

Transforming the CR500 from a bike that's hard to hold to one that's lean and mean was no easy task for Honda. Without belaboring the point, Honda's '88 CR500 was too vicious and unpredictable for most riders to hang on to. In a word, the bike was gnarly. In spite of confused suspension and a thick, heavy feel, the CR's awe-some power made the machine fully competitive, though the bike should have come with a "use caution" warning applying to the throttle—void only if you're name is Rick Johnson.

Last November we gave you our first impressions of all the '89 Hondas. At that time we tagged the CR500 as both

On the CR500RK, huge amounts of power are thankfully coupled to a fine-handling, maneuverable chassis.

easier to ride and vastly improved due to improvements in the chassis and suspension—gains that came about after long hours of testing, redesigning and input from factory riders, testers and Roger DeCoster. According to DeCoster, Honda devoted more time to testing the '89 CR protos than they've ever allocated to any past models. Their goal was to mate more controllable power to a manageable chassis with works-like suspension.

CONTROLLED RAGE

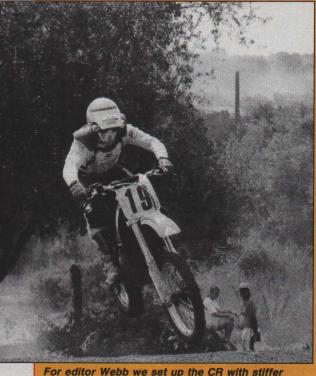
First of all, the CR500RK starts much more easily than the '88 model did. Honda fit the bike with a long, oddly shaped lever that folds under the tank, but it does a great job of letting you get in a full kick. Second of all, the bike is still a missile. The dyno confirmed our feelings about the engine: It makes power earlier than the '88 model, yet it doesn't rev out as far or have as much peak horsepower. In fact, from 3500 rpm all the way up to 5500 rpm, the '89 has anywhere from two to three more horsepower than the '88! Then it hits the proverbial wall. Thankfully, Honda gave the five-hunny enough flywheel so that it doesn't stall too easily as well as carburetion that's zeroed in perfectly. The redesigned port shapes and squish band also reduce some of last year's hysterical hit.

While Honda left the transmission untouched (both gears and ratios), it now feels like the ratios are a little too closely spaced for the huge amounts of power that the bike spits out at low rpm and in the midrange. It seems that you're shifting too often, searching for



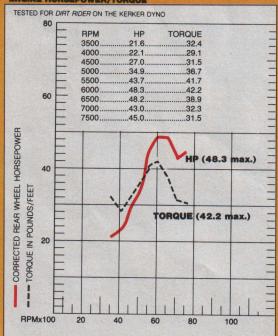
PHOTOS: DICK LAKE

SPECIFICATIONS



For editor Webb we set up the CR with stiffer springs from Honda front and rear. For heavy (200+) riders and fast pros, the springs work well and virtually eliminate front-end shimmy.

ENGINE HORSEPOWER/TORQUE



REDLINE REPORT

It's readily apparent from glancing at the dyno report that major-league horsepower is the CR500's forte. The machine pumps out horsepower and torque earlier in the powerband than the '88, then proceeds to belly up and hit the wall at 6500 rpm. Looking at the numbers, a phenomenal buildup appears from 4500 rpm (27.0 hp) to 6000 rpm (48.3 hp)—a 21 horsepower gain within 1500 rpm!

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RIPPER!

the next cog before finishing a turn. There's more than enough power on tap to easily pull a higher gear than

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Honda's newest CR500 looks a lot like the '88 CR250, and that's no accident. The 250 felt feathery light, turned smartly and inspired lots of rider confidence. The lowboy pipe and side-drop tank combined to lower the center of gravity and, more important, helped centralize mass—the key to a light feel. This year the CR500 has been graced with those same traits.

Frame geometry and construction also saw some changes compared to last year's 500. Rake and trail are now 28 degrees/4.8 inches, which should make the '89 a bit more stable than the '88 version's 27.5 degrees/4.5 inches. New gusseting at various frame tube junctions and a smaller-diameter, thinner-walled steering stem add rigidity and, Honda claims, reduce weight.

In the interest of improved rider positioning, the subframe is 12mm lower, the seat and side plates are shaped differently, the tank is skinnier yet holds more (2.4 gallons claimed versus last year's 2.0), and the footpegs are 3.5mm wider front to rear.

The other major visible change is the inverted Showa cartridge fork. Benefits of an upside-down suspension unit include reduced underhang (which reduces the chances of a fork leg catching on a rock or on the side of a rut) and greater rigidity for more precise steering. The triple clamps on Showa's inverted fork, for example, grasp 54mm tubes, while the "sliders" are 45mm. It makes last year's 43mm fork seem positively wimpy. Claimed travel remains 12.0 inches.

Instead of rubber accordion fork boots to protect the valuable slider areas, Honda uses hard-shell nylon guards that wrap almost completely

Getting at the preload ring is a pain since there's very little room between the airbox and the milk bottle-shaped reservoir on the damper.



necessary around a bend, but it feels somewhat uncomfortable doing so.

In fact, the Honda just won't rev out at all, and you're forced to shift because the power stops building. So, rather than being able to motor through a turn and let the bike rev until you're out on the straightaway, you have to short shift and lug it or shift in the turn. Unlike the Kawasaki KX500. which always seems to have the "right" gear for a situation, the CR

around them, providing coverage from both roosts and side blows.

Rear suspension is courtesy of a brand-new delta-shaped Pro-Link, a piggyback reservoir Showa shock and a lighter swingarm. In addition, the rear hub is die-cast to reduce weight, both overall and unsprung. Claimed wheel travel is up from 12.6 to 13.0 inches.

MAKE IT EASY

People love Open-classers for their power. Honda strove to make the CR500RK deliver that power more smoothly than before as well as start more easily than anything in its class without an electric starter.

Starting with starting, Honda's engineers placed two small grooves in the cylinder bore just above the exhaust ports. These bleed off excess compression at low kicking speeds but don't detract appreciably from total power output. In addition, the kickstarter shape, changed due to the lower pipe, was designed to make it easier to kick over the 491.4cc engine with its 6.8:1 compression ratio.

Updated porting specs were in-

stainless steel.

Most of the fuel is carried below the CR's backbone. The tank itself is slimmer, yet it holds more. Getting at the Keihin is a snap.



cluded to give a nominal power boost, but most internal engine changes were intended to make the motor even more reliable and longer lasting. The cylinder sleeve, for instance, is now much thicker-with the outside diameter up from 99 to 105mm-to increase rigidity. Bore and stroke remain 89 x 79mm. Naturally, the cases were bored a bit to accommodate the larger jug. To reduce friction, Honda went to a piston ring with less tension, from 1.35 kg/mm to 1.0 kg/mm.

Other changes include an additional roller bearing (14 instead of 13) in the connecting rod's big end. a new heat-treating process for the small-end bearing and reduced inner taper in the wrist pin-all in the interests of improved durability.

To reduce the chances of losing coolant partway through a race, the coolant spigot is now flanged and bolted to the cylinder head. The head gasket is thinner-0.25mm compared to the RJ's 1.0mm-and is no longer made of asbestos; now it's

Inside the clutch housing, vou'll find the damper rubber shapes and

PHOTOS: MIKE WEBB

Removing the fork springs is best done by removing the top clamp and bottoming the fork. Here, Roge DeCoster and Eric Crippa check the oil level.

sizes are new to better cope with the 500's power.

One final change of note is the location of the reed. It's seven millimeters closer to the rear of the piston, not to conform to any powerband modifications but to provide more carb-to-frame clearance.

On top of all this, a host of smaller detail changes appeared. Honda used a different shape and ratio for the rear brake pedal in an attempt to make inadvertent rear-wheel lockup less likely. With the new pipe routing comes a new, easier-access airbox and filter. Finally, there's a quicker-turn throttle and, naturally, the CR comes with a new, larger, quieter FIM-legal silencer.

The long, bent muffler keeps the CR quiet; the new rear end features a lighter swingarm and an even 13.0 inches of claimed travel.



The inverted Showa is extremely sturdy, offers a smooth ride and very little stiction. The brake is strong and





With a no-flex front end, good rubber from Dunlop and gobs of usable midrange, the Honda is magical through fast sweepers.

RIPPER!

forces the rider to really concentrate on gear selections.

Second-gear starts are a cruise, and third-gear gates are run of the mill. We actually started in fourth gear during our race testing and the bike pulled it! The clutch is fairly easy to yank in, and the action remains intact under horrible abuse.

On longer, faster tracks, the power is very usable, since you can short shift and float in the meat of the powerband. Because the gearing isn't as critical at higher speeds, you can easily manipulate the power without overrevving the bike. The CR feels controllable, but get too aggressive and the motor will slap you senseless. There's a nine-horsepower gain from 5000 rpm to 5500 rpm and an increase of another five up to 6000 rpm! Manhandling a 14-horsepower surge in just 1000 rpm is insane, so it's best to bob around the

track by staying right in front of or inside the huge hit.

SHACKLED THRUST

How has Honda dealt with this power increase? Simple. They've totally revamped the chassis, suspension and ergonomics so that the bike not only handles better, it feels lighter to boot. In playing with new frame geometry figures, Honda kicked out the rake a half degree, altered the trail, lowered the center of gravity by fitting a side-drop tank and lowboy pipe, stiffened the frame and fit an all-new suspension system onto the bike.

The inverted Showa fork was a hotbed of rumors prior to its debut. We'd heard stories of breakage, excess stiction and damping troubles. As it turned out, the upside-down version offers a ride far superior to that of last year's standard telescopic. The increased rigidity is immediately noticeable, although getting the correct compression damping setting and keeping

air out of the fork really affects its performance. We've heard through local dealers and suspension shops that 75 percent of '89 CR owners find their suspension harsh. For all but the lightest riders, Honda's optional stiffer springs with less preload make the fork great for motocross.

We bled the fork before every ride, and by adding compression we actually increased plushness since the fork resisted squatting better and stayed in the comfortable portion of travel.

Faster riders will need to bump up the oil level, but we found that by setting it at 116mm from the top, it absorbed the big hits without fail and wasn't too offensive on the smaller bumps. This may seem odd, but for no apparent reason the 500's fork seems to offer smoother action than the CR250's on both stutter bumps and big compression hits.

The 500's Pro-Link rear end utilizes Honda's latest delta-shaped linkage, which is nearly identical to that on the

'88 CR250. Basically, it's lighter and more rigid than the previous fork-link system. Rear-end action has been improved, increasing control; at no time does the bike wander side to side, even in the roughest of conditions. On stutters and small bumps and hits, the milk bottle-reservoir Showa shock reacts positively, absorbing impacts with little effort. Midrange wallops and giant crushers are handled in stride, and, again, the Showa seems well suited to both slow and fast riders up to 190 pounds. Setting sag at 95mm worked best for cornering manners and stability. After numerous play rides and 10 or so races, the seat foam broke down badly. Plan on fitting an aftermarket pillow to the bike during the middle of the season.

SPEAKING OF STABILITY ...

While this bike runs likes a cheetah, it shakes its head like a horse with a bug in its nose. During testing we couldn't get the front end to toss on tighter sand tracks or stadium-type courses, but get the bike on a high-speed GP course or in the desert and it gets nervous, both at speed and when the throttle is chopped. It's critical to get the compression damping set up just right: too little and the bike tends to shake-a lot! Going to the stiffer front springs pretty much nips the problem in the bud for bigger riders, but if you're normal size and not pro-level fast, you'll have trouble with nose whip.

Even though Honda kicked out the steering head angle to 28 degrees (from 27.5 in '88) and fiddled with the trail, the bike carves like a works machine. Inside or outside, on rough or smooth surfaces, in terrain that's slick or full of traction, the CR snaps a fine line and follows it with incredible agility. You can actually make directional changes in the corner and pick and choose your exit with very little effort.

Yes, the bike is fast (almost too fast) and has new silverware fore and aft,

Honda makes the pipe thick for both durability and to reduce the noise level. The snaking headpipe looks vulnerable but holds up well under abuse.





We did some night racing at Ascot Park, and the CR craved big leaps, though the fork did seem to rebound too quickly.

PHOTO: KEN FAUGHT

but the big news is the handling. By forcing the center of gravity down low and centralizing mass, Honda has actually fooled the scales. They claim the CR weighs in at a feathery 223.8 pounds dry, but in truth it tips the scales at 236 pounds with oil in the tranny and coolant in the radiator (no gas). Still, that's seven pounds lighter than the '88 CR500 (that bike stunned the scales at a whopping 244 pounds). And in a straight-from-one-seat-into-the-other comparison with the '88, the '89 felt 15 pounds lighter!

This low center of gravity has helped transform the manners of the CR500. No longer do you point it and hang on; now it's more of a flicker. You can have fun on the five-hunny, riding it as you would a lightweight 250. We raced the machine in California at Carlsbad's extremely rough and sandy GP course and on Ascot's hardpacked night track with excellent results. Great starts were easy, and, with the exception of tight, aerobic tracks, the Honda was a pleasure to race.

HOT SPOTS

Our brakes worked great and were never sticky or went away for any reason whatsoever. The Dunlops—a K490 front and a K695 rear—are fantastic. They seem to offer an excellent bite in a large variety of soil types.

This bike is quiet. We give Honda top marks for working toward stealth. The muffler itself is a double-jointed aluminum affair that has a trick collar over the mounting bolt so your leg won't hang up on the bolt shoulder.

Aftermarket folks are going to be hard pressed to build a better set of fork guards. They wrap around the exposed lower tubes nicely, are stiff enough to mount the front brake cable to, and they can take a licking.

OFF THE SHOWROOM FLOOR ...

This bike is a champ. It's shockingly fast, has excellent suspension and feels light for a 500. Any rider worth a pinch of used Bel-Ray air filter oil can hop on the CR500 and win races. The drawbacks are few. The obvious one is that it's so fast that it tests the pilot's ability to stick to the workable part of the motor. With almost no overrun on top end, you're forced to abandon any rev theory through corners and are obligated to shift at odd moments. Coupled with the huge amounts of midrange, this gets toilsome.

Is the Honda the best Open-class bike for 1989? Perhaps. Out of the crate, it's definitely the fastest and will have you cornering like R.J. in minutes. Its jumping ability is flawless and its pulling strength unparalleled. But is it too fast? Is the power aimed too specifically toward the full-blown factory racer? Maybe. But there's no doubt that the bike is the lethal weapon of the Open class and will most certainly dominate the action in the first

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Switching lines in corners is a joy. The CR steers precisely, and the monster midrange lets you rocket out of turns with only small stabs at the clutch.

RIPPER!

This bike is awesome! The engine has a fairly smooth and rideable powerband and enough power to fly a B-1 bomber. On fast tracks the CR500 has the agility of a 250 but is also a little shaky and doesn't quite rev far enough. The ergos are perfect, the brakes excellent, and the handling is unmatched. For the pro, it's the best Open-class bike made.

—Rich Taylor

Ht./Wt.: 5'9"/150 lb.
Motorcycle(s) currently raced/ridden:
Honda CR125RJ, CR250RJ
Riding ability: Pro motocrosser

The '89 CR500 is without a doubt far too fast and much too powerful for almost everyone, especially me. It also happens to be more fun to roost, rip, climb and jump than you can imagine. During our testing we were out in the desert climbing hills and came to a monster climb that is impossible to conquer when the ground is dry. In fact, an '88 KX500 could only claw halfway up after repeated attempts. I moseyed over to the hill on the CR, shifted up to third, hit the clutch and pretty much vaulted over the top before I knew what had happened. No other bike on the market today has that kind of power.

On a motocross track the bike can be a handful. At Carlsbad, where the track is long and wide, the power was welcome and I fared pretty well, including one massive holeshot. But on a real tight sand track, I got beat up. Too much power at one time cou-



pled with no rev-out made for grief in the corners. I love the suspension (I went for stiffer front springs and a stiffer rear coil), the brakes are great, it corners with no effort, and with the stiff springs set up for my weight, the bike didn't shake a bit. If there's one problem, I'd say it's with the lack of versatility brought on by the monstrous power surge at five grand, which will pretty much make it a brute both in the woods and while trail riding.

-Tom Webb

Ht./Wt.: 6'3"/215 lb.
Motorcycle(s) currently raced/ridden:
'89 Kawasaki KX500
Riding ability: Vet Expert motocrosser

This bike has the most potential of all the 500s. It starts very easily, the controls and ergonomics are excellent, and all rider transitions are smooth. If motocross tracks were made only of turns and jumps, this bike would be tops. As it is, the occasional long straightaway littered with sharp-edged bumps and potholes wreaks havoc with the machine; the front end shakes violently, and, even when I dropped the fork all the way in the triple clamps, I nearly got jackhammered off the bike.

Aside from the head snorts, the CR carves the corners. The great low to midrange power and upside-down flex-free fork make for positive cornering manners in all types of terrain and in all traction situations. However, the powerband flattens out early and is too short for the really serious racer, and, in spite of having the most potential, the CR500 also leads the pack in cost.

-Jon Miller

Ht./Wt.: 5'10"/170 lb.
Motorycle(s) currently raced/ridden:
'88 Kawasaki KX500
Riding ability: Vet Expert motocrosser

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