

Touring: Super Guide for a Super Ride
Tests: Honda CBX, Yamaha IT250,
Maico 450 and Triumph Bonneville

CYCLE WORLD®

APRIL 1978

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America's
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Enthusiasts'
Publication

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HONDA SIX

***Fastest Bike
We've Ever Tested***



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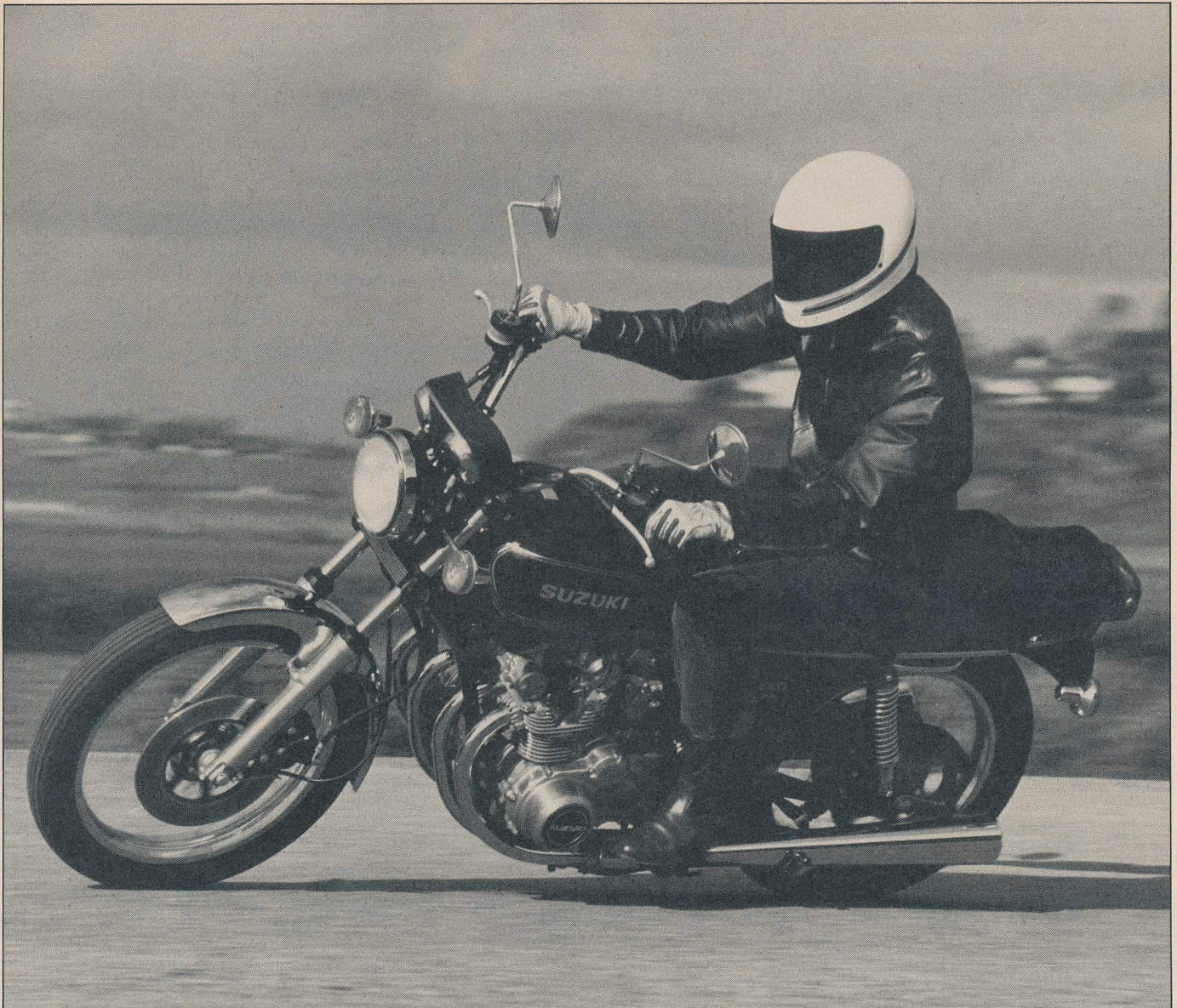
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COVER

HONDA CBX/Photographed by Robert Monkton



SUZUKI GS550C



■ When we ran our initial test of the GS550 a few months back (August, 1977), about the only question we had concerning Suzuki's slick-handling new four-stroke middleweight was its visibility in a market that included the solidly established Honda 550 and the formidable Kawasaki KZ650. We suggested that the stylishly understated GS550 might be *too* understated and that there might be consequent problems on the showroom floors. Bearing up bravely in the face of our rather somber misgivings, the guys at Suzuki controlled their panic and sold every 1977 GS550 they could bolt together.



So much for our marketing acumen. The lesson that emerges is this: You like the GS550 as much as we do, and this bike's popularity in its first year on the market makes it an excellent candidate for a long-term evaluation. We particularly like this form of testing inasmuch as it gives us an opportunity to assess more than a bike's potential. In the course of living with a particular machine for a year, we're able to draw conclusions about its reliability and quality, as well as employ it as a test bed for various aftermarket products (suspension, exhaust, etc.).

Our pilot project for this test format was our 1977 Kawasaki KZ650 which, upon delivery of the GS550C, was approaching its 10,000-mile goal. Suffice to say in the meantime that our experiences with the KZ650 have been so instructive that we

plan to tackle at least two long-term pavement bikes this year in order to give ourselves an opportunity to be a little more specialized in our evaluation. The Kawasaki KZ1000 that's hitched up to a trailer elsewhere in this issue is slated for some serious touring action this year (a monsoon has forced us to delay our introductory test on this bike until next month), long-haul touring being a dimension that's limited with middleweights like the KZ650 and GS550. The GS550, for its part, will be employed as a street and sports bike.

We have a number of projects in mind for the GS550. Exhaust will be one of the first, since the GS550's exhaust note is hardly what you'd call stimulating, a characteristic it shares with virtually all the middle- and light-heavyweight Fours. There's a more practical reason for this >

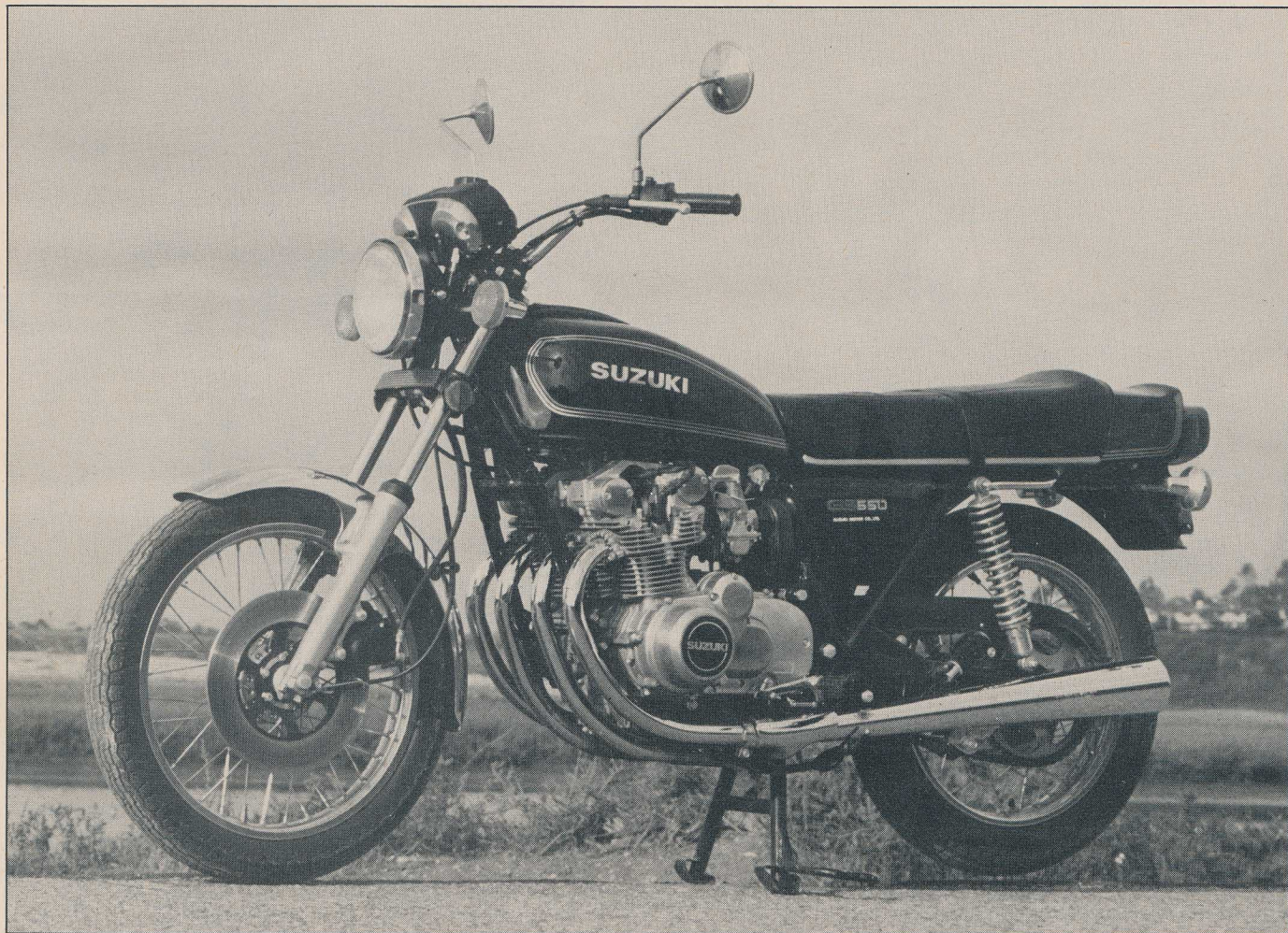
A Brief Introduction to Our Snazzy New Long-Term Street Bike

modification, too. The J&R 4-into-1 exhaust we installed on our KZ650 was worth a half-second at the drag strip and since the GS550 gives something away to Kawasaki's street screamer right off the top, pumping up its quickness can't hurt. Along these same lines, we plan some experiments with carburetion and ignition. We have some suspension modifications in mind as well, even though the GS550 handles as well as anything in this class and better than many. In particular, we have a cure in mind for the slightly stiff Showa forks (see the suspension remarks in the data panel). It also seems likely that

better heat dissipation, and improvement of the seat shape and material for greater comfort—but generally speaking the C edition of the GS550 differs very little from the original. The heart of the bike is its super-smooth 549cc dohc transverse-mounted inline Four. Internally it employs a nine-piece crank riding in six bearings (five roller, one plain), with the camchain sprocket centered between cylinders two and three. Suzuki's nifty automatic cam-chain tensioner is employed, and valve adjustment continues to be via insertion or removal of shims fitted into cups at the ends of the cam followers.

fairly quickly. With this technique, the GS550 will light up its rear tire readily and turn passes in the high 13s all day long.

We were pleased to find that this GS550 was a tad quicker than our original test bike of last fall—13.86 sec. compared to 13.93, the latter figure representing the best of a substantial number of passes. We've also got one mph more at the top end. Even though 13.86 doesn't sound particularly impressive stacked up against the KZ650's basic 13.19, it's near the head of the half-liter class (with Honda's new Vee-Twin CX500 yet to come). The last Honda 550 Four we tested (the since-discontinued



a set of aftermarket shocks will find their way onto the rear of the bike.

And then we'd like to experiment with some cast wheels (Suzuki has good ones of its own, offered on the E versions of the 550, 750 and 1000cc street bikes, but we'd rather shop around). And then maybe a bikini fairing would be neat. And then a cafe-style seat. And then . . . well, what would you like to see? Obviously, the GS550 is going to keep us busy.

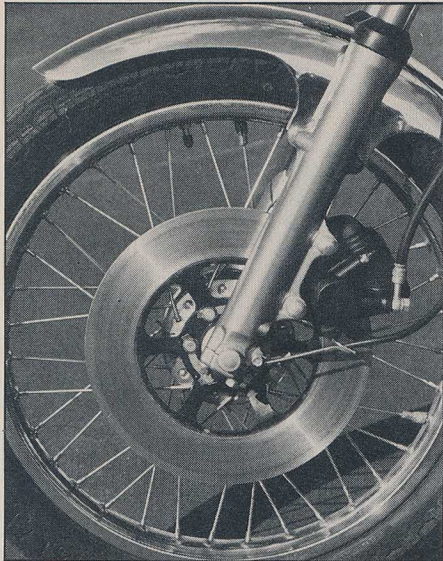
Here's the basic machine we'll be working with. There have been a couple of changes—a redesign of the front brake caliper to allow use of a thinner rotor, for

Primary drive is via straight-cut gears, generating power into a wet 14-plate clutch that has yet to present any difficulties in our encounters with these bikes.

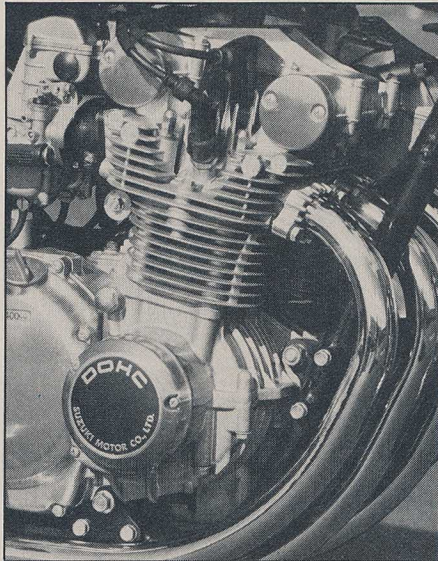
We don't have a horsepower figure on the GS550, but it's in the general neighborhood of 45. Although bigger Suzukis come on with a little more alacrity beyond 6000 rpm, the 550 has no peakiness, which makes its performance deceptive. So does its relative shortage of low-end torque; in order to get the bike out of the hole in a hurry, the engine has to be buzzed up fairly high. We got our best results using about 6500 rpm and letting the clutch in

550F, last October) ran the quarter in 14.51 sec. Yamaha's XS500E (December, 1977) did it in 14.57, and the same firm's SR500 street thumper (January, 1978) couldn't crack 15 sec. The point is that this bike is quicker than it seems to be on first impression, and, given its excellent cornering clearance, rangy handling and precise steering, is just the sort of machine one would want for the focal point of a street bike project.

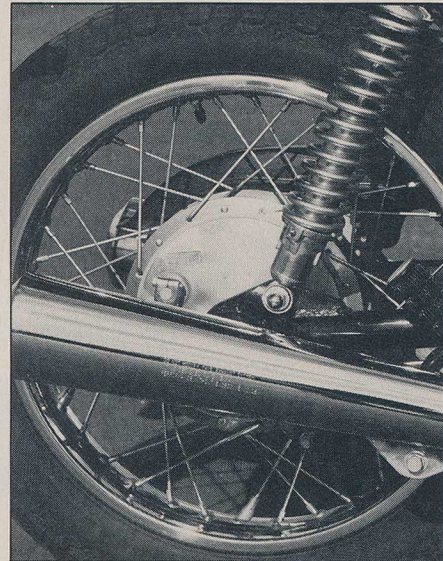
A couple of performance items for the record at the outset of this evaluation: First, this GS550 came in with almost the same fuel consumption as our original test >



Front brake on current edition of GS550 has improved caliper and thinner rotor for better cooling.



Four-cylinder dohc 549cc engine in GS550C continues unchanged from last year.




Rear suspension is fine for one-up barnstorming, a trifle soft for two-up. Stock tires are IRC.

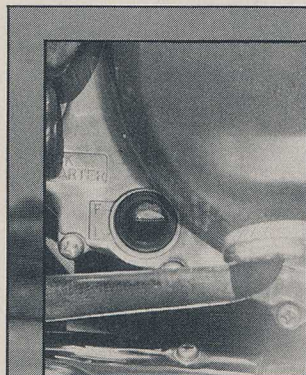
bike last year, 42.6 mpg for the current edition as compared to 42.4 for the original. Second, a compression check yielded readings of (beginning with cylinder #1) 170, 178, 170 and 162. Factory specifications say anything between 128 and 171 psi is OK. We'll pass along compression readings again at the end of the test.

Although the Suzuki middleweight doesn't have the fore-and-after disc brakes that distinguish its larger brethren, it is one of the best stoppers on pavement today. A full cafe treatment might eventually include dual discs up front, but these aren't likely to produce any marked improvement in the GS550's outstanding ability to come to a quick and controlled stop. The data panel tells the story.

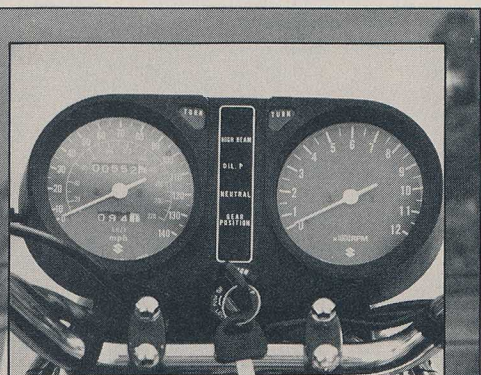
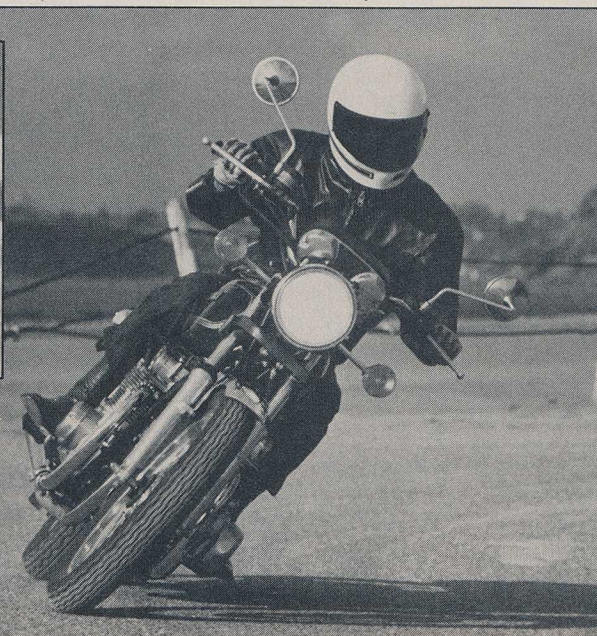
One other area where this bike is an improvement over the first one we encountered is its 6-speed gearbox. We complained about this unit's notchiness the first time out, and particularly disliked the false neutral between fifth and sixth. Our long-term bike still lets you know you're shifting gears, and neutral can occasionally be difficult to achieve when the bike is running, but the gearbox is generally no problem.

Suzuki has drawn favorable review for its instrumentation, which differs from the competition by (1) offering red-colored backlighting for night use and (2) including a digital gear indicator. Purists object to the latter, but it's not at all out of step with the bike's sophisticated character.

The same goes for the styling, which is lean, trim and classy without resorting to any gimcrackery. Suzuki reinforces the low-key styling approach with dark colors; this year's choices are burgundy and midnight blue on the basic bikes and black on the E version (besides black paint you get mag wheels and discs at both ends, which costs you \$140 more). Our bike is burgundy, but it will almost always look black in photography; in fact, under most light conditions it even looks black to the eye. Nevertheless, with its snazzy gold-and-red striping it makes for a rich-looking cosmetic treatment. We hope you like its looks—and the basic machinery—as much as we do, because you're going to be seeing a lot more of it. 



Oil level sight gauge is a handy item that we expect will become industry-wide on Japanese street bikes.



A hard plastic instrument nacelle has replaced last year's metal model. Instrumentation, including digital gear indicator, remains unchanged.

SUZUKI GS550C

SPECIFICATIONS

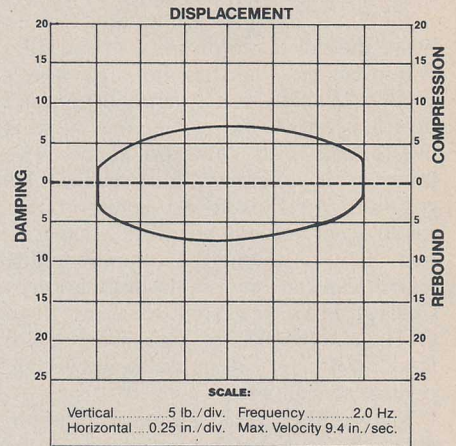
List price	\$1829
Engine	dohc four-stroke Four
Bore x stroke	56.0 x 55.8mm
Piston displacement	549cc
Compression ratio	8.6:1
Carburetion	(4) 22mm Mikuni
Air filtration	oiled foam
Ignition	battery/points
Claimed power	na
Claimed torque	na
Lubrication system	wet sump
Oil capacity	5.0 pt.
Fuel capacity	4.5 gal.
Recommended fuel	low- or no-lead
Starting system	electric, kick
Electrical system	12v alternator
Clutch	wet, multi-disc
Primary drive	straight-cut gear
Final drive	#50 single-row chain
Gear Ratios, overall:1	
6th	6.31
5th	6.90
4th	7.74
3rd	9.11
2nd	11.73
1st	17.59
Suspension, front	telescopic fork
Suspension, rear	swing arm
Tire, front	3.25-19
Tire, rear	3.75-18
Brake, front	11.6 in. disc
Brake, rear	7.1 in. drum

Total brake swept area	118.5 sq. in.
Brake loading (160-lb. rider)	5.28 lb./sq. in.
Wheelbase	56.5 in.
Fork rake angle	29 deg.
Trail	4.7 in.
Handlebar width	30.7 in.
Seat height	32.0
Seat width	11.0 in.
Footpeg height	11.5 in.
Ground clearance	6.3 in.
Curb weight (w/half-tank fuel)	466 lb.
Weight bias, front/rear, percent	46/54

PERFORMANCE

Engine speed @ 60 mph	5126
Power/weight ratio, (160-lb. rider)	na
Fuel consumption	42.6 mpg
Speedometer error:	
30 mph indicated, actually	27.7
40 mph indicated, actually	37.9
50 mph indicated, actually	47.3
60 mph indicated, actually	56.5
Braking distance	
from 30 mph	31 ft.
from 60 mph	119 ft.
Standing start	
1/4-mile	13.86 sec. @ 93.36 mph
Speed after	
1/2 mile	104 mph

FRONT FORKS

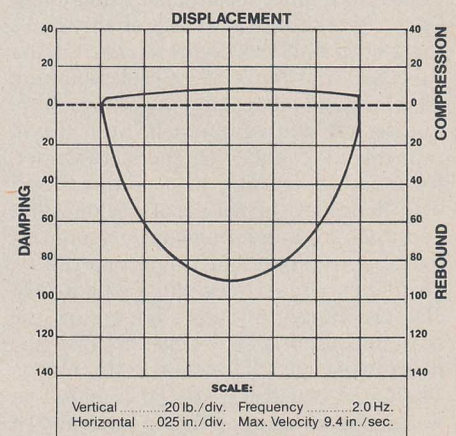


Showa straight-leg fork

Fork travel	6.0 in.
Engagement	6.0 in.
Spring rate	32/47 lb./in.
Compression damping force	7 lb.
Rebound damping force	7 lb.
Static seal friction	19 lb.

Forks on the GS were slightly stiff, primarily because of unusually high seal friction, but seemed to loosen as the bike was broken in. Handling can be improved by sealing one of the pair of rebound orifices in each damper rod, thereby increasing rebound control.

REAR SHOCKS



Showa shock, non-rebuildable

Shock travel	3.5 in.
Wheel travel	3.7 in.
Spring rate	100 lb./in.
Compression damping force	7 lb.
Rebound damping force	91 lb.

Spring and damping rates are fine for the solo rider who occasionally has a passenger. Converting the bike to a pavement racer would require stiffer damping, and a reduction in spring rate to 90 lb./in. Two-up touring with baggage would necessitate an increase in spring rate, by 10 to 20 lb./in.

Tests performed at Number 1 Products

ACCELERATION / ENGINE AND ROAD SPEEDS

