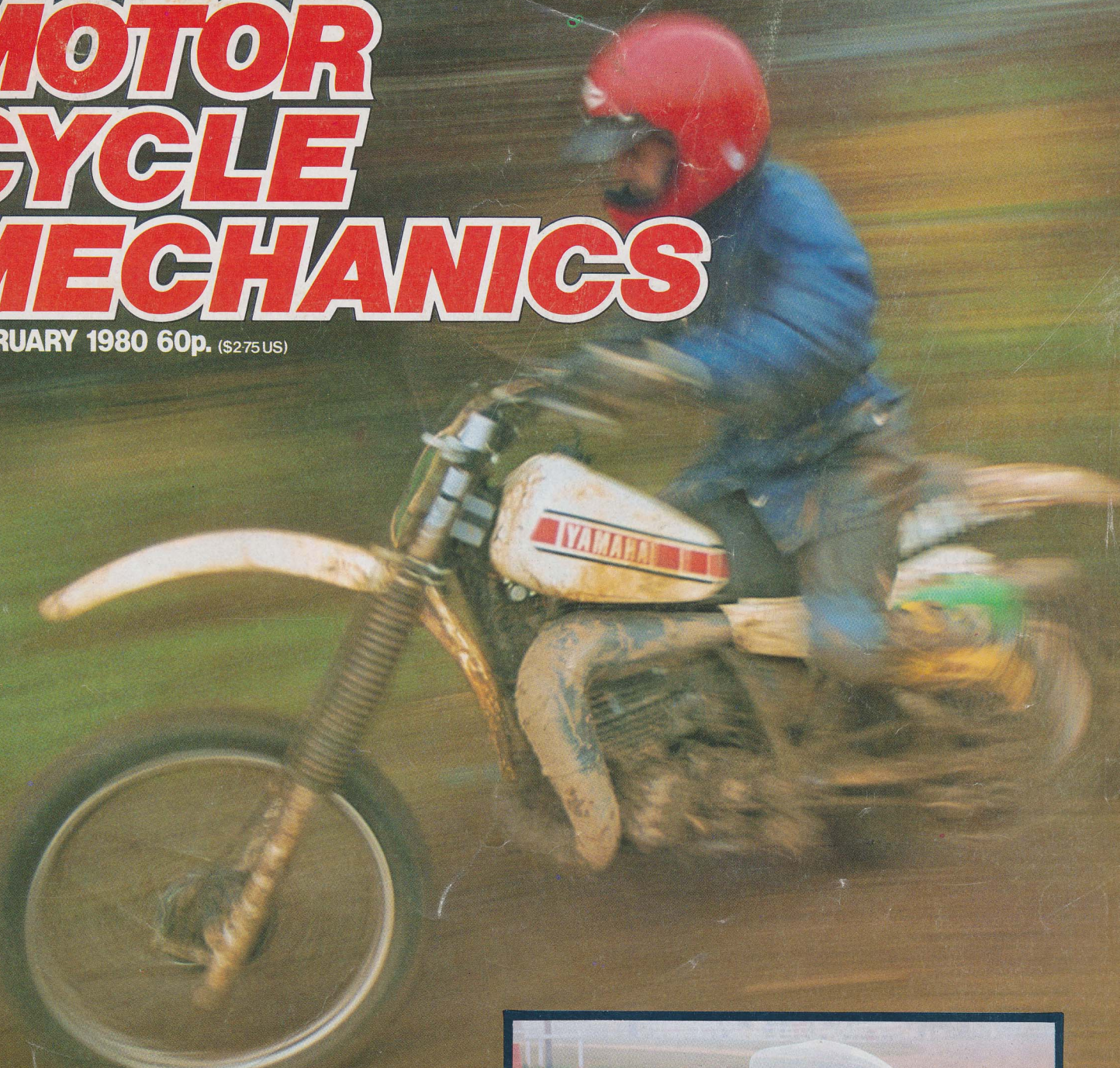


MOTOR CYCLE MECHANICS

FEBRUARY 1980 60p. (\$2.75 US)



Yamaha's wild ones

LIGHTING-
our critical survey

Kawasaki's workaday
wonders



143mph Honda 900FZ tune-up

Star Turn

Moto cross

Brian Crichton gets to stretch his legs on a moto crosser . . . in fact on the seven different models in the 1980 Yamaha range.



The 100 was either on the boil or off it. When it was on the back wheel spun.



Earnest cornering tactics — you have to look hard — on the mighty HL500 four-stroke.



Rooster tailing with the 100cc schoolboy scrambler.

RIDING a moto cross bike gives a sensation which lasts a minimum of four days. You start to worry about it at least the day before. Then comes the big day. Then at least two days of aching muscles.

Actually I had opted out of this "Star Turn" claiming that the present breed of moto crossers were just too high for my paltry 5ft 2in frame.

Yamaha had invited us to ride their 1980 range right from the 50 and 80cc schoolboy models to the mighty HL500 four-stroke. John Robinson was going along to ride the big stuff . . . until the day dawned.

So I found myself, along with journalists from other publications, facing a line-up of seven bikes at the newly created moto cross course at Mallory Park road race circuit in Leicestershire.

It was the coldest day of the winter so far. The rain was on the verge of turning to sleet and the track was muddy. The course featured a couple of horrific obstacles, as spectators who attended the inaugural meeting (featured in last month's issue) will attest to.

I had not ridden an off-road bike for over a year and a glance at the incredibly high seat height of the 125 intimidated me into putting my name down as first to ride the more sensibly sized 100, hoping that these problems would somehow resolve themselves.

It was back in 1977 while trying to sit on the works 250 Yamaha of Stuart Nunn and finding it was impossible that had convinced me I was in for a no-score result on the big bikes.

As things turned out the problems did break down one by one. Having ridden trail

bikes in a few off road events and having at least had a go on a couple of scramblers about four years ago I was not a complete novice.

Then we were told that, thankfully, an abbreviated version of the course had been set up for us, the jump being optional. The weather we couldn't improve, but I found that I could get on all the bikes except the HL500. That problem was solved by a friend who provided a step.

This bike is something of a special. The engines are supplied to Norton Villiers Triumph at Shenstone in the West Midlands. Here the frames are made and cycle parts fitted, resulting in an Anglo-Japanese moto crosser.

It has the tallest seat height of the Yamaha range and the conventional rear suspension compresses less under body weight than the cantilever models.

A decompressor is fitted. I tried the motor without it and a firm swing on the kickstart brought it to life, the engine emanating a beautifully deep bellow.

Surprisingly the riding position in relation to the handlebars felt right. I had expected them to feel too far away.

With the wheels rolling I felt as though I was riding a motor bike on stilts. The engine revved freely, the gearchange was good and the bike drove through the mud with cavalier disregard.

Then came the first corner. Steering round it in a series of half-hearted attempts at very low speeds set a new course. A burst of power let the back wheel spin and break away slightly to the left.

It felt quite controllable on the exit from

the corner. The entry was the hard bit.

Through a very tight right-hander followed immediately by an equally tight left-hander which looked and felt very slippery, I put out a leg, moto cross fashion, to steady myself.

Of course it was far too short to reach the ground. Yet I felt more confident. I told myself I may as well save myself the effort and keep both feet on the pegs. On successive laps I tried both ways and finally preferred the leg out method, ridiculous though it may have looked.

Bear in mind all the time that I was going at very lame speeds concentrating on simply staying on the bike. Coming off or stalling it would have required pushing the bike to the nearest ledge or finding a deep rut to get the seat low enough to get back on board.

Consequently I was missing out all the hard parts of the course in an effort to simply maintain a steady rhythm. The Yamaha was great fun on this baby course, a lot of credit going to the roundness of the barking and burbling exhaust note as it switched from power to overrun.

The corners were the hard bits. It was difficult not to worry about the front wheel sliding away, particularly from such a remote riding position. Mild back wheel slides I could cope with. Simply easing off the power brought it back in line.

An unexpected feature of the HL500 was that unlike the 465 two-stroke which I had tried earlier the front wheel tracked remarkably well when the power was eased off in a corner. The two-stroke had a tendency for the front wheel to slide out under these

circumstances. But then it could be argued that it was designed to be ridden with the throttle open!

The other major difference was that shutting the throttle on the four-stroke was almost like putting it in reverse compared to the two-stroke.

The suspension was also much less compliant than the 465. I reckon that it would have suited a very fast 12-stone rider or a moderately fast 15-stoner. My ten stones in riding gear was allowing the forks to bounce over some of the firmer parts of the course involving very little of the enormous fork travel available.

The engine would pick up from no revs so that just when you thought that you were too slow and had let it die the motor gracefully sung out its staccato bass line to

pull clear.

Like all the Yamahas that day it blasted through the mud in a straight line with ease. Trouble was that a blast down the straight meant more careful setting up to turn right at the end.

I couldn't get the hang of it and had to swallow mud as former British champion Vic Allan purposefully overtook with a banzai wail and an inch to spare.

Finding extra confidence was not helped by the weather. Though I was thoroughly enjoying the ride my jacket was almost soaked through and my fingers cold having fallen off previous mounts, the 500 being the last bike I tried.

Riding a moto cross bike in itself is not too difficult. Making it go fast and staying on is the skilful part. And then there is the not

inconsiderable obstacle of a moto cross track.

Most riders could step off their road bike, sit on a road racer and guide it round a road race circuit however slowly. Far fewer could get on a moto cross bike and get it round a moto cross track, particularly if it's muddy.

Riding a moto cross bike well is one of motor cycling's supreme challenges. It requires tremendous self-confidence, determination and physical fitness with quite a large helping of natural talent. It's not as easy as some riders make it look.

Oh yes. How did I get off the giant Yamaha? Bicycle fashion, jumping off it just as I brought it to a halt. Short-legged budding riders can take heart though. Andy Robertson is my size and he is number one rider for the British Yamaha team. ■



Crichton discovers that the seat height on the 250 reaches his navel.



Machine on the front cover is the 250 Yamaha. Here Crichton struggles again.

