



THE Z

Thirty years young!

By Joe Kosch, of *SHORT BIKE WITH LONG HISTORY* magazine

Kenny Herring. Not a big name in dirt bikes to many, but a major figure in my dirt biking past. Kenny was the first of my friends to get a Honda minicycle. It was a CT70, but one look at the thing told me that I had to get a bike, and no lawnmower-engine-powered pile would do. The 70's odd horizontal cylinder motor didn't look like a real dirt bike powerplant, but I accepted that because nothing about the bike looked normal. It looked good, though. The

paint, the castings, every screw that held it together, screamed quality. I wanted in, and nothing was going to stand in my way.

The 70 was too tall for me at that time, so I did some research to see what Honda had in my size. Somewhere in there, the money question came up. I had none. For some reason, I failed to realize that I could simply write to *Dirt Bike* and ask for one of the many machines it gives away. Instead, I shifted

Honda 50s have been a big hit with kids for 30 years now. Lately, the 50's popularity with parents has increased also—it's a healthy choice compared to candy, cartoons, and violent video games.

my sights toward the cheapest thing Honda had, and set about mowing lawns to gather cash. Dollars entered my private account like drops from a minor roof leak into a five-gallon bucket. I secured a lucrative position in the newspaper business, in delivery. Soon, my bankroll swelled to a figure that matched the suggested retail price of the lowest-priced Honda of the time, the QA50. I had spent months convincing myself to like the QA and dislike the frustratingly well-equipped Z50 and CT70. Honda cruelly introduced the devastatingly tantalizing SL70 during this trying period.

The day finally came when my father drove me and my co-investing brother to the Honda shop. The QAs were there, and Honda had a promotion going that provided a cool Honda shirt to buyers of any new machine. Glorious! "That QA thing is a piece of junk," the dealer told me. "I've got a leftover Z50. It's a much better machine." An odd marketing strategy, to be sure, but the words "piece of

junk" did not escape my father's ears. We folded the Z50's bars down, flipped the footpegs up, drained the float bowl with the little drain knob, turned the closeable gas cap tank vent to "off" and lowered the thing into the trunk of dad's Oldsmobile. The shirt? The shop was out of the special Honda jersey, and coughed up a Miller's Cycle Shop T-shirt instead. It was a day of not getting what I had expected, but I was no less disappointed than a lottery winner who hit a \$22-million jackpot rather than a \$25-million one.

I had no idea at the time that I had latched onto one of the most bulletproof minibikes ever made, as the 50 did nothing but impress me while I had it. I rode that Mini-Trail 50 year-round, in snow, rain and scorching heat, for four straight years. It never failed to start and nothing broke, fell off or even started looking shabby. It wouldn't surprise me at all if it is still carrying some kid to unforgettable adventures—lots of 50s, many older than mine, are.

My '71 Mini-Trail 50 wasn't much different than the original '68 model, except that it had a headlight and taillight, and a few other nice extras like a pedal-operated rear brake and a rear fender that was long enough to actually work as a fender. Some early models came with "full street-legal lighting and instrumentation." The '72 got the biggest change in Honda 50 history: rear suspension. The greatest thing about the 50 is that it's still being sold, 30 years after it was introduced. We put a '98 Z50 in the car and brought it home to be ridden by all sorts of kids to see if it's as great as it was in '68.

TIME MACHINE

The 50 has gone through a bunch of cosmetic phases in its 30 years on the market (check the sidebar), but the heart of the machine—the single-overhead cam, two-valve, four-stroke engine and three-speed, auto-clutch transmission—have stayed very much as it was in '68.

Starting a new 50 is even easier than it was in the '60s or '70s, thanks to the maintenance-free electronic ignition. Little first-time riders might have a tough time pushing the kickstarter, because the four-stroke has a lot of compression compared to a two-stroke pee wee 50, but most six-year-olds can get the thing lit. Unlike most Hondas, the 50 isn't at all cold-blooded. It even starts from dead-cold without the choke.

Once the 50 is running (you have to listen closely, as the intake and exhaust are well muffled), you get under way by pulling the shift lever up for first. This can be a challenge for small kids, too, because there's a lot of resistance at the shift lever whether you are shifting up or down. Kids manage, just like they have for the past 30 years. It's weird that Honda, the king of refinement and control-feel, hasn't made the shift action lighter by now. Maybe Honda doesn't want very young riders to shift. Being stuck in first is a pretty effective speed limiter. Third gear is good for more than 30 mph on level dirt, which is plenty fast for this kind of bike.

Honda has ironed out the 50's few other rough edges. The sticky, cruise-control worm-drive throttle has been replaced by an easy twisting conventional unit. The throttle housing also acts as the perch for the only lever on the 50's



There's no 30th-year anniversary model of the Z50 for the U.S. market, but the '98 may become something of a collector's item. Its neat XRish styling and fun potential are really what make it worth owning.

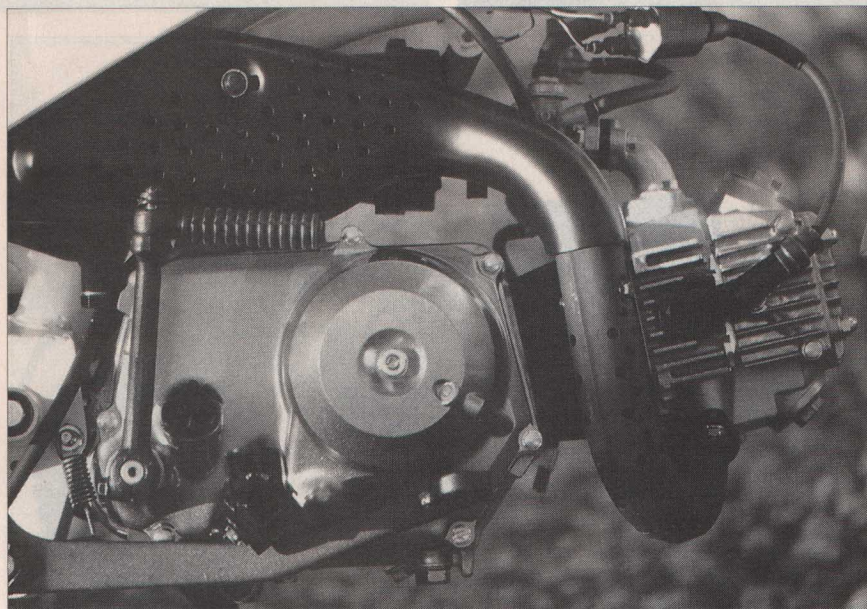
handlebar, the front brake lever, a much better system than the welded-on perches the early 50's had.

The fold-down bars and closeable fuel system are gone, but it still fits easily in a car. The lights are gone, too, but this is a bonus, since the stocky, 110-pound 50 is already on the heavy side for small kids.

The good part of the 50's heavy, rugged construction is its ability to withstand almost any sort of riding kids or adults want to do. The stamped steel wheels, big backbone frame and tough footpegs and footpeg mounts are nearly indestructible. That's good, because the 50's ergonomics accommodate kids and adults equally well. The suspension even copes with most adult and kid antics, and the fork or shock can take lots of brutal bottoming if you can.

ULTIMATE VET BIKE?

The fact that the 50 has sold well enough to stay in Honda's lineup for 30 years says a lot about the brilliance of the original design. There are lighter, smaller bikes for very young first-time riders, but none are as fun for the whole family. At the ripe old age of 30, the 50 is as fun to ride as it is to reminisce about.

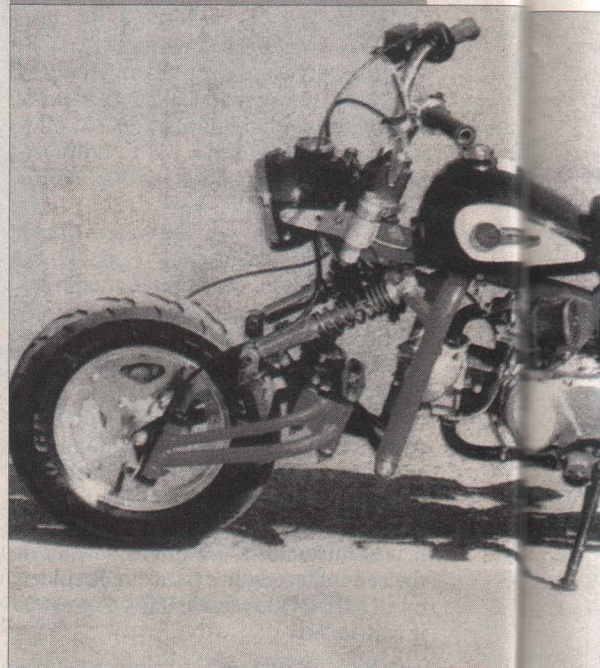
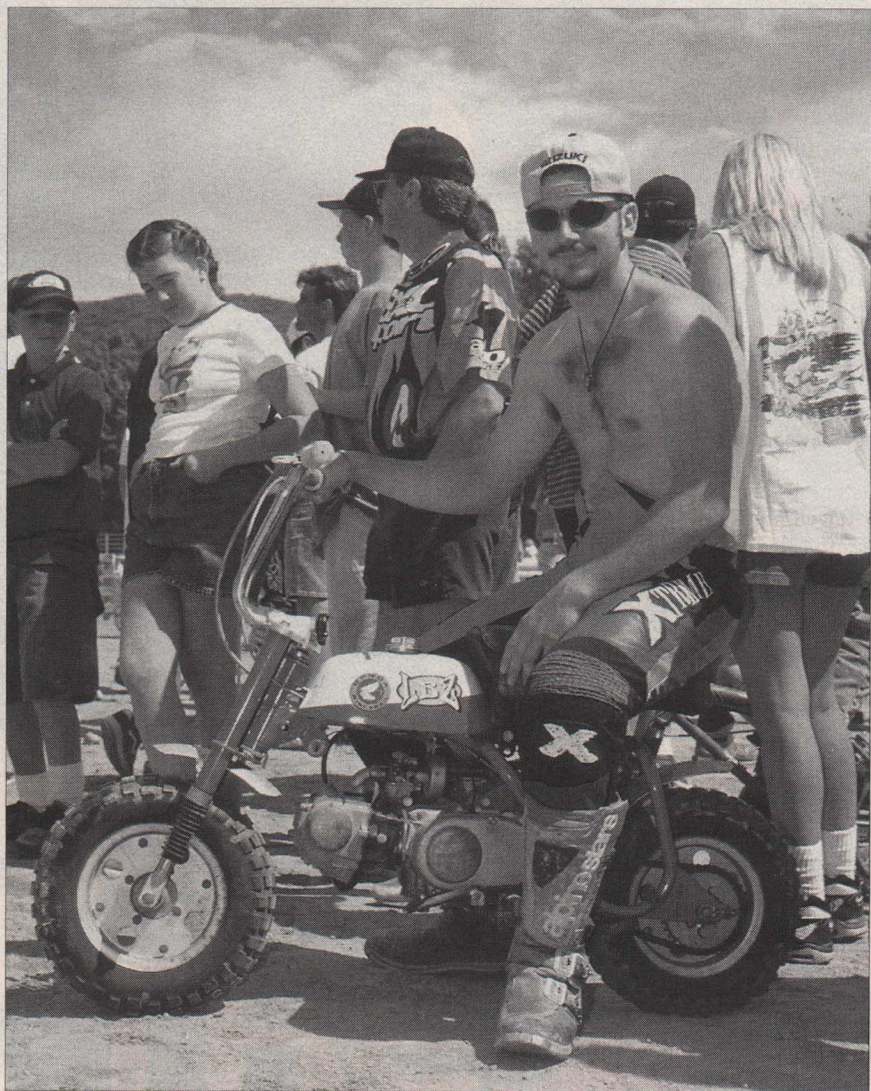


Forget the usual four-stroke starting drill. Just kick and go. It's not even cold-blooded!

50 HISTORY
FROM BEGINNER'S BIKE
TO BACK-YARD
SUPERCROSS STAR

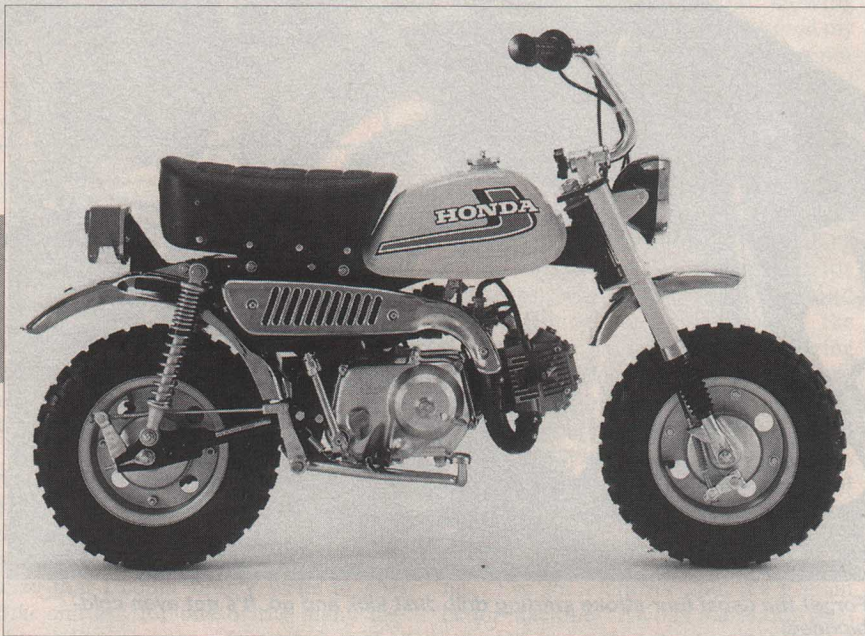
● Trying to get a regular person to ride your regular dirt bike? Good luck. Things are different if you have a Honda 50. *Everyone* wants to ride it. Here's a look at some of the high points of the 50's amazing first 30 years. ●

Honda 50s have inspired some of the most bizarre custom creations in dirt biking, like this Super Motard mini.

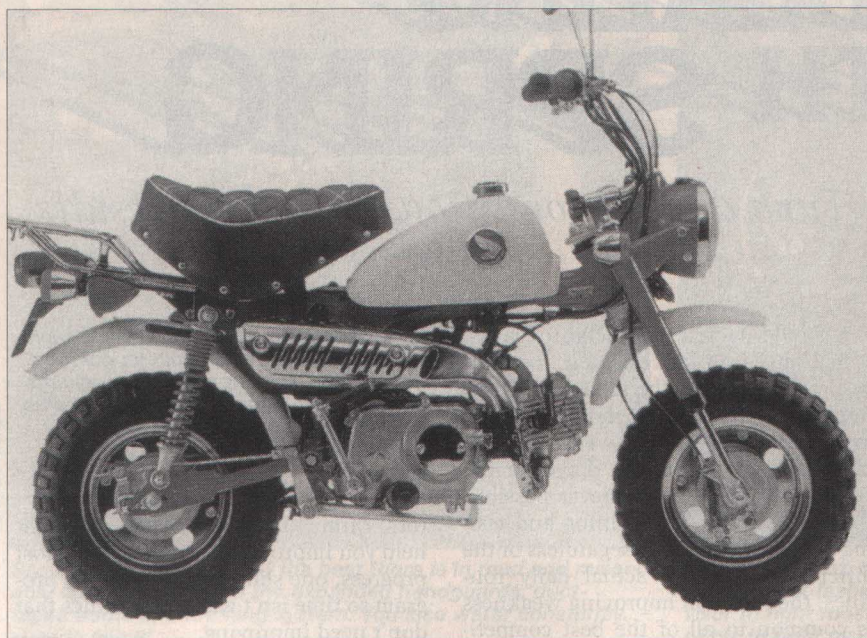
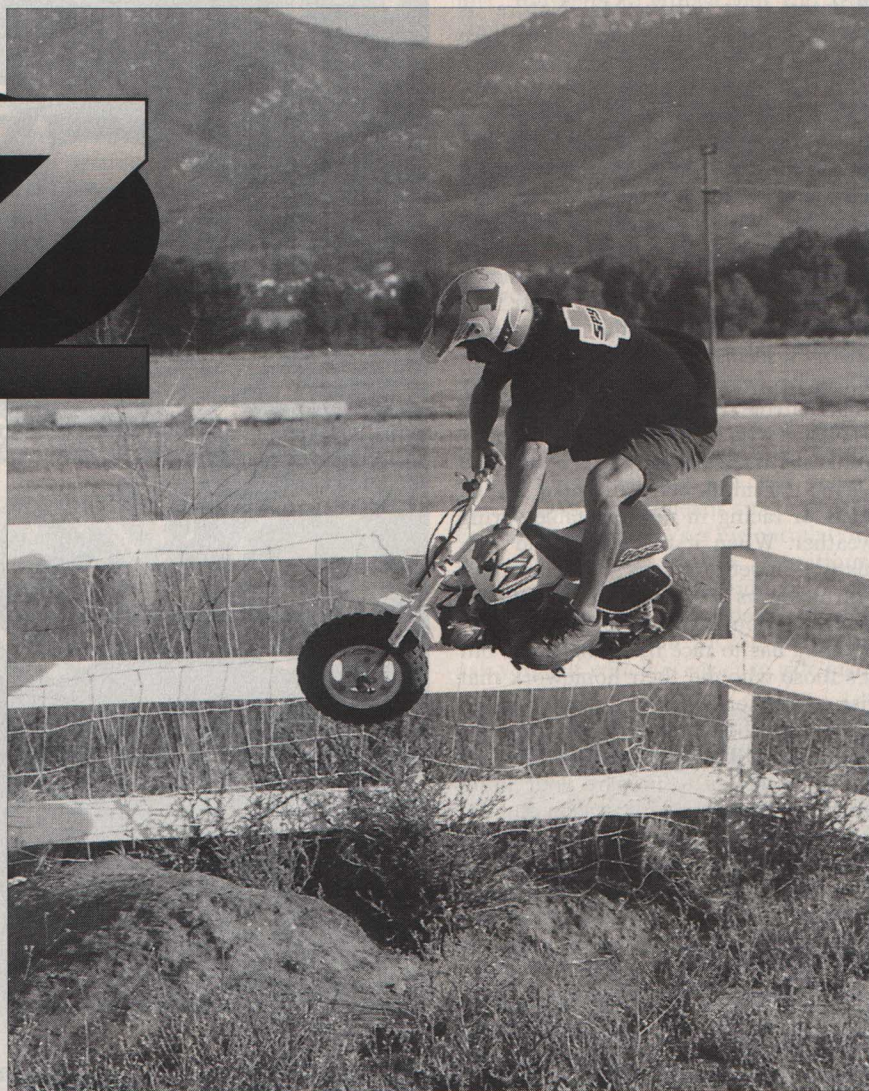
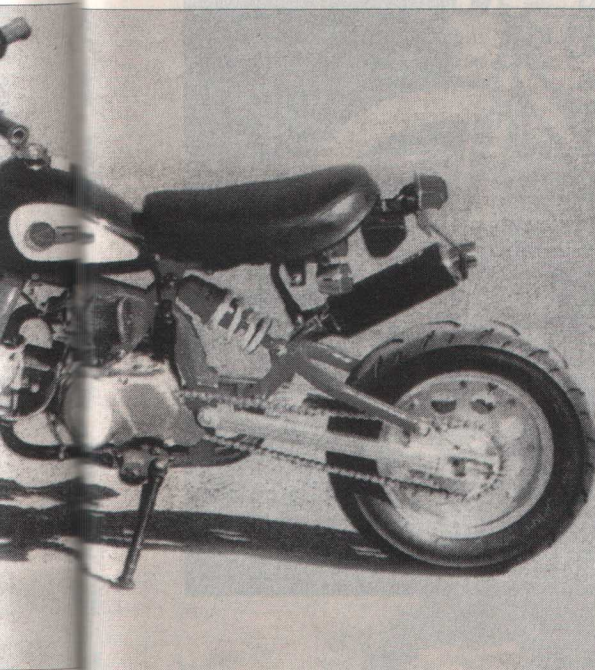


The first Z50 was sold in '68 before Honda had even started assigning model years to its machines. This '68 was motoring around the pits at the '97 White Bros. Four-Stroke World Championship. First-year models had white grips and no lights.

Honda added rear suspension to the Z50 in '72. The 50 also got a quieter muffler and a new gas tank shape. This configuration was retained, with little more than graphic changes, until '78. This is a '75.



THE Z



Folks laughed at the "R" Honda added to the 50's name because it is usually reserved for Honda's racing models. Actually, every 50 ever made is a racing model. Just ask Ryan Hughes, Jeremy McGrath, or other hardcore back-yard 50 racers.

Honda is doing us a favor by keeping its special 30th Anniversary commemorative Z50 model in Japan. This plaid-seated monstrosity with the '79 tank and mid-'60s badges looks more like a cobbed-together junkyard bike than the original Mini Trail. A nice replica of the '68 would have been great.