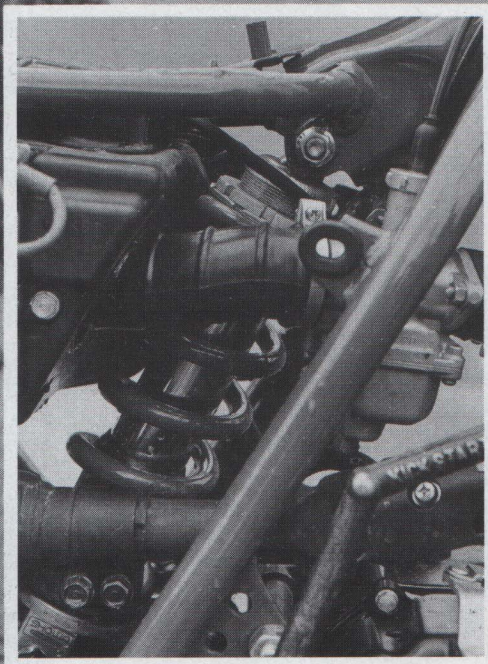
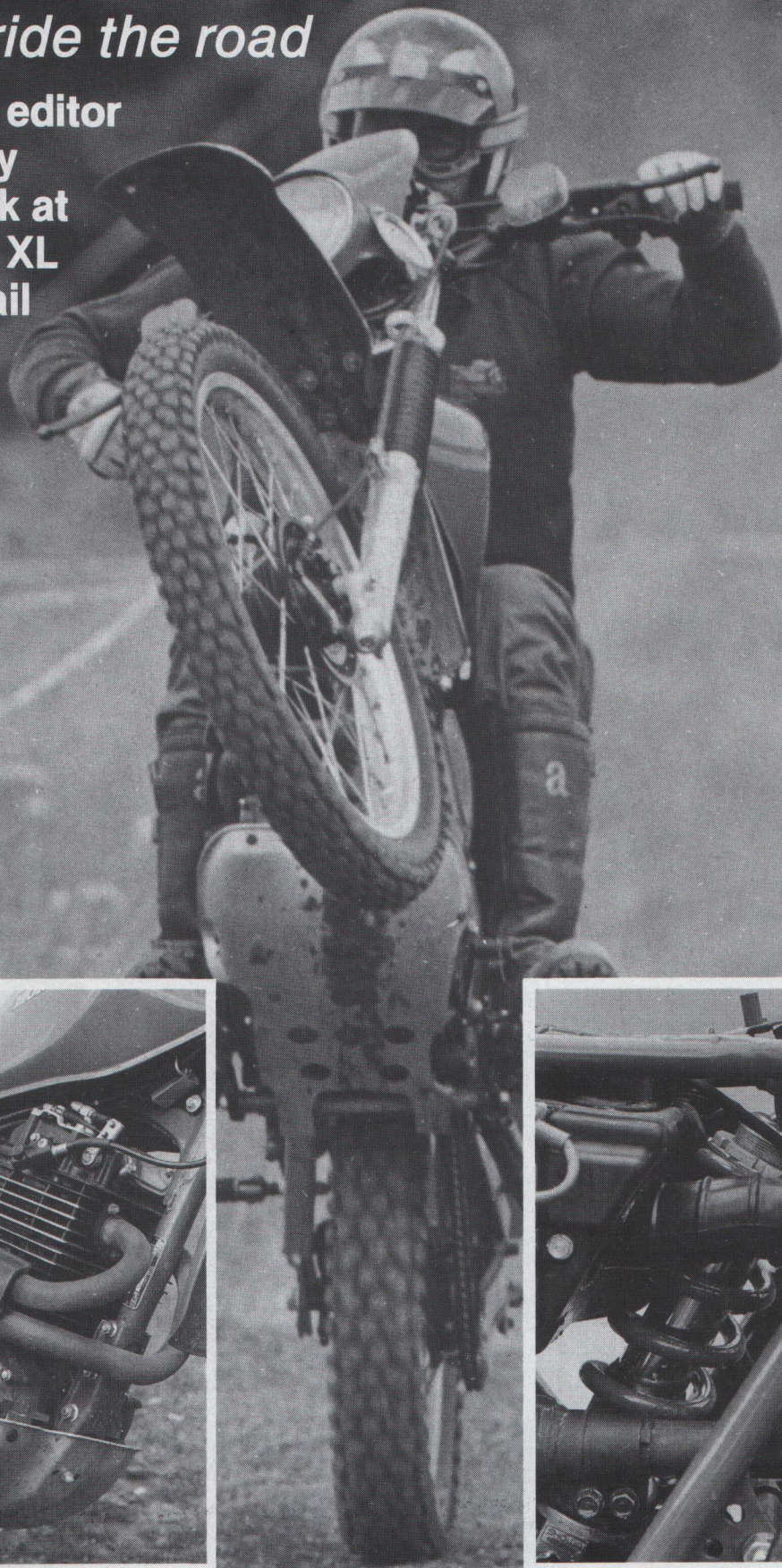


HIT THE DIRT...

... and ride the road

**Mechanics editor
Jim Lindsay
takes a look at
the Honda XL
range of trail
machines**



HONDA OFF-ROAD'83

The evolution of the modern trail bike has been a long process. The first offerings were pretty crude in their approach, being little more than roadsters with a bit of extra ground clearance, motocross style handlebars, sump protector plates and high-level exhausts. The shortcomings of excessive weight and stiff, short-travel suspension ensured that they spent nearly all of their time on the tarmac. Indeed, they were not up to much else.

Thankfully, times change and the latest crop of Pro-Link equipped 'R' series trail bikes from Honda represent a significant step forward both in style and, more importantly, off-road performance.

Take the smallest in the range, the XL125R, for example. A bit more hump in the tank, shorten the seat a touch, junk the rack and indicators, substitute a small rectangular headlamp in place of the round item and you're looking at something which very closely resembles the XR200R, Honda's out and out competition enduro bike. See a stock XL125R blast by you on the street, and you'd be hard put to tell the difference anyway.

The 125 complies with the latest laws concerning L-riders in the UK but still offers lively performance both on and off the road coupled with good looks, good handling (in both modes) and ridiculously good fuel consumption, around 80 mpg under normal road conditions.

Power is provided by Honda's long-perfected single-cylinder four-stroke engine which has done sterling service in road bikes as well as the twin-shock trail model, the XL125S. Despite the power restriction, the bike will reach a useable 65 mph top speed. Thanks to the unburstable nature of the power unit, it will hold this speed mile after mile. So long journeys are possible and can even be enjoyable even if they do demand a fair bit of effort and determination on the part of the rider.

From second to fifth, the gear ratios are close and this helps keep the motor well on the boil to tackle hills and provide respectable acceleration for a machine of this capacity. First gear is usefully low, providing good pulling power for coping with sticky sections on the rough.

With long travel suspension at both ends to soak up the bumps, comfort on the road is good. But the compliant springing also gives (somewhat surprisingly, you may think) positive handling on tarmac. It takes most people a little time to trust the Bridgestone Trail Wing



HONDA OFF-ROAD '83

tyres that come as original equipment on all the XL models; but don't be fooled by the semi-knobby pattern. These boots grip the road well and your bottle is liable to give out before their hold does. It is, however, wise to proceed with a modicum of caution in the wet as their water clearing ability is not as good as that of a conventional road tyre.

On the dirt, the low weight of 106 kg (233 lb) makes the 125R delightfully easy to throw about while the progressive rear suspension does an excellent job of keeping the back wheel in contact with the ground, giving maximum traction over rough going.

The close ratio six-speed box is an asset, too, allowing you to hustle the small machine along from hazard to hazard with no danger of missed shifts during clutchless changes.

It would be a shame to lay out cash on this bike and not use it on the dirt. Riders who get their kicks on the rough will probably still be having fun on this machine long after they've thrown away their L plates and escaped from the 12 bhp law.

Of all the trail bikes on the market, the Honda XL250R offers the best compromise between street and off-



road performance. The design is essentially the same as that of the 125, the same XR-based frame, only bigger, of course, Pro-Link rear suspension, long travel air-assisted front forks and the same aggressive styling treatment.

The four-valve engine has an equally good pedigree having been used not only in previous XLs but also in the highly successful CB250RS roadster. It will power the 124 kg (276 lb) 250R to a top speed of 80 mph but has enough low down pull to let you plonk happily along most green lanes, rarely having to drop below third gear.

Like the smaller 125, both the road handling and the dirt handling do much to inspire confidence in the rider. The Pro-Link rear unit offers a big range of adjustment allowing it to be tuned fairly precisely to the requirements of individual riders.

The forks are fine for road use but will benefit from some careful tuning if you're planning to use the machine extensively on the dirt. Varying the quantity and weight of oil is a worthwhile exercise to get the front end behaving as it should. Another good tip for people who want to spend most of their time on the rough is to fit a slightly larger rear sprocket to give even better lowdown punch.

I don't think that the general malaise that has descended on the 250cc class will affect the XL much.

For the rider wanting the best combination of dirt and road performance, this is the one to go for.

By modern standards, big singles have the reputation of being somewhat temperamental and difficult to live with. Fortunately, the XL500R is the exception that proves the rule. Starting is a doddle. The 500R has an automatic decompressor operated from the kickstart which lifts one exhaust valve at the crucial moment as you kick the motor over. This feature is also to be found on the other two R models but it's on the 500 that you really appreciate it.

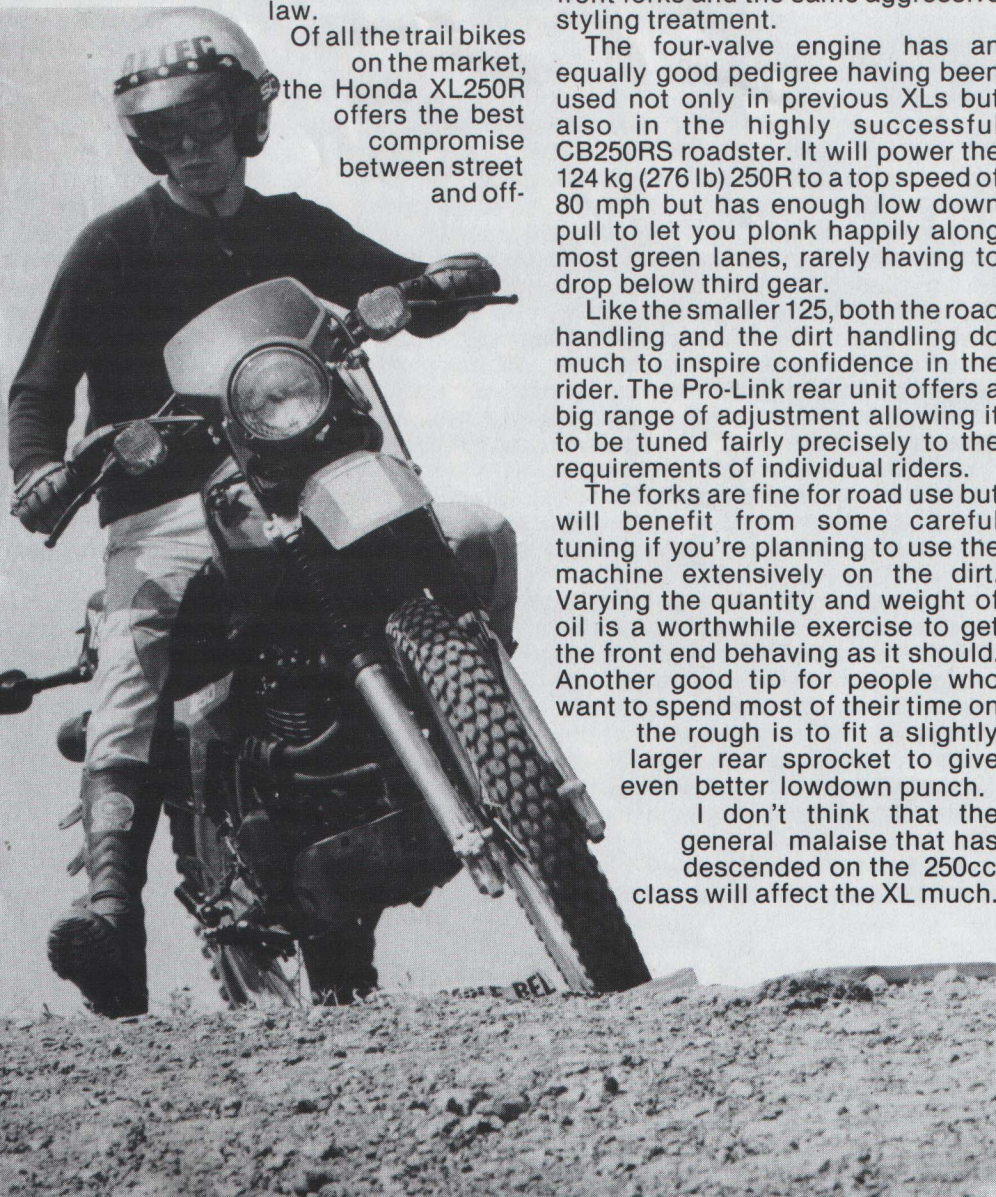
Despite its size, the 500 can be used on the dirt without too much trouble provided that the rider has some previous off-road experience.

On the tarmac, the strong, torquey pull of the engine makes it an ideal long-distance bike. It would be especially useful for touring some of the remoter parts of Europe where the roads are something less than civilised.

In this country, the XL500R is at its best on minor country lanes where the bumps would overtax the short travel suspension of an ordinary road bike. On this sort of road, the 500 is excellent, the long travel suspension soaking up all the lumps and potholes allowing you to keep the throttle wound on head most of the time.

The twin leading shoe front brake may look a little odd in these days of multi-discs, but it comes on good and strong when you need it.

The 500 could be faulted as a dirt machine for being too heavy and as a road machine for not having enough top end performance; but the bottom line is that the bike is fun and that is what really counts.



XL125R Specifications



Engine 4-stroke OHC single
Bore & Stroke 56.5 x 49.5 mm
(2.22 x 1.95 in)

Displacement 124 cm³ (7.57 in³)
Compression Ratio 9.4

Carburettor 22 mm (0.87 in) piston
valve
Max. Horsepower 10.0 kw/9,000 min⁻¹ DIN
(18.6 PS/9,000 rpm) DIN
Max. Torque 11.3 Nm/7,500 min⁻¹
(1.15 kg-m/7,500 rpm)

Ignition Capacitor discharge
Starter Primary kick
Transmission 6-speed
Final Drive # 520 roller chain
Frame Diamond type, steel tube
Dimensions (L x W x H) 2,065 x 840 x 1,185 mm
(81.30 x 33.07 x 46.65 in)
Wheelbase 1,355 mm (53.35 in)
Seat Height 840 mm (33.07 in)
Ground Clearance 265 mm (10.43 in)
Fuel Capacity 8 lit (2.11 US, 1.76 IMP gal) including 1.4 lit (0.37 US, 0.31 IMP gal) reserve

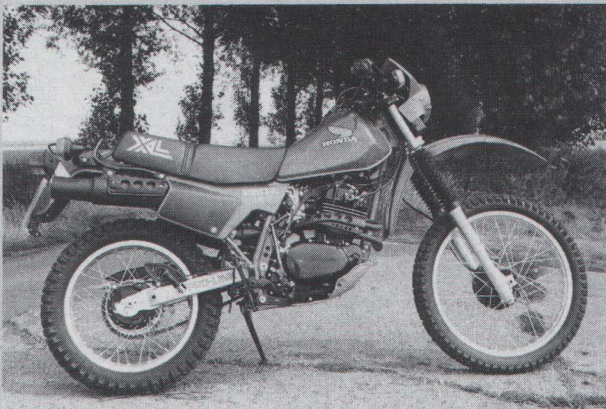
Wheels Steel rim/wire spoke
Tyres Front: 2.75-21 4PR semi-knobby
Rear: 4.10-18 4PR semi-knobby

Suspension Front: Air-assist leading axle telescopic hydraulic fork, 204 mm (8.03 in) travel

Rear: Pro-Link with gas-charged damper, 175 mm (6.90 in) axle travel
Brakes Front: Leading/trailing drum
Rear: Leading/trailing drum

Dry Weight 106 kg (233.70 lb)

XL250R Specifications



Engine 4-stroke OHC 4-valve single
Bore & Stroke 79 x 57.8 mm (3.50 x 3.15 in)

Displacement 248 cm³ (15.13 in³)
Compression Ratio 9.3

Carburettor 28 mm (1.10 in) piston valve
Max. Horsepower 16.5 kw/7,500 min⁻¹ DIN
(22.5 PS/7,500 rpm) DIN
Max. Torque 22.2 Nm/7,000 min⁻¹
(2.3 kg-m/7,000 rpm)
Ignition Capacitor discharge with electronic advance

Starter Primary kick with automatic compression release
Transmission 6-speed
Final Drive # 520 'O'-ring lubrication sealed roller chain
Frame Diamond type, steel tube
Dimensions (L x W x H) 2,210 x 865 x 1,230 mm
(87.01 x 34.06 x 48.43 in)
Wheelbase 1,385 mm (54.53 in)
Seat Height 880 mm (34.65 in)
Ground Clearance 280 mm (11.02 in)
Fuel Capacity 9 lit (2.38 US, 1.98 IMP gal) including 2 lit (0.53 US, 0.44 IMP gal) reserve

Wheels Aluminium rim/wire spoke
Tyres Front: 3.00-21 4PR semi-knobby
Rear: 4.60-17 4PR semi-knobby

Suspension Front: Air-assist leading axle telescopic fork, 215 mm (8.46 in) travel

Rear: Pro-Link with gas-charged damper, 190 mm (7.48 in) axle travel
Brakes Front: Leading/trailing drum
Rear: Leading/trailing drum

Dry Weight 124 kg (273.37 lb)

XL500R Specifications



Engine 4-stroke OHC 4-valve
Bore & Stroke 89 x 80 mm (3.50 x 3.15 in)

Displacement 497 cm³ (30.33 in³)

Compression Ratio 8.6
Carburettor 32 mm (1.26 in) piston valve

Max. Horsepower 24.3 kw/6,500 min⁻¹ DIN
(33 PS/6,500 rpm) DIN
Max. Torque 39.0 Nm/5,000 min⁻¹
(3.9 kg-m/5,000 rpm)

Ignition Capacitor discharge with electronic advance

Starter Primary kick with automatic compression release

Transmission 5-speed
Final Drive # 520 'O'-ring lubrication sealed roller chain
Frame Diamond type, steel tube
Dimensions (L x W x H) 2,210 x 865 x 1,260 mm
(87.01 x 34.06 x 49.61 in)
Wheelbase 1,405 mm (55.31 in)
Seat Height 895 mm (35.24 in)
Ground Clearance 270 mm (10.63 in)
Fuel Capacity 10 lit (2.64 US, 2.20 IMP gal) including 2 lit (0.53 US, 0.44 IMP gal) reserve

Wheels Aluminium rim/wire spoke
Tyres Front: 3.00-21 PR semi-knobby
Rear: 4.60-17 4PR semi-knobby

Suspension Front: Air-assist leading axle telescopic fork, 215 mm (8.46 in) travel

Rear: Pro-Link with gas-charged damper and adjustable spring preload, 190 mm (7.48 in) axle travel

Brakes Front: Double leading shoe drum
Rear: Leading/trailing drum

Dry Weight 139 kg (306.44 lb)

NOTE: Specifications subject to alteration. Check at your nearest Honda dealer for specification details and prices