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DIRT RIDER

MARCH 1976

PDC \$1.25



**SPECIAL
SIX DAYS
ISSUE**
**Malcolm Smith
on Safari**



HOTCHA
—Another verge
of control color
**MOTOCROSS
POSTER
INSIDE**

**Bike of
the year?
Yamaha
TT 500**

**Three
Trans-AMAs
wired on
the circuit**

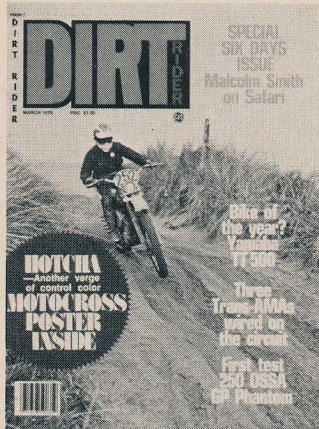
**First test
250 OSSA
GP Phantom**



DIRT RIDER

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MARCH, 1976



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ED SCHNEPF/Publisher
RICK SIEMAN/Editorial Director
DAVE SCHOONMAKER/Word Director
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CAROL VAN ORSDOL/Business Manager
JANET GRAHAM/Consumer Relations

LEE SALBERG/
Eastern Advertising Director
333 N. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60611
(312) 263-4569

ALAN KUDA/
Western Advertising Director
7950 Deering Avenue
Canoga Park, California 91304
(213) 887-0550

CHRIS HAMM/Advertising Coordinator

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Shame goeth before a fall. Sometimes.

For example: We weren't on a test ride. With trail and enduro bikes we seldom formally "test ride," we simply take the test bikes out instead of our own when we go trail riding. Which is whenever we can. We were, then, on a trail ride, over a favorite trail. This particular trail goes up, tight and twisty, to the top of an imposing ridge, then comes down, tight and twisty, to a river. The trail is between two and five feet wide. The drop on the outside edge is often breathtaking.

Climbing up the ridge we encountered noise. It grew and eventually became several riders on modified MXers. They were having a bit of trouble with the switchbacks. Their bikes were pretending to be steam shovels. They were also being loud; evilly, disgustingly, brainlessly loud. They needed a lesson!

At the crest of the ridge the *Dirt Rider* Trail Ride Crew swapped machinery, putting our best foot forward, so to speak. Down after the receding motocrossers we rode, XL 125 in the front. Soon we closed with them. They were, it seems, still having trouble with the switchbacks.

The MXers were nervous, probably. It was probably their first time on that trail. Their bikes were definitely in the wrong place at the wrong time. We waited for a stretch of straight trail, steeply downhill, waited until they cautiously upshifted to third, feeling their brakes every once in a while for security. The mighty XL attacked. Engine screaming in fifth, using every pony in its noble little engine, grabbing the extended hand of gravity, it blew past the three motocross machines with a clear ten mile per hour overtake speed. The rest of us stayed behind, watched.

The pass was bad enough, a clear insult. As the XL pulled farther ahead its turn signal blinked, signaling its return to the center of the trail.

Two of the three MXers crashed at that moment. Clearly a fall from pride. The story is true, really, and it makes a point that much needs making. The Honda XL

125 has been, in the past, a much maligned motorcycle. It has been ridiculed and persecuted in the most slavishly follow-the-leader fashion by some magazines. The fact is, that for its intended purpose it is one of the finest dirt bikes to come out of Japan.

For its intended purpose. Face it, no one is going to go out and buy an XL, any XL, to race with, unless he's a died-in-the-wool four-stroke freak and willing to spend megabucks to build a marginally competitive machine. Even serious enduro riders will steer clear of

XL 125 TEST

**Riding right and
righting wrongs . . .**



the 125 unless they plan to modify it extensively. Casual trail riders will buy the 125, so will a lot of first time dirt riders, guys who need the street-legal excuse to justify the expense. A lot of these people will learn enough on the XL to decide that they do want to get serious in the dirt, that they do want to move toward some kind of competition machine. The XL is a great springboard to another bike. Sadly enough, some of the bikes to which an XL rider might "move up" are poorer bikes than the little thumper, in handling, suspension, in everything, in fact, except power.

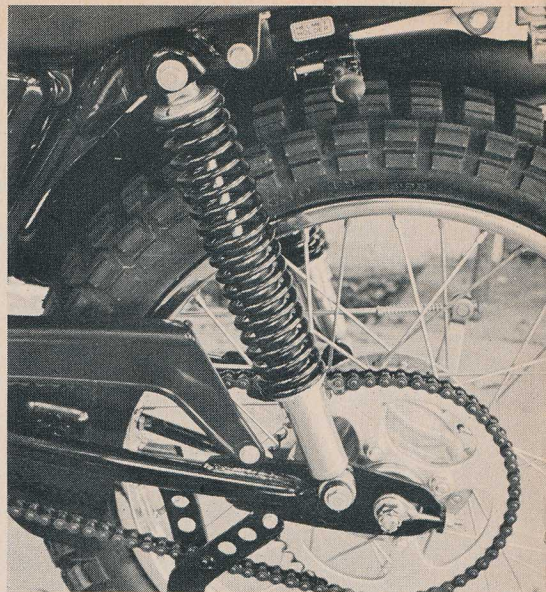
The 124cc Honda four-stroke engine is likely the most versatile in the entire Honda stable. It has powered bikes as diverse as the 125 trails bike and the CB 125 streeter. It is a marvel of simplicity and durability. Unfortunately, in stock trim it is low on power, compared especially to any of the gutsier two stroke 125s. This has been the key to the Hondas damnation in the motorcycle press.

Going back in the XL's evolutionary chain a bit we find the SL 125. Still street legal, it was one of the second generation of Honda dirt bikes, following on the heels of the massive and dangerous high-piped "scrambler" models. It taught a lot of people to ride dirt, and, in those simpler days, was often modified enough to be competitive in enduros and, in at least one case that we know of, observed trials.

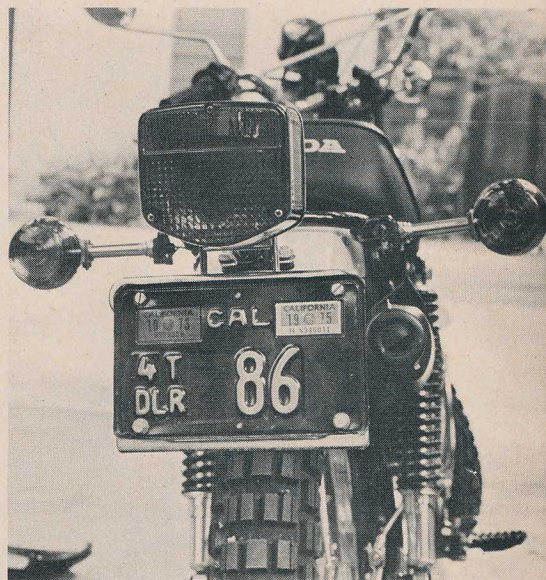
The first XL 125s were "serious" SLs. The pipe was still low, but now allowed the engine to breathe a bit better.

Moderate power increases made the bike nifty for slow, take-it-easy trail-bopping. The low pipe cut down on ground clearance, though, weighed a ton, and was sadly susceptible to rocks and other gnarly objects native to the kind of places that the bike seemed to urge its owners to explore.

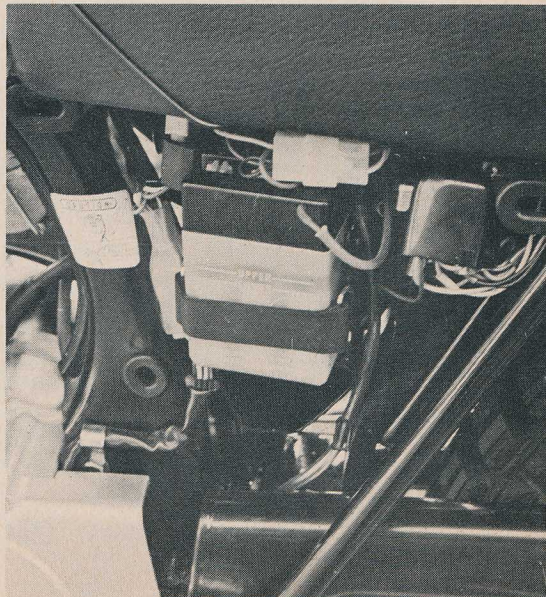
For 1976 the XL line has received a face, or at least a pipe, lift. High pipes are the order of the day from Honda and the pipe on the 125, seemingly incorporating some exhaust know how learned from the TL series, is great improvement over earlier models.



Suspension worked well, it was perfectly happy handling any terrain at speeds the Honda was capable of.



Silly laws make for silly taillights.



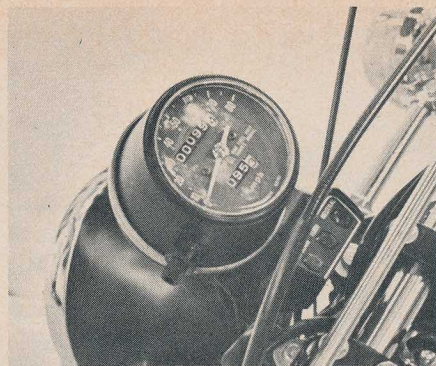
The battery was, at least, small and securely strapped down.



Tool kit was slightly better than what we've been subjected to in the past.

The power feels unchanged but ground clearance is great and the traditionally slim profile of the machine remains.

Otherwise the bike seems pretty much the same as before. Details like the bars, pegs, grips are fine. The gearshift lever needs moving up as delivered, and a skidplate is a must for rough going. The fenders are classy enough, art nouveau lines and all, but the front still will need a mud flap to keep the engine from packing up in gooey going. Tires are either Bridgestone Trail Wings or Nitto Universals. If you have a choice, we prefer the Bridgestones. Neither will win any awards for traction. Forks and shocks are really pretty fine. Though, as always, they can be made better with fork kits, etc. If the casual

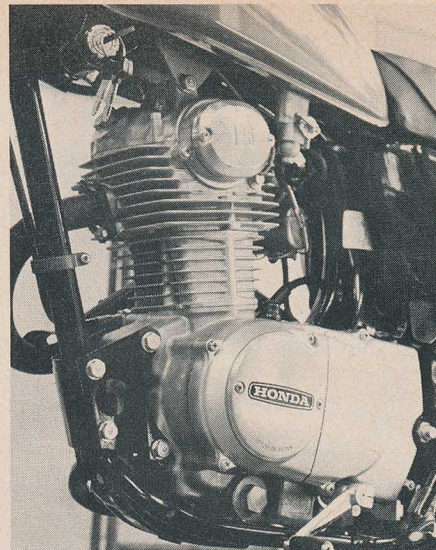


Large windows on speedometer allow riders to predict the future. Handy in enduro situations, or for following directions cued by mileages.

trail rider changes his fork oil as per the owner's manual instructions he will have a suspension system that will satisfy his needs, stone stock, for a long time.

The turn signals come off with relative ease. The speedo has that swell big window odometer. The taillight is still dangerous. Dangerous!

Further nit-picking: The steering lock is flimsy, though better than none at all. The tool kit is only marginally better than has become the norm. The airbox is reasonably easy to service, though a tight fit. The chain guide, though we appreciate the thought, is flimsy and vulnerable. Until they become stronger these are better left off.

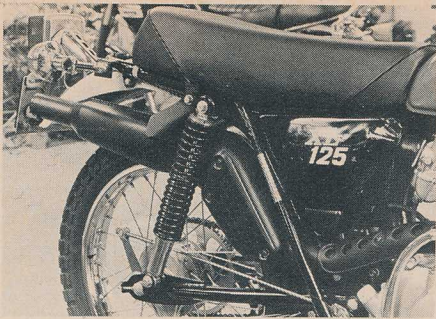


See the pretty engine. See the vulnerable undersides. See the drooping shift lever. Fix them.

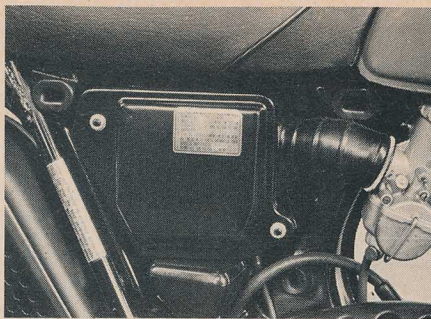
The gas tank has a larger filler hole than has been Honda's custom of late. In these times of crisis the spillage saved will be appreciated. Some people will dislike the placement of the ignition switch. We did.

Lastly but certainly not leastly, we have to consider the frame. Nothing trick here, no exotic materials or anything, but somehow, perhaps it was





High pipe is a definite improvement over past efforts.



Reasonably well sealed, and not too hard to service, a good airbox.



HONDA XL 125
American Honda
100 West Alondra
Gardena, California 90247
Price: \$796 (Los Angeles)

SPECIFCATONS

Engine Four stroke/single
 Bore/stroke 56.5x49.5
 Displacement 124cc
 Compression Ratio .. 9.4:1 (uncorrected)
 Carburetion Keihin
 Final drive 3.466:1
 Lubrication 10W30
 Warranty NA

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase 51.8 inches
 Runing weight 221 lbs.
 (with minimal gas)
 Fuel capacity 1.7 U.S. gals.
 Oil capacity 1.1 U.S. qt.

COMPONENTS

Forks Honda
 Shocks Honda
 Frame Single downtube cradle
 Pegs Folding, sprung serrated
 Rims Steel
 Ignition Points
 Tools Yep
 Air filter Wetted foam
 Fenders Plastic
 Muffler Polite, approved

blind luck, perhaps a stroke of genius, the XL 125 frame performs head and shoulders above those on the rest of the XL line. As illustrated at the beginning of the story, at any speed capable with engine and/or downhill slope it was impossible to make the 125s frame misbehave. It cornered, tracked, even slid, beautifully and on command. It seemed to beg for more power in order to be competitive at something. Of course, were that power supplied certainly the suspension, and possibly the frame itself, would begin to reveal weaknesses.

Our test session on the XL was unusually long, owing to a sudden influx of flashier test bikes. Nothing broke on the bike, amazingly, not even the turn signals which we left on, out of a spirit of perversity, through most of the test. Not a single plug change or oil addition was required. When burning hot or two-weeks-in-the-garage cold, the little Honda never took more than three kicks to start.

The *Dirt Rider* Subversive Motorcycling Committee has in mind a project bike. An eco-bike, would you believe, with better than stock performance but quiet and emission-free enough to undercut any proposed regulations. If we can talk Honda into it, the XL will be the basis for the project.

As it is, if you know what you want a motorcycle for, and if the 125 fits into that intended purpose, you would be hard-pressed to chose a better machine.

