

600cc
STREET/TRAIL
SHOOTOUT

By the Staff of DIRT BIKE

MONSTER MASH!

For cruising to the beach or on the beach, which is best?



What happens when you turn three Pro motocrossers loose on a Speedway track with three big four-strokes? You have a race, what else? The Honda had the strongest motor of the three.



For hard-core street racing, our testers chose the XL600. For just tooling around, the KLR won the draw. The XT600 finished middle-of-the-road.



Wheelspin is nothing strange to street/trail bike tires; for serious off-roading we would suggest good knobbies. For the most serious off-roading, hang some lights on a real dirt bike.

In an era of specialization—pure enduro bikes, awesome motocrossers that are out of place on anything but a race track, and street bikes that come closer to roadracers than anything we'll ever really need—why does there seem to be an all-out battle for 600cc street/trail supremacy? If you want to buy a street bike, you have your choice of many mounts much more stylish than the KLR600, the XT600, or the XL600. Also, all of us know that even the most underdeveloped pure dirt bike will run rings around these big 600s when the pavement falls away. Why do they even exist?

We at *Dirt Bike* have a theory. The 600cc street/trailers fill a void created by dirt riders who really want a street bike, but simply cannot stay off the dirt roads. It's in the blood—if you've ever spent time trailriding or track racing on a real dirt machine, anything wearing two wheels under you is going to be scooted through the mud now and then.

Anyone who's ever tried to ride a full-fledged street bike on a hilly fire road knows the limits of a pure road design. Another classic example is the mountain bike—evolved from the ten-speed to something that holds up under ex-BMXers and dirt bikers

who can't get enough off-road action to satisfy the urge.

So that, in essence, is what a street/trail bike is. It is the motorcycle equivalent of the mountain bike; in all honesty, it's more comfortable on the road, but it will cut through the boonies without giving you massive heart failure. The best and biggest examples of this genre are the Honda XL600, the Yamaha XT600, and the Kawasaki KLR600. And the question is: For what they were intended to do, which is best?

THE BEST HORSEPOWER

There is no doubt that the Honda XL600 is the fastest of the three. The XL has a huge 100mm piston driving gobs of ratcheting torque to the rear wheel. On the asphalt the Honda feels very peppy and strong. If you ride it like a motocrosser, you'll be doing wheelies away from every tight turn and traffic light, and it'll be a miracle if you don't lose your license in the first hour.

In the dirt the XL gives you the feeling that you can bore your way through anything the bike doesn't want to climb. Only on the steepest terrain does the tall street-type gearing get in the way; for everything else there's plenty of torque on hand.

Next in line is the Yamaha XT600. It is

very close to the XL in overall power, but just a bit slower. The torque delivery isn't quite so violent, but it has plenty of low end and a good mid-range. Compared with the Honda, it doesn't rev out as strongly, and as a result will lose a few bike lengths on a long drag lease.

The Kawasaki KLR600 is another story altogether. The engine is very smooth, very much like an electric motor, and it also has piles of torque, but it delivers its power in such a leisurely manner, it will lull you into wondering if you're moving forward at all. Of course, this isn't the case; you can actually move out quite well on the Kaw, and on a mountain road it's a whole lot of fun. But when you have to keep up with an XL and XT, you've got a lot of work on your hands.

PICKING A DIRECTION

Asphalt handling is nearly equal on all three bikes. There are slight differences, of course, but they can all be flung around canyon roads with wild abandon and leaned over to the point of insanity, and if a street bike rider with a chip on his shoulder comes along, you can motor away with complete disregard to his multi-cylinder monster.

The big differences become obvious in the



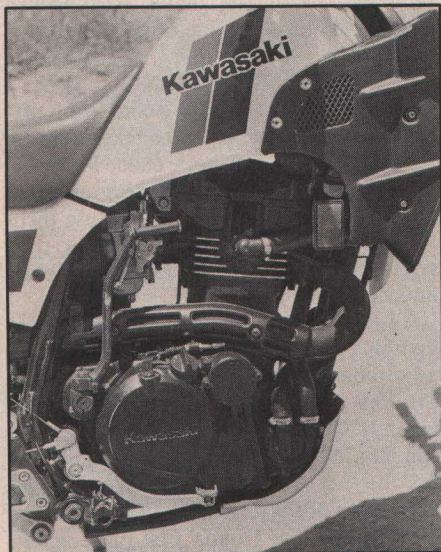
The Kawasaki KLR made the least amount of noise upon returning to earth, but the high weight factor made it the most difficult to control.



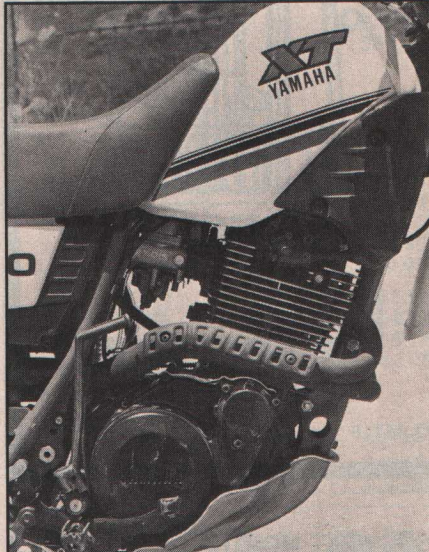
High-jumping on the XT600. Our testers asked for hazard pay after this and offered a suggestion to the readers: Don't try this at home.



It IS possible to cross up the XL600, but it's not comfortable. When it landed, the rear brake actuating lever would hit the muffler.



Our testers were turned on by the KLR600's spacey styling and unusual parts, but all agreed it was the slowest of them all.



The Yamaha XT had good low and mid-range power, and was voted the easiest to start of the group.



No doubt about it, the Honda is the horsepower king here. It has more low end and mid-range power than any of the other bikes, and it also revs out.



dirt. All three bikes are hindered by soft suspension, tall gearing, and marginal street/dirt tires, so racing through the boonies or tackling a tough enduro section is out of the question. You may hear dedicated street/trail riders talking about fire roading with stars in their eyes—there's a reason for this. To be painfully blunt, smooth dirt fire roads are where these bikes are most at home. Any section of really technical off-road riding would be a real chore; you could muscle them up a rocky hill or through a muddy woods section, but if you had to do it all day, it would stop being fun at about ten o'clock in the morning.

We liked the Honda best in the handling department, because it has a good dirt bike feel to it, and the short wheelbase allows you to move its massive weight around with sur-

	KAWASAKI KLR600	YAMAHA XT600L	HONDA XL600R
Engine type	4-stroke DOHC single	4-stroke SOHC single	4-stroke DOHC single
Bore and stroke	96mm x 78mm	95mm x 84mm	100mm x 75mm
Displacement	564cc	595cc	589cc
Carburetion	Keihin CVK40	(2)Teikei Y27PV	28mm/30mm Keihin
Fuel tank capacity	11.5 L (3.03 gals.)	11.0 L (2.9 gals.)	12.0 L (3.2 gals.)
Transmission	5-speed	5-speed	5-speed
Brakes, front/rear	Disc/drum	Disc/drum	Disc/drum
Ignition	CDI	CDI	CDI
Suspension:			
Front	Kayaba, 230mm (9.0 in.)	Kayaba, 255mm (10.0 in.)	Kayaba 230mm (9.0 in.)
Rear	Uni-Trak, 220mm (8.66 in.)	Monocross, 235mm (9.25 in.)	Pro-Link, 200mm (8.0 in.)
Wheelbase	1470mm (57.8 in.)	1440mm (56.7 in.)	1419mm (55.9 in.)
Ground clearance	280mm (11.02 in.)	260mm (10.2 in.)	270mm (10.6 in.)
Seat height	870mm (34.25 in.)	860mm (33.9 in.)	860mm (33.9 in.)
Weight	340 lbs.	326 lbs.	324 lbs.
Retail price	\$2449	\$2399	\$2346
Country of origin	Japan	Japan	Japan
Distributor	Kawasaki Motors Corp. 2009 E. Edinger Ave. Santa Ana, CA 92705	Yamaha Motor Corp. 6555 Katella Ave. Cypress, CA 90630	American Honda Motor Corp. 100 W. Alondra Gardena, CA 90247

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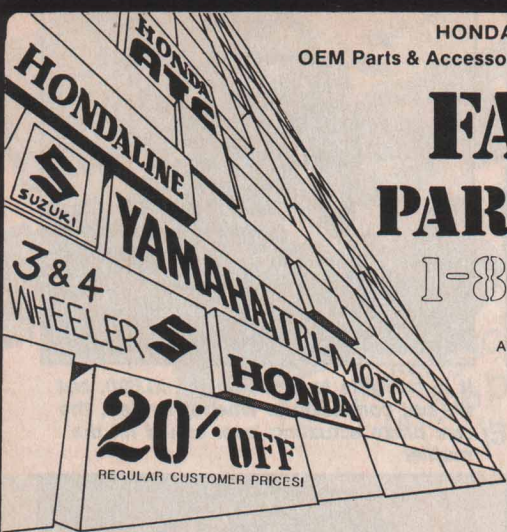
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600cc STREET/TRAIL SHOOTOUT

prising efficiency. The Yamaha and Kawasaki are pretty much tied for second place. The Yamaha actually handles well, but the suspension is so soft you can't appreciate it. The Kawasaki has a firmer suspension, but the long wheelbase and shallow rake angle cause it to fight back in anything other than straight-line running.

As we said, fire roads are the best off-road excursions for these bikes. Next in preference would be gentle, hard-packed trails. Avoid deep mud and sand at all costs—they don't like it.

BUMP SOAKING

If you're at all serious about your off-roading, every one of these bikes needs a stiffer suspension at both ends. Much research has been conducted to determine that people buy street/trail bikes and use them 90 percent of the time on the street, so they are suspended to soak up expansion joints and not much else.

To their credit, they all use some sort of damping adjustment. The Honda features adjustable rebound and compression, while the other two machines allow rebound tuning only. This works out very handy, as you can stop at the edge of the road and dial up the forces before you hit the dirt.

Because of the dual damping control, we have to give the Honda first place again. The Kawasaki takes second because it just feels firmer and more in control, and the Yamaha follows a close third. Keep in mind that adjustable damping is not going to cure all the ills—when you attack a set of small whoops and are greeted with massive clanking and bottoming at both ends, you will see exactly what we mean.

BITS AND PIECES

The Kawasaki has to win the Golden Gizmo award. The mere existence of the other two bikes should tell us that watercooling isn't an absolute necessity on a big four-stroke street/trail bike, but it's new technology, so what the heck. But a thermostatic fan on the radiator? Somewhere we should be able to hear the sound of somebody's cheese slipping off their cracker a little bit.

All three bikes are not real picnics to start. If we had to pick a kick winner, it would be the XT—it doesn't necessarily start easily, just easier than the other two. Our best advice would be to read the starting drill noted in the owner's manual, and follow it religiously.

Smoother of the bunch would be the Kawasaki. The KLR is nearly vibrationless, even at maximum revs. The Yamaha is next in line, and even though the Honda is loaded with counterbalancers, it finishes a distant third in the wake-me, shake-me category.

All three bikes have more or less average rear brakes. We're talking a lot of inertia

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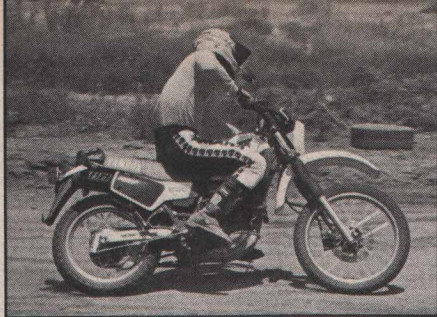
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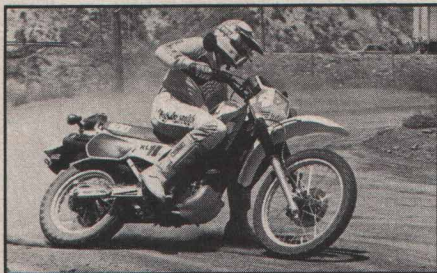
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Riding the XT600 aggressively proved one thing—it doesn't like to be ridden aggressively. Cruising fire roads is your best bet.



The KLR can get sideways with the best of them. The extremely mellow power delivery made it easy to control.



A short wheelbase makes the XL600 the handling demon of the three. It turns quickly, but the high-speed stability suffers.

and weight here, and it's time for something more than single-leading-shoe drums in the rear. The Honda front disc is the best, hauling the XL down with ease. Next is the Yamaha; a good, strong brake but a bit touchy in the dirt. The KLR front disc got the job done, but everyone agreed it was a little weak.

TAKING HOME THE BACON

Not surprisingly, we chose the Honda as the winner. Honda has had a long time to figure out how to build a four-stroke, and even though we can find plenty to snivel about, they've got it dialed. We'd almost declare second place a tie, but it seems that more of our testers and hangers-on prefer to ride the Kawasaki than the Yamaha, so the KLR takes home second place.

Please keep in mind that we are almost talking about street bikes here, much as we at *Dirt Bike* hate to admit it. Unless you're into spending considerable wads of money, you're not going to be able to ride one of these to a Sunday motocross and then compete on it before riding home. But, if you already have a dirt bike and you want something to cruise to the 7-Eleven and maybe, you know, relax on, get yourself a 600. They're a whole lot more fun than a touring bike. □

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