

LONG-RANGE TEST

1500 MILES ON AN XL250S

"It's Just Now Starting to Run Good."

By The Dirt Bike Staff



Although some of our tests cover a 30- to 60-day period, we occasionally get a model for an extended test. And, having an extra bike around the DB garage or offices doesn't mean that it just sits and gathers dust.

No, we often continue to flail away at them at the same pace as we did on the original test. These bikes may end up with one of the staffers, or, as in the case of our 1979 Honda XL250S, it gets passed from rider to rider. At best, this usually ensures uneven, sketchy maintenance. Sometimes the next rider finds that the reason the Honda is not out in the dirt is a flat, or it's just out of gas.

And, of course, each successive rider thrashes the bike as if it were virgin, so the abuse level is quite high.

With about five frantic months on the XL and its departure imminent, we got to talking about the merits and demerits of the bike one afternoon after its last killer high-pressure wash at our hands.

We traced back over the service time of the 250 and compiled some interest-

ing notes. The bike ended up with a total of approximately 1500 miles on the odometer. Of that, nearly 600 were estimated as dirt-only miles—the tough ones.

The street mileage ran about 350 on freeway-type roads, ridden at 65 (or whatever we could get away with), and the rest was the usual light-to-light, cross-town stuff.

Besides a couple of flat rear tires, only the air filter and the engine oil received any attention during the entire stint. And then it was usually a last-straw effort.

The results of this inattentive pounding brought up some surprising strong points and emphasized some of the weak ones.

First off, the engine didn't really start to break in and run right until about the 1100-mile mark. We didn't realize it wasn't running up to potential when we did the original test, because we had no comparison. But the more hours the engine got on it, the faster the XL became. Initially the 250 would tap out on the flats at about 75. Before we turned her in, she would pull 85.

Additionally, the vibration level—low because of the counterbalancers that run off the crank—stayed at the same point. This near-lack of vibration showed up in at least one area—the engine mount bolts. We never had to mess with them.

We did find that an engine oil change is absolutely necessary about every 200 or so hard miles, or the tranny gets notchy and hard to shift. This is a problem with air-cooled four-strokes, since the oil is subjected to high temperatures and extra-heavy-duty use.

The capacitive discharge ignition never needed any service or adjustment—we never even pulled the plug on it, at all. However, our battery kept going dead if the bike sat for four or five days. We never could trace the problem, but if the bike was ridden constantly it would maintain the charge in-

stilled in it on an overnight charger. If it sat, though, the battery would fizzle out. It didn't affect starting, or the head or taillight operation, but the turn signals and the brake light wouldn't work in this condition.

As far as the engine is concerned, the only weak area was the clutch. At the 500-mile mark the clutch started slipping. Once the engine got hot, during any high-traction, hard-shift situation (read: on the pavement) the clutch would slip. It deteriorated steadily from that point. Our guess is that the clutch springs are too soft—a trade-off to low-effort clutch actuation. This same clutch problem has come up on some of the hypo four-strokes that we've seen race here locally. After-market replacements are now available.

Hubs, brakes, spokes and rims gave us no hassles at all. The spokes rarely needed attention, which was good, since they probably wouldn't have gotten any. The rims are strong and resist dings and flat spots quite well. Brake action remained smooth and constant for the duration, but the front brake cable is quite flimsy, resulting in constant adjustment. We suggest a good, stout Terrycable replacement to cure the mushy stocker.

Up front, the fork seals took a goodly amount of abuse before they puked at the 1100-mile mark. This is impressive for a bike that spent so much time in the dirt. A good pair of fork boots would extend that even further. Of course, changing fork oil and cleaning the seals and parts once in a while would help, too. No real problems here.

All of the lights, side covers, fender and other hang-on equipment stayed intact despite some crashes to the contrary. Especially notable are the rubber-mounted turn signals. Good units.

Our tank or petcock never seeped a drop of fuel on the bike or rider. The tank actually resisted denting well, too.

At the top of the "unhappy" list are the tires, which never attained any better traction than they could muster in the dirt when they were fresh. As the semi-knobs wore down some, the street traction improved, but it still isn't something to shout about.

A close unhappy runner-up is the suspension. Granted, it is a dual-purpose bike and shouldn't have the suspenders of a motocrosser, but the marginal shocks remained on the bike well after their death somewhere around the 500-mile mark. On the good side, though,

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they didn't leak and they were adequate on the street.

The smallish-diameter fork tubes became very flexible when the bike was manhandled in the dirt. At the other end, the swingarm didn't stand up to the abuse. It flexed and flopped, finally destroying the swingarm bushings. Here again, some maintenance—any maintenance, please!—would have helped, but the swingarm should be made of stouter stuff, we feel.

Some of the other goods and bads are:

- Seat retained firmness and shape, didn't sag;
- Footpegs bent easily;
- Despite the excellent ground clearance, we smacked the bash plate on a rock hard enough to break one of the rear mounting points;
- An excellent two-up bike, seat is long enough to be comfortable for the passenger;
- Most maintenance areas are simple, easy to get to;
- Sprockets held up well, as did the chain, despite the abuses of the car wash;
- Steering head never came loose—no bearing problems here;
- Nothing, absolutely nothing fell

off, but someone swiped the tools from the external tool pod;

- Mirrors loosened up constantly;
- Tank and side cover trim stripes and other stickies are very durable.

After as much sniveling as we've done, you might think that we wouldn't want to have one around except as ballast, but you're quite wrong.

After all, we rode the XL like a motocrosser for a third of its young life—abuses far beyond the intentions of the Honda designers. Despite this thrashing, the machine started easily all the time, hot or cold. It provided dependable, economical transportation at the stab of the lever. And, as we said before,

it was running better all the time.

You can probably bet that some of the things that we brought up are already in the computers and on the minds of the Honda people. Some of the things we encountered, such as the suspension and tires, have already been much improved on the 1980 version of the XL250.

Although we expect the arrival of a new XL shortly, we hated to see the old one go back. Now we'll have to thrash the new one for 1500 miles just to get it to run right.

Hell, with another 1000 miles on the old one, I'll bet we could get 95 out of her. □

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