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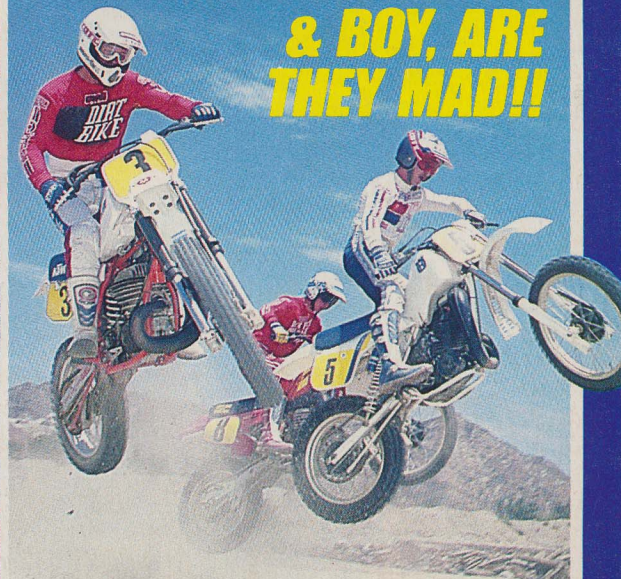
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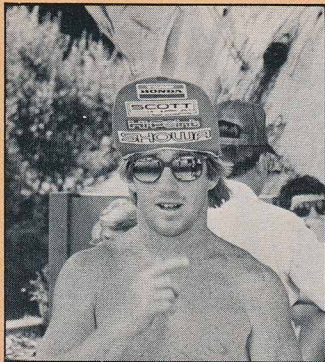
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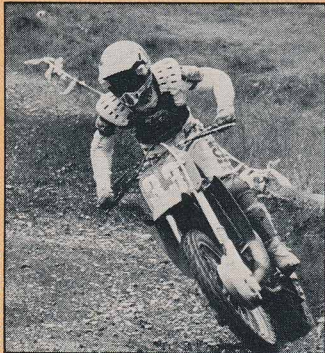
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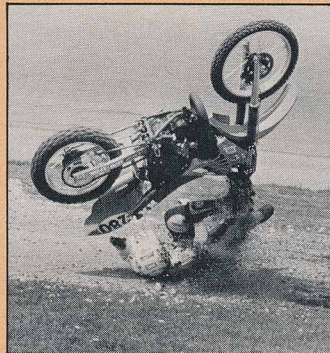
MAGOO



125 SHOOTOUT



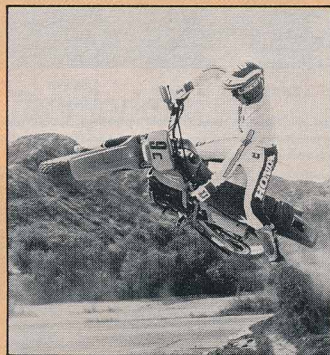
UNADILLA 250 GP



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DUST BUSTERS



HONDA XR500

WARNING: Much of the action depicted in this magazine is potentially dangerous. Virtually all of the riders seen in our photos are experienced experts or professionals. Do not attempt to duplicate any stunts that are beyond your own capabilities. Always wear the appropriate safety gear.

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ON THE COVER:—We've packed the pages with head-to-head shootouts this month. On top are six charged 125s going for the throat, and lower on the page are a half dozen of the fastest motocrossers in the world. Photos by Clipper and Webb; awesome separation by Valley Film.

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HONDA XR500R

THE TARGET

By the Staff of DIRT BIKE

It's big, it's plush, it's under fire

The Honda XR500 is in a rather odd position: Everybody is firing at it. The claims fly: "Our bike is faster than the XR." "Our bike is 25 pounds lighter than the Honda 500." "Our big four-stroke has a whole lot more low-end punch than the XR, and the suspension is better, too."

Why are all these people attacking the poor XR without the merest hint of mercy? It's because the XR500 is the *standard* of four-strokes. It's what the others are shooting at. Or for.

It's a target; a big, red, vulnerable target that everyone else wants to shoot holes in. And under the rules of competition in the marketplace (no rules whatever, to be exact), the XR500 is fair game. Let's take a look at what's causing all this furor.

HOLDING PATTERN

Honda went all out on part of the XR lineup for 1984. A completely revitalized 200 and an all-new 250 can certainly be considered highlights of their four-stroke parade. The XR500, on the other hand, received no new handouts, gimmicks or items. It had proved itself as a salable and easy-to-ride machine, and was just about right for the thumping enthusiast. Smart, rideable power, ballpark suspension, and middle-of-the-road habits made it a popular bike.

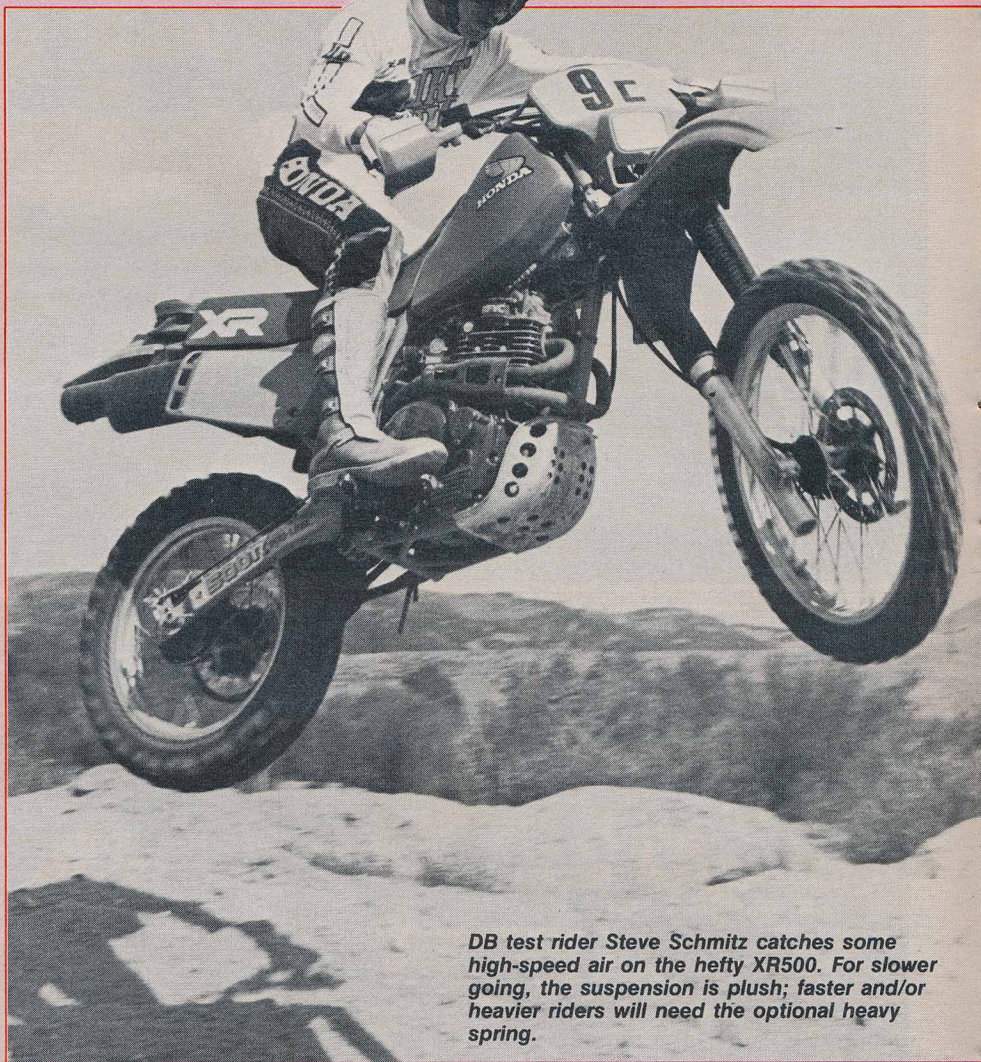
Big changes don't make a bike better. With that in mind, we coaxed a big XR out of Honda to evaluate, or re-evaluate, its merits. We already knew that it will not give Team Husky grief on the enduro circuit or smoke Ricky Johnson at a four-stroke National, but it will hold its own down in Baja or on those long trail rides, or when simply busting brush in the hills. This is the XR's niche.

WORKHORSE IN DISGUISE

You could say that the 500 motor is a real mule. It makes its power fairly early, carries into a decent mid-range, and then revs out in a broad and usable fashion. It's not a stump-puller like the TT600, but it has enough power to keep you going in the slowest and ugliest of terrain.

The entire performance of the 500 is broad in nature. You can short-shift, rev, plonk or lug the engine, all with reasonable results. Its strength is its adaptability to rider input. An expert can rev it to the moon; an enduro rider can lug and use the torque; and a novice can concentrate on maintaining forward momentum.

On the less positive side is the transmission. Moving through the five speeds is done



DB test rider Steve Schmitz catches some high-speed air on the hefty XR500. For slower going, the suspension is plush; faster and/or heavier riders will need the optional heavy spring.

reluctantly at best. Forget shifting under power; it refuses. We put some Kal-Gard Engine Gard in the oil, and after a couple hundred miles the trans loosened up—almost as good as a worn-out Yamaha.

Starting Big Red takes a particular routine. Turn on the choke, never touch the throttle, and kick. Get your hand near the throttle and it's doom. Once the engine is hot, this routine works about 50 percent of the time. The other 50 percent it lights off when it wants to.

Honda has dialed in the jetting almost to a T, but the 500 still suffers from that painful, nagging glitch right off the bottom. When the bike is being chugged at low rpm and the throttle is slammed open, it stumbles, then reacts.

TINY DANCER... AHHHH, NO

At 275.5 pounds (measured on the protesting DB scales) the Honda can't be considered your basic fun-to-flick machine. Working tight woods or uphill switchbacks takes some serious muscle, and some riders have been known to shed six to eight pounds during a day's ride.

Compounding the mass of the machine is a nice-looking but ineffective saddle and tank arrangement. The wide tank is nestled to a huge tongue on the saddle that defies the human body. If you're tall and skinny it's no problem, but 90 percent of the people will have to deal with the obstruction. It pushes you back on the saddle, as opposed to the preferred up-on-the-tank style.

Working trails and fire roads won't tax



THE TARGET

the bike's suspension, but it does show off the suppleness. In this environment, the forks and rear end handle things just fine. You can ride the XR all weekend and experience very little fatigue.

Once you get into testy terrain, a few nervous habits surface. Whoops and bumps cause an allergic reaction that borders on scary. The rear end will take the first few bumps just fine, then quite suddenly it lurches and moans, ending with a harsh bottoming that sends the tail section into another time zone altogether. Even continued doses of throttle won't straighten it out. Backing off is the only safe answer.

A super-short wheelbase (56.1 inches) is one of the reasons for the weirdness, as is the less-than-tolerant rear suspension. Installing a stiffer spring helps, but then it becomes harsh on the small bumps. The only reasonable alternative is a change in the shock and Pro-Link linkage system. Maybe in '85?

PARTS AND PARTICLES

Give an A-plus to the all-time killer excellent front brake. It's progressive, not too intense, waterproof, and plain boss. The rear unit, on the other hand, is semi-wimpy and loses its efficiency with prolonged water use. Consider it painfully average.

Although the throttle is a dual cable model, its action is moderately easy. So is the clutch action; it feels more like a 125 motocrosser than a big four-stroke. Those neat little brush guards on the front levers are deluxe but will break if you fall on them.

The 17-inch rear wheel seems to work okay, but it is tough to find good rubber for it. A slotted swingarm makes a nice, quick detachable rear wheel, and the snail cam adjusters make for quick chain adjustment. The chain itself is a strong O-ring model that's perfect for mud running.

Honda changed the material on the chain guide to make it more unbreakable than before. Also, they are using a denser material for the cushion under the tank so that it won't flatten.

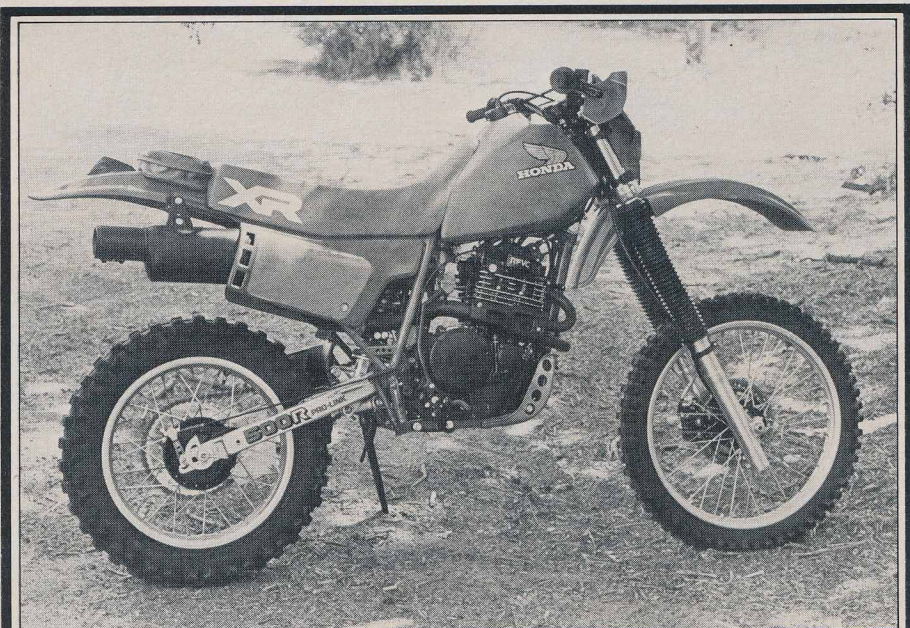
That big tank holds a lot of gas, and you can go at least 70 miles when she's full. We actually got an 82-mile loop out of ours during testing.

THE SHOOTING GALLERY

While the Honda may not be the most brilliant four-stroke, the fastest or the lightest, it's still the main target of the competition. The package is aimed at the masses, not the expert. It's a little heavy and the suspension is somewhat ordinary, but the bulk of the bike is right. Your average rider can hop aboard and have an entire weekend of riding fun. The competition keeps firing away at the XR, but they haven't shot it down yet. Hopefully, Honda will reload for '85 and return the fire. □



Trailing the Honda shows off the versatile motor and the made-for-the-masses chassis. Shifting is too notchy for our likes, and a Weight Watchers' diet plan would help too!



HONDA XR500R

Engine type	... Air cooled, SOHC, 4-valve, 4-stroke
Bore and stroke	... 92mm x 75mm
Displacement	... 498cc
Carburetion	... Dual 28mm
Factory jetting:	
Main jet	... Pri., 135; Sec., 108
Needle jet	... N/A
Jet needle	... N/A
Pilot jet55
Slide number	... N/A
Fuel tank capacity	... 12 L (3.2 gals.)
Lubrication	... Wet sump
Gearbox ratios:	
1	... 2.462:1
2	... 1.647:1
3	... 1.250:1
4	... 1.000:1
5	... 0.840:1
Gearing, front/rear	... 14/48
Ignition	... CDI

Recommended spark plug	... DPR8EA-9
Silencer/spark arrester	... Yes/yes
Wheelbase	... 1425mm (56.1 in.)
Ground clearance	... 338mm (13.3 in.)
Seat height	... 950mm (37.4 in.)
Rake/trail	... 25.5°/114mm (4.5 in.)
Wet weight, no fuel	... 275.5 lbs.
Tire size and type:	
Front	... 3.00 x 21 6PR IRC
Rear	... 5.10 x 17 6PR IRC
Suspension, travel:	
Front	... 280mm (11.0 in.)
Rear	... 280mm (11.0 in.)
Intended use	... Enduro, off-road
Country of origin	... Japan
Retail price, approx.	... \$2398
Distributor:	
American Honda Motor Co.	
100 W. Alondra Blvd.	
Gardena, CA 90247	

PROFILES

AL BAKER

Flying low with the Baja commander



Although Al is known for his Baja prowess, he does campaign as many National enduros as possible. Here he's seen at the Quicksilver run in Northern California.



Al Baker now works for Honda of Japan in the development of its XR lineup. This photo is a few years old, but Al still has the smile, add a few wrinkles.

Al Baker has been on top of the off-road world for many years. Starting in the late '60s, in ISDE competition, motocross and desert racing he has, as they say, done it all. He works with Honda of Japan on the development of its XR lineup and has been campaigning an XR500 in the Baja events. We found Al at his ranch in Hesperia, California, taking a break from testing.

DB: How much mental preparation goes into racing the high-speed Baja races?

Baker: It's all mental preparation. You don't just get on a bike and hang it wide open. You're going to lose it, or the bike is. A lot of it has to do with knowing your motorcycle and listening to the motor. You have to know when it's going to come apart. You know that when it starts slowing down, there's extra friction going on inside. Or if it starts overrevving on you, it's getting lean. So it's really important to listen to the motor to keep it happy for long, high-speed sections. Just like roadracers, it's all mental, keeping the concentration necessary to deal with what your motor is telling you. It's not all wide open and hang it out.

I like to learn the Baja course. The night before the race I sleep on it and transmit the entire course through my head to know how I want to run the race, what's going to happen and how I'll deal with it. So, when I'm going fast, I'm sort of mentally prepared. I already know what's going to happen. It's automatic.

DB: How important is pre-running the Baja courses?

Baker: A lot of guys pre-run to find shortcuts. I do it to find out how fast my bike is, how to set up the suspension so it has enough travel so the ride is plush in the rough areas but firm enough for the high speeds. Gas mileage is also critical. You don't want to run with a full tank all the time. We try to estimate how far our bike can go in each section on a certain amount of gas. Gas mileage is that important.

DB: Are the Hondas you run super-trick-ed-out machines?

Baker: The last couple of years, our bikes (Honda XR500s) have been nearly stock. It's almost better to run stock. Once you start running different pistons and cams and stuff, your bike may be faster, but the items haven't been durability tested. I'll always sacrifice some power for a bike that won't blow.

In the last Baja 1000, our bike was pulling an actual 105 mph. The year before, I think we got an honest 95 mph, no more. Our bike is identical to the 500 Husky on the top end. We always thought the four-strokes were an advantage down there for holding high speeds for a longer time. But in the last one, Dan Smith was about 200 yards behind me as we entered a 14-mile dry lake. At the end of the dry lake, I turned back and looked, and I hadn't pulled him an inch! □

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