

# DUAL-PURPOSE DAZZLER

*The most serious street/trail machine yet*

*By the Dirt Bike Staff*

**W**e've never made a secret of our feelings for the Honda XL500. In past tests we've practically crowned it king of the dual-purpose bikes—and for good reason. The old bike did everything right—it handled well, was comfortable to ride, and was blindingly fast. Compared to the competition, it was the best you could do. Our only complaint was: When were they going to get serious? The XR500 Pro-Link was the hottest four-stroke going. What was keeping Honda from borrowing the off-road technology and coming out with a truly serious dual-purpose bike?

Well, with the XL500R, it looks like our prayers have been answered. Oh sure, it still weighs in at 20 pounds more than the XR, and the suspension is a little shorter and softer; but Honda has made so many changes for 1982 that the XL could rightly be called a brand-new bike.

#### TECHNICALITIES

To be specific, here are some of the new features to be found on the XL500R:

- The rear suspension is completely dif-

ferent. The Pro-Link system is "XR" to the core, except for shorter travel (7.5 inches) and lack of damping adjustments. Shock preload is adjustable and the steel swingarm rides on needle bearings.

- The rear wheel assembly is now the quick-change enduro setup—straight off the XR.

- Both the front and rear wheel assemblies now use XR-type wheels and hubs; much lighter and stronger than the old units.

- The forks are air-adjustable, have a half inch more travel, and use 37mm tubes.

- Front brake is the latest dual-leading shoe system—an extremely strong brake—which is just what the XL needed for serious street duty.

- The steering head pivots on tapered roller bearings—much stronger and less troublesome than cups and balls.

- An O-ring chain is standard equipment (another XR steal).

- The cam chain tensioner is now automatic, and the ignition advance is electron-

ic; small changes, but both reduce maintenance chores.

- Although the XL still uses a push-pull throttle cable setup (booooo!), the throttle assembly is now a straight-pull enduro-type unit (yaaaay!).

- The tires are new, the skid plate is bigger and better, and it's been redesigned to look just like an XR with turn signals.

The spec sheet is encouraging. After drooling over it until the spring rains allowed us a day of sunshine, we finally went for a ride.

#### RIDING IMPRESSION

Kicking the bike over for the first time was a chore. Honda four-strokes are always coldblooded, but they're also tight and finicky when brand-new. This is how to start the XL: Turn on the key, set the kill switch to "RUN," pull the choke on all the way, crack the throttle just a little and give it a full kick. Chances are it'll take a half-dozen kicks to light up, and then it'll idle, just as long as you don't crack the throttle



*The '82 XL500 is without a doubt the hot ticket for a laidback Sunday afternoon cruise through town or country.*







## HONDA XL500R

open. It'll probably stall once or twice, and then you'll have to go through the whole process again. Once the bike gets a few hundred miles on the clock, it'll mellow out and start more easily. When new, they're a pain.

Once everything was toasty-warm, we hit the streets. Within the first mile, it was obvious that the XL was more than a match for any asphalt scrambling we would want to do. The bike is geared to do 65-70mph with no trouble at all, and the new tire design gives a very smooth, vibrationless ride.

Our only problem during the street portion of the test was training our right wrists to exercise a little restraint. We found out rather quickly that nailing the throttle out of a slow turn would produce an instant wheely in first, second, and third gears; even fourth—every now and then. Wheelies on the street may be all kinds of fun, but the people who drive police cars hate them, so we tried to cool it until we got into the dirt.

Naturally, we picked the muddiest day of the year to go out on the XL. Mud is fun (it's a lot better than dust), but it pointed out an alarming characteristic of the new style of tires; namely, they pack up. In other words, the mud sticks in all the tread grooves and traction goes out the door. At this point, it's like riding on slicks... very difficult to get up or down hills with any amount of control, and scary in the turns unless you like to slide.

This isn't a problem unique to the Honda, however, as most street/trail "trials" tires will pack up under muddy conditions. The only type of tires that will shed mud efficiently is a good set of knobs. The XL will need a 17-inch in the rear and a 21-inch in the front. Until you install good rubber, it's a good idea to be aware of the packing problem that occurs when the going gets wet.



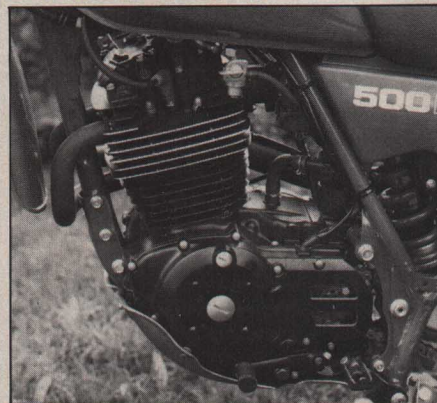
**About the only thing keeping you from getting too radical in the dirt is the dual-purpose tires.**

We got up on the dry side of the hills and started putting the XL through its paces. First stop? A local homemade motocross track! Would you expect anything less from us?

First off, we have to admit that the XL is not a motocross bike—*no way!* The bike's biggest hindrance is its weight; with gas and oil we're looking at well over 300 pounds. When you slam the XL into a berm, it feels like you're going to drive the wheels right through it, and it takes a lot of muscle to hold the bike in line. The big surprise was riding in whoopedos. The suspension bottoms in the big ones, but really not that badly, and we were able to skip through the bumps with a reasonable amount of style. Landing off jumps was also smooth and controllable, but the weight factor never went away. The XL isn't made for this kind of work, but it'll do it if you don't try to cut competitive lap times.



**The front forks will need a few pounds of air for really rough terrain, but the damping is perfect for normal trailriding.**



**The XL's engine doesn't use the reed valve of the XR500, but it still has loads of low-down grunt. The cam chain tensioner is now automatic—one less chore to worry about.**



**Although the Pro-Link rear end is softer and shorter than the competition models, it is by far the best thing to ever happen to the XL.**



**On your way to the trails, don't be intimidated by anyone on an RD400. The XL handles better on canyon roads than most street bikes.**

The power was right on. Just twist the throttle and the XL will leap forward. It definitely looks silly when somebody tosses an XL500 into a berm and then cranks a big wheely out of it, but the bike will do it... no sweat. For any type of hill we had to climb, or turn to roost through, there was always a gear to fit the situation. One of our main complaints about the Suzuki



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## HONDA XL500R

SP500 (the XL's main competition) was that the bike was geared too tall for comfortable dirt riding. The XL does not suffer from this problem, and all five gears are useable in the dirt or on the street.

### BITS AND PIECES

The seat/handlebar/footpeg relationship on the XL is just about perfect. All of our testers felt right at home in the saddle; the XL is one of the most comfortable bikes made.

If you're wondering what the little black box to the lower left of the triple clamps is, it is not the "black box" for the ignition. It houses the electrical connections for the headlight assembly. If you want to pull the headlight, unplug it from the box, and all the wires remain neatly attached behind the plastic cover. Very sanitary.

The double-leading shoe front brake is strong. Once you get used to it, the XL will stop quickly enough to make your eyes bug out. If it's too much for your riding style, it can be adjusted to a milder state.

The steering head lock is now built into the ignition switch, making it a lot easier to use than the older type of lock.

Both front and rear fenders are good and wide. Even with the tires packed up and slinging in all directions, none of the mud wound up on the rider.

The new XR-style graphics are boss. This XL has got to be one of the best-looking bikes of 1982.

We've heard quite a bit about clutch basket trouble with hopped-up XR500s, and a certain amount of this trouble could carry over to a worked-on XL. Don't consider modifying your engine without beefing up this area. And even if you choose to leave it stock, make sure you change the oil at the recommended intervals.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

We spent the rest of the day just cruising in the hills, and the XL was right at home. Laidback trailriding is the XL's cup of tea. The front end tracks without ever washing out, the suspension soaks up all the bumps without beating you to death, and the power is always there and always manageable.

The bike's only drawback is its massive weight. But weight is a necessary trade-off if a manufacturer is going to build a street-legal machine. Considering all the extra junk necessary to satisfy the Feds, it's a wonder our street/trail bikes are as light as they are.

The bottom line is this: The XL500 has always been better than the competition, and this year's XL is about 200 percent better than last year's. It has good power, good suspension and good handling characteristics, and it's very comfortable to sit on and ride. It is the best you can buy; no doubt about it. □



## HONDA XL500R

Engine type ..... Four-stroke, single  
Bore and stroke ..... 89mm x 80mm  
Displacement ..... 498cc  
Carburetion ..... 32mm Keihin  
Ignition ..... CDI  
Transmission ..... Five-speed  
Fuel tank capacity ..... 2.6 gallons  
Wheelbase ..... 55.9 inches  
Seat height ..... 34.6 inches  
Weight (claimed) ..... 297.6 pounds, dry  
Suspension:  
Front ..... 37mm air/spring forks, 8.5 inches  
Rear ..... Pro-Link single-shock, 7.5 inches

Ground clearance ..... 10.2 inches  
Tires:  
Front ..... 3.00 x 21 IRC  
Rear ..... 4.60 x 17 IRC

Intended use ..... Street/trail  
Approx. retail price ..... \$2098  
Country of origin ..... Japan

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