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FEBRUARY 1981
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On the cover: John Wheelchel jumps the YZ125 over the littlest YZ, while little Shela tries to keep low. Photo by Tom Webb.

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HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHAT IT'S LIKE?

RIDING A FACTORY HONDA FLATTRACKER

During which DB learns the joys of sliding

By Paul Clipper

The appeal of flattrack racing is very basic. Raw horsepower, noise and incredible top speeds are the ingredients for a gut-level thrill; and this intestinal emotion is the life blood of smooth-track competition.

It's addictive, really. Once you've

experienced the thrill of watching 25 shrieking four-strokes crowd into the first turn of a half-mile oval at speeds well in excess of the National Speed Limit, you're ruined for anything else. Motocross is child's play. Enduros are little more than aimless wandering.

Trials riding is like sitting on the side stand.

Even the jaded crew of *Dirt Bike Magazine* isn't beyond this attraction. We've been to many Grand National and Regional events, places like New York, Delaware, Ohio and, of course, California. Living a stone's throw away from Ascot Park, it's hard to resist the temptation when the Big Boys are in town, and more often than not, we're down on the track rubbing elbows with all that horsepower.

Soon enough, though, the curiosity gets to us all. We've been noticing the new Hondas quite a bit lately, always with one nagging question in the back of our brains: "... Wonder what it'd be like to sling a leg over one of those things??? ... Naw, it'll never happen. Those bikes are so secret, we shouldn't even be looking at them in the pits."

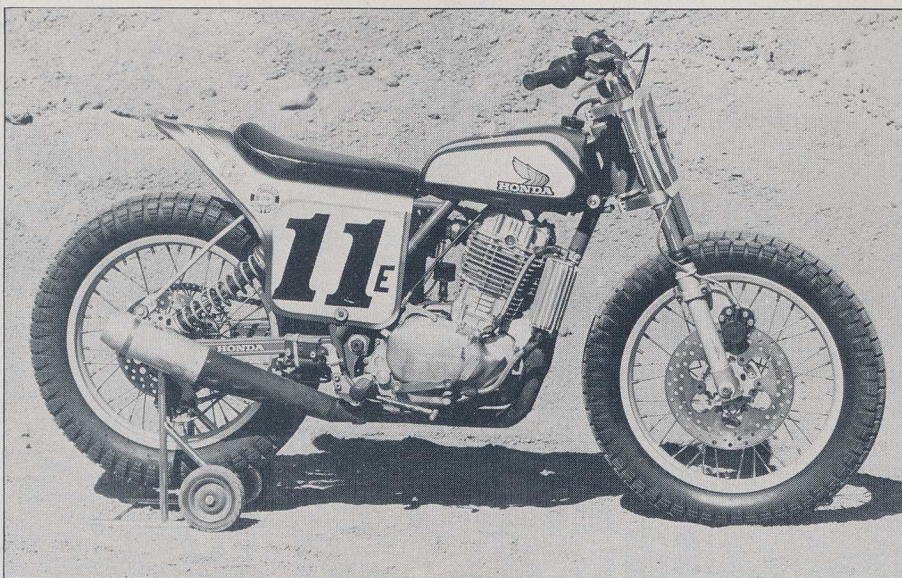
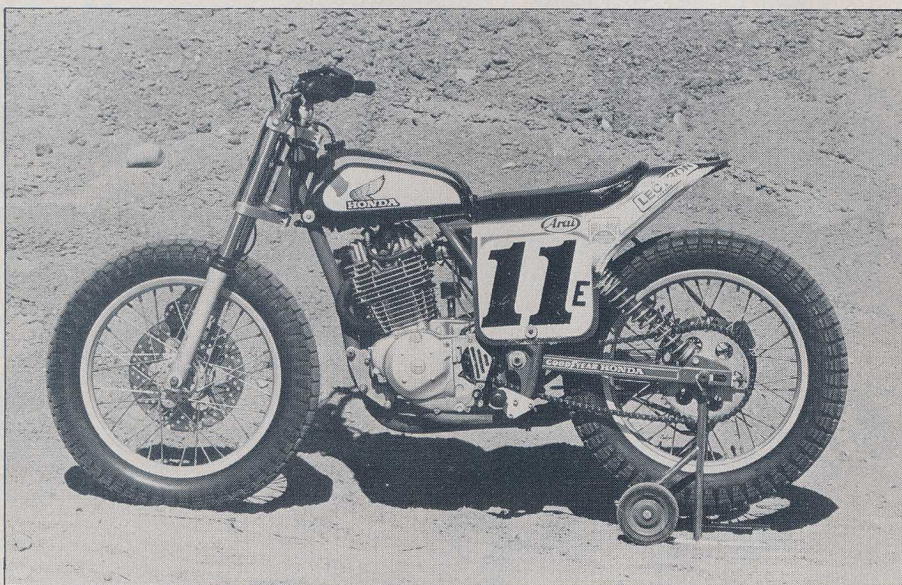
Or so we thought. In the middle of one of our routine weekly calls to American Honda, we half jokingly popped the question.

"Hey, Bob, what's the chance of getting a ride on Mickey Fay's TT bike? Nothing serious, you understand, we just want to see what it runs like."

The answer really rattled our chains: "Sounds like fun. Let me see what I can do. And hey, listen, if I can't get Mickey's bike, will Jeff Haney's do?"

To shorten a long, weird story, it turned out to be no problem at all to get a day's ride on Jeff's bike, and once everything was settled, the fear started creeping in. "What in the world are we doing? We aren't flat-trackers!" But it was simple to convince ourselves of two facts: One, in the interest of informative, investigative journalism, it was essential to report our findings. Two, it would be a heckuva lot of fun.

Next on the list was where to test it. There was only one choice: Ascot! A day at Ascot would be like a day at the



Study these photos carefully, do the same thing to your XR500, and you, too, can have a factory TT bike. *No*, we didn't have the bike fitted with training wheels for this test—that's a workstand, dummy!



RIDING A FACTORY HONDA FLATTRACKER



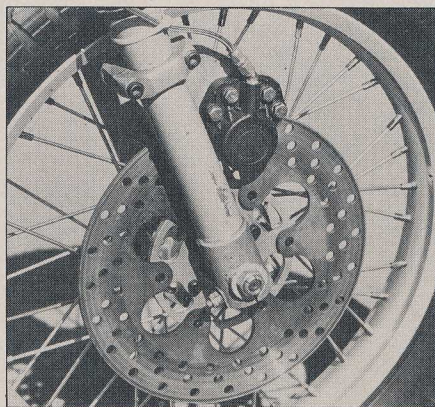
Tom Webb had never been closer than spitting distance to a TT bike but had things well under control by the end of the day.

Gates of Heaven. One quick phone call later, Ascot was out. We would have to rent the track, at a princely sum, and, contrary to popular belief, magazine staffers aren't made out of money.

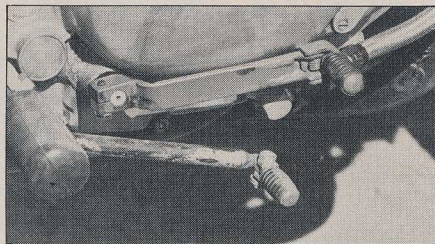
At the last minute, we settled for Indian Dunes. They have a TT track there, and although we knew that the surface was a little soft, we figured it would do the job.

The bike we wound up testing was Jeff Haney's TT bike, which is a mild machine compared to the XR500 half-milers. The last place Jeff's bike had been ridden was Peoria and gearing and suspension was still set up for the fast track. The bike didn't look all that radical, so we threatened John Row with public humiliation and managed to pump a few details out of him.

The bike is known as the XR500TT. don't call it the Honda TT500; they get upset. Jerry Griffiths is the Honda Flattrack Team Manager, and he is also the builder of all these wonderful bikes. The frame is handmade by Jerry, and when we rode it, it was wearing Works Performance shocks and a set of modified Marzocchi road racing forks with suspension travel set at just about four inches. That sounds short compared to nearly any off-road bike, but in TT, we don't have a whole lot of whoop-de-dos to contend with.



Grimeca brakes are state of the art. Note clean and effective caliper mounting.



Shifting and braking are both done on the right side. It takes a little getting used to, but it makes the most sense for any kind of flattracking.

Naturally, we couldn't find out too much about the motor, but we learned a couple of things. AMA rules state that the displacement of a race bike can't exceed 80 thousand over the original bore, so right off we know that the bike is a true 500. Rats! For a while there, we were entertaining notions that it was some kind of exotic 650 single! Inside is nothing more than a Wiseco 10.5:1 piston, a cleaned up but unported cylinder head and a one-off Megacycle cam. Carburetion is by a 38mm Lectron carb.

But, we didn't come out to X-ray the machine; we came out to ride it, and after a certain amount of hemming and hawing, we did just that.

There's no kickstarter on the XR, so a good healthy bump start was necessary to get things cooking. There's no compression release, either, so starting takes second gear and a whole lot of determination.

Once things were warm and toasty, we took a couple of laps around the TT track. We learned two things immediately: The XR was geared very high and was capable of some frightening speed; and, what looked like a rather smooth track turned out to be bumpy enough to jar our fillings out. We talked our friends at the Dunes into running a blade over the course, which smoothed things up, but now

the surface was too soft. After about 20 laps, we were cutting berms into the corners.

Not a very good situation on a TT bike. We turned a few quick laps during all this, and the XR was stable, extremely fast and very precise in the turns, but the track soon deteriorated miserably. We hated to leave behind all that opportunity for top end but decided to move to a hard clay short track in another part of the park. We wouldn't have much chance to use more than one gear, but at least the surface would hold up.

As it turns out, this was the best move we made all day. Where it was possible to go fast on the TT track, it was now a very simple job to go sideways. Stone sideways, just like a speedway bike. We had a ball!

Sliding the XR was as simple as walking. Just break it loose a little coming into the turn to slow down, lean it *waaaay* over and start rolling the throttle on. The back end would come around as simple as that, and in order to keep going in the intended direction, the front wheel is turned into the slide. Voila! Instant classic skiddin' position!

Each of us took a different amount of time to adapt to the new way (for us) of riding, but by the end of the day, we were all going in circles like fools. Backing it in, backing it out, sometimes even backing it clear around in a circle. But, what the heck, it's all in fun anyhow.

And it's addictive. By the time the sun was going down we were all scrambling for one last ride. We hated to see the XR being loaded up when the day was over.

It's not possible to buy a bike just like Jeff's right off your dealer's floor, but all the basic ingredients can be found right in a stock XR500. It would take a good investment of time and money to build a replica from aftermarket parts, but good flattrack frames are available for just about any kind of engine, and after the right kind of treatment, going sideways is as easy as pie.

By the end of the day, there were three different minds thinking along these lines, and what with the strong comeback sportsman flattrack racing is making these days, it could be a fun thing to do. What? *Dirt Bike* build a flattracker? Just you watch and see if we don't! □