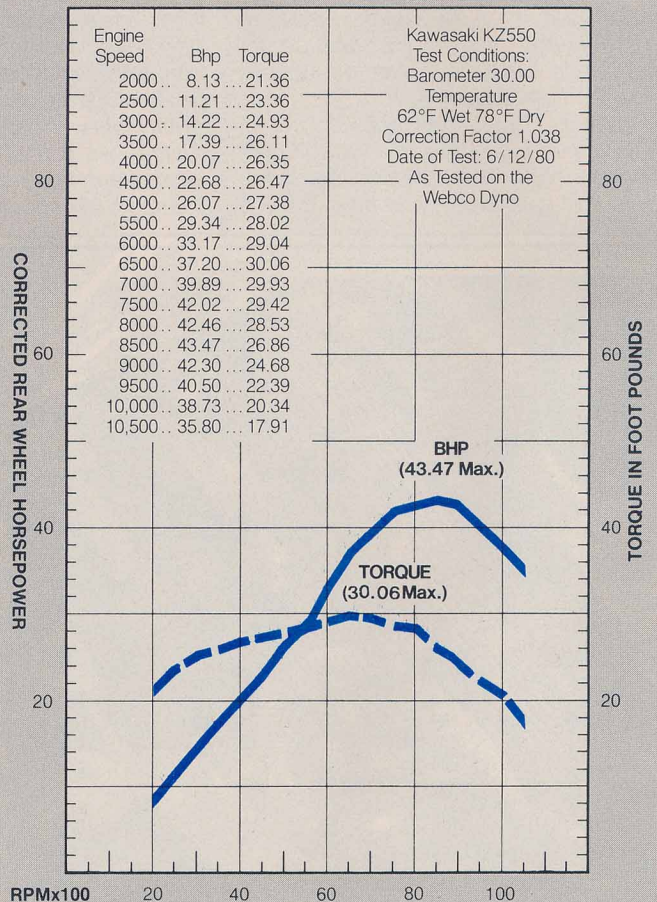
Power source Single-phase generator
 Charge control Regulator/rectifier
 Headlight beams, high/low 50/35 watts
 Tail/stop lights 8/27 watts
 Battery 12V 12AH

INSTRUMENTS

Includes Speedometer, odometer, tripmeter,
 tachometer with 9500 rpm redline. Indicators for
 high beam, turn signals, neutral.
 Speedometer error, 30 mph indicated, actual 29.82
 60 mph indicated, actual 60.00

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The goose is loose

and its leaving riders breathless!

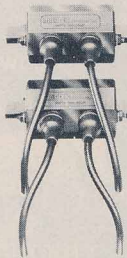
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Kawasaki 550 *Continued from page 71*

K81 used on the rear; Kawasaki, however, chose to economize on the front tire, mounting a more traditional ribbed Dunlop Gold Seal F7. The F7 doesn't grip nearly as well as the K81 and lacks the extended sidewall tread that helps the TT100 hold at severe lean angles. On the freeway the combination works well, remaining unaffected by rain grooves.

The KZ's ground clearance is excellent. It's difficult to scrape anything, so when the folding footpegs finally kiss the ground it's time to ease up: solid parts touch next. On the left side the rubber sidestand bumper gets eaten away and the centerstand tang will scrape. The centerstand rests against a rubber block and gives a little; too much contact will eventually unload the rear end. It's harder to strike metal on the right side, but when it does—it's not friendly. The exhaust header junctions are camouflaged with a thin piece of chromed sheet metal, and if you're dragging that with regularity you're on the verge of throwing the KZ550 down the road.

Braking is the one conspicuously weak tie in an otherwise excellent package. The drilled 296mm (11.65-inch) front disc seems big enough for the task, but braking is not wholly a matter of swept area. When you crank down hard on the KZ550's brake the caliper flexes apart visibly; not the best for consistent braking action. On a fast, twisty downhill the brake can fade seriously. Compounding that, the front brake lever is set a little too close to the handlebar grip. As the brake fades, the lever pulls back closer and closer to the grip, eventually reaching it. One tester (who favors a two-finger grip on the front brake) found himself seriously overcooking a turn with two fingers trapped between the lever and the bar. The rear drum brake has good feel and works well until the front fades, at which point, it, too, becomes overworked and fades.

The very attributes that make the KZ550 a competent backroad scratcher work against it on the interstate, keeping the Kawasaki from being a truly all-around bike. Even though sixth in the KZ is slightly higher than is in the GS550, by no means is it a "downhill only" cruising gear. Because both 550s are geared lower overall than the Yamaha and Kawasaki 650s, the 550s tend to feel as if they vibrate more than those 650s do. The KZ550, in fact, is so buzzy it imparts a frenzied feel on the freeway. We found ourselves continually hunting in vain for a seventh gear.

At 60 mph the Kawasaki 550 turns 5004 rpm, a rev-rate not inordinately high but definitely busy. Bands of vibration increase and decrease throughout the rpm range above 4000, eventually numbing hands, feet and butt.

(Continued on page 75)

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photo by: John Ulrich

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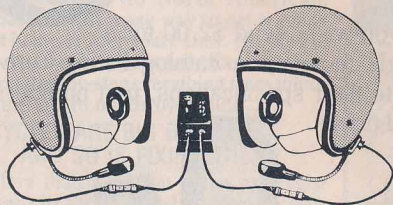


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Kawasaki 550 *Continued from page 74*

The non-stepped seat is too firm to be comfortable for more than an hour or so, and the passenger grab strap lies in the space that a tall solo rider will want to occupy. Although the short, moderately flat handlebar lends itself to a proper leaning-into-the-wind position, the pegs are a bit too high and forward for long-legged riders. A passenger (who will get the buzz of the footpegs) will make riding conditions tight.

The firm, non-adjustable suspension works to discourage touring hopefuls also. The spring rates that are a delight in the twisties become a pain in straight-line use. The fork hardly budges over concrete expansion joints, yielding a buckboard ride. Over average-sized dips and bumps the front end gives only an inch or so. It finally makes use of its plentiful travel on the largest of potholes, giving the rider a good jolt in the process.

With its adjustable suspension, the custom model, the KZ550-C1 LTD, avoids some of the A1's suspension difficulties. Soft springs rated at 20 and 45 pounds per inch and air caps help the fork action, while adjustable damping shocks and dual-rated springs adorn the rear end. You can bolt the C1's shocks (\$108 a set) to the A1 easily enough, but the air-spring fork will be tougher to adapt. The fork legs and springs in the LTD are 2.4 inches longer than those in the standard model; and since the 550-A1 doesn't use spacers, the LTD springs (\$14.16 each) have to be trimmed that amount before installation. Happily, the circlip-retained air caps (\$10.62 each) fit right up.

A number of small features make the KZ550 easy to live with. The ignition switch operates a fork lock that makes minimum theft security a snap. To engage the starter, the clutch lever must be pulled in: daydreamers will find it hard to hurt themselves. Our 550 always fired up readily, and its choke lever, though placed down on the left side of the engine and not on the handlebar, was easy to reach—much better than most low-mounted levers.

The KZ's light weight and quick steering make riding around town a delight. It's driveline snatch is the only distraction. A handy feature in stop-and-go traffic is the automatic neutral finder. Whenever the bike is still, an upshift from first gear always gives neutral; we tried, and it's impossible to get second gear unless you're moving.

A \$2179 price tag puts the KZ550 on the lower end of the middleweight price range, yet its sporting performance rivals the best. While not a perfect all-rounder, the KZ550 is our current choice in a mid-caliber backroad gun. It has power and handles well enough to satisfy all but the hardest of the hard-core canyon riders. With better brakes and adjustable suspension, it might satisfy them all.

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