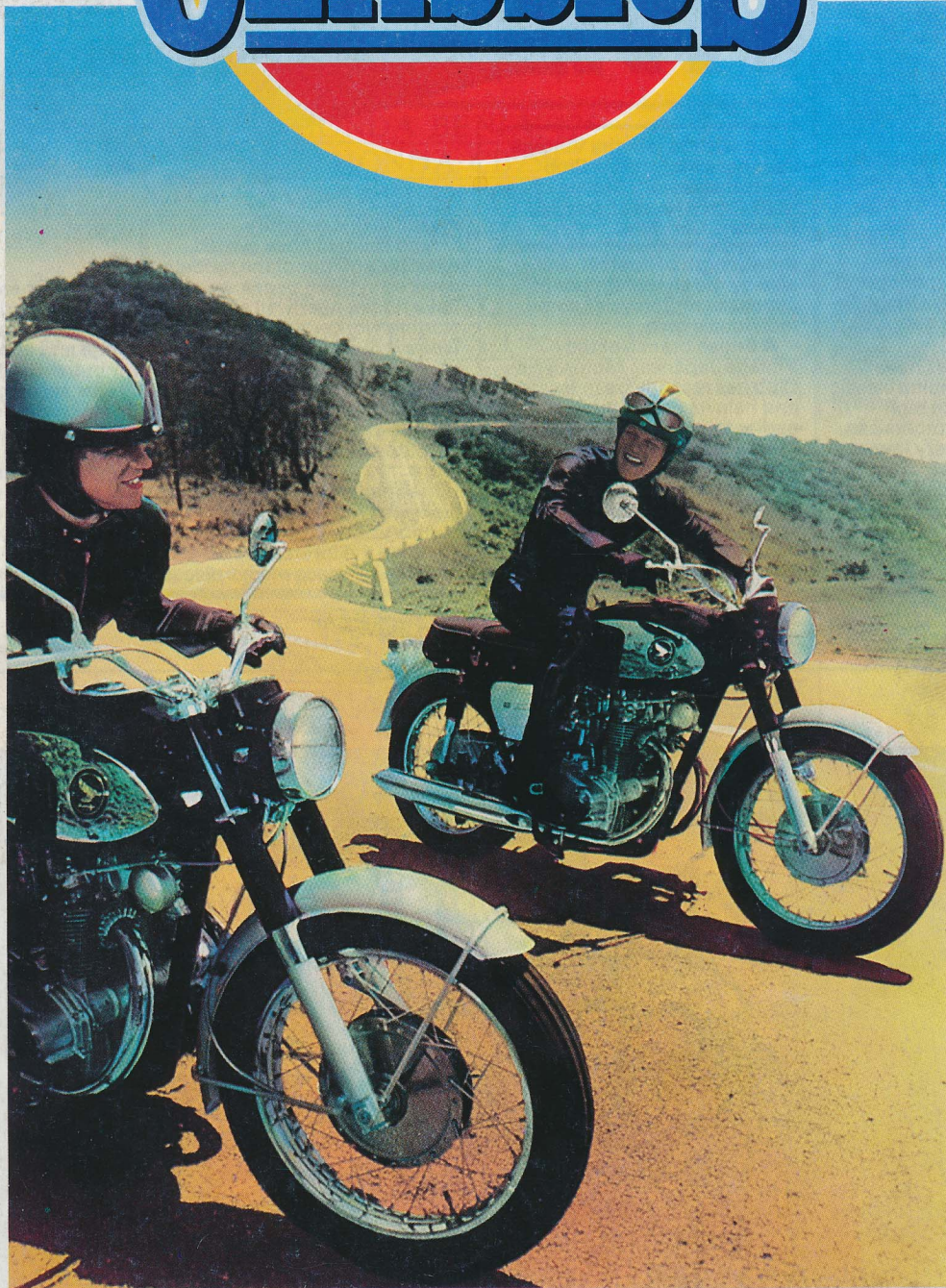


JAPANESE CLASSICS



20 Golden Greats
from the Land of
the Rising Sun
1960-'72

JAPANESE CLASSICS

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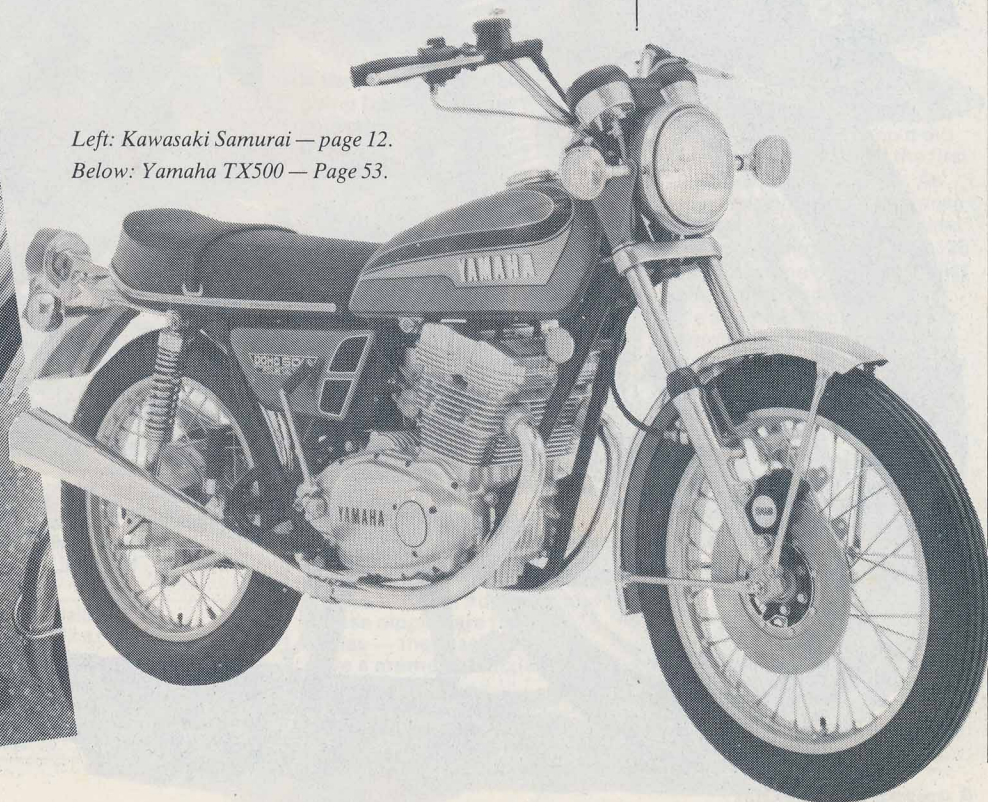
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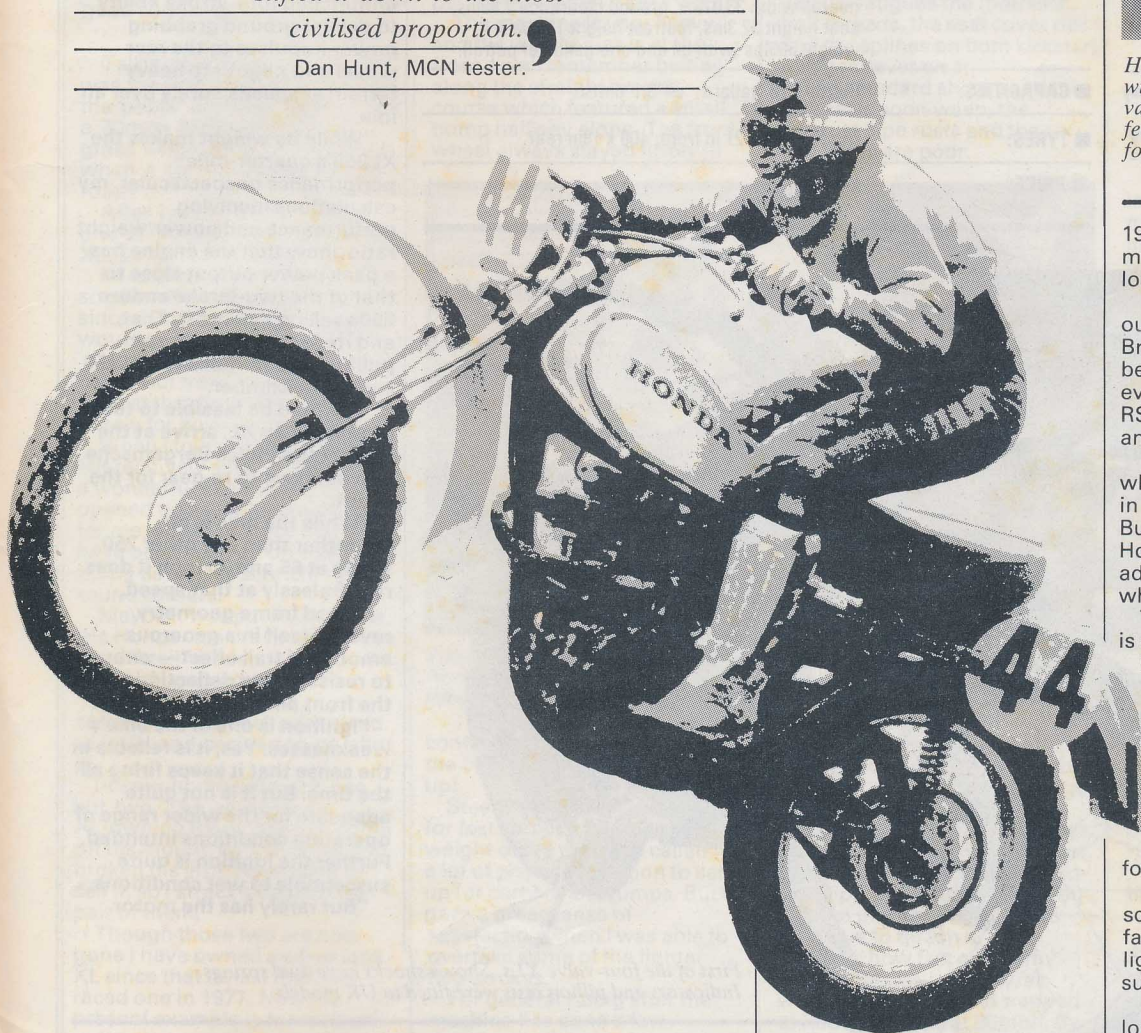
*Left: Kawasaki Samurai — page 12.
Below: Yamaha TX500 — Page 53.*



THE QUIET ONE

“The engine reeks of hidden horsepower. Yet Honda has stifled it down to the most civilised proportion.”

Dan Hunt, MCN tester.



The author — having XL of a lot of fun while trail bike scrambling one of his Motosport collection.

THREE of the “Big Four” Japanese manufacturers extensively use four-valve heads on their performance four-stroke machinery.

The advantages of less reciprocating weight, higher revs and more valve area have been seen as essential requirements by Honda, Suzuki and Yamaha in the search for power.

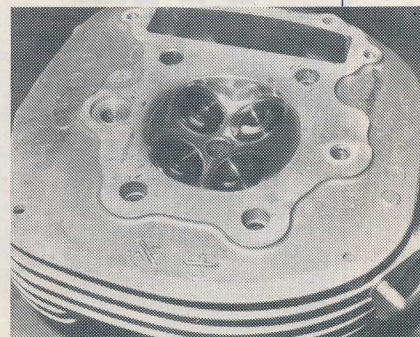
Who started it all? Well you could cite the 1923 Ricardo Triumph for a start. But in more recent times the XL250 Honda Motosport trail bike of 1972 set the four-valve head ball rolling again.

Compared to the British diet of pushrod 250 four-stroke singles the new Honda seemed very special with its chain driven overhead cam and four-valve top.

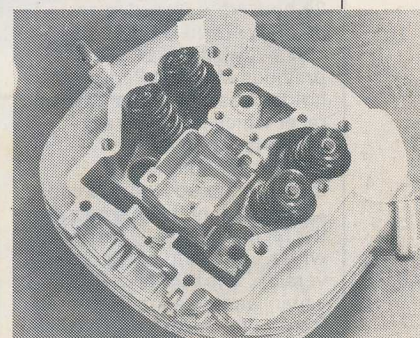
Yet this silver tanked trail model never really caught on in Britain, unlike America where it was extremely popular.

Give someone a good thing and they always want more. The Americans were so pleased with the XL both as a fun bike, and for its tuning potential, that soon big bore kits up to 350cc were being sold right across the States.

Honda got the message and brought out a 350 version late in



The pentroof four-valve combustion chamber with central plug. This one has been polished for performance.



Head houses plain bearing cam with two-finger rockers to operate valves. Highly tuned XLs often feature needle bearing modification for the cam.

1973, followed by a 500, and most recently for 1983 a 600cc long distance off-road mount.

Maybe if Honda had brought out a pure road version for the British market sales would have been better here. When Honda eventually did get round to the RS250 road single in 1979 it was an instant sales success.

Britain never saw the first 350 which was eventually dropped in America in favour of the 500. But the ever growing army of Honda four-valve singles has added the XR350 enduro model which went on sale here in '83.

Talking about Honda's army is appropriate in this respect because the original 250 was conceived as an all-purpose bike for the Japanese army.

With the fantastic growth of off-road riding in America, sparked to a large extent by the DT1 250 Yamaha trail bike of 1968, the vast Stateside market was ripe

for a four-stroke alternative.

Competition dealers scrapped the heavy XL frame in favour of custom built lightweight frames with longer suspension.

First time out an XL won the long distance Baja 500-mile desert bike race by more than an hour and the following big

HONDA XL250

THE QUIET ONE

bore XLs, notably tuned by Bill Bell became legendary.

And it wasn't only in off-road events where the XL250 made its mark. At Mosport Park road race circuit in Canada a standard 250 motor in a standard frame set a new 250cc 24-hour track record at an average speed of 66.12mph.

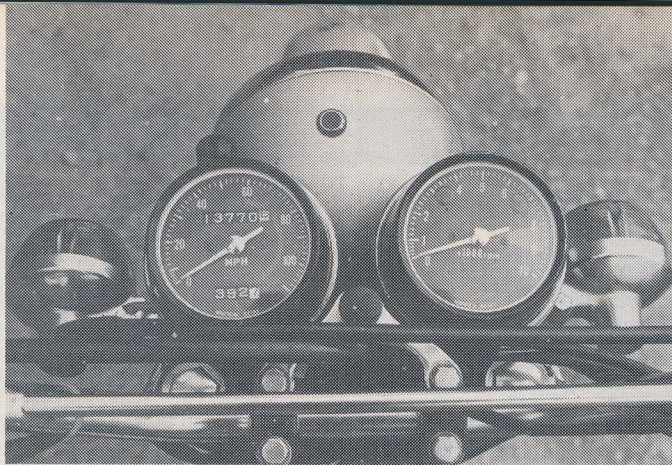
That was in 1973. The previous Mosport Park record holder was a Yamaha TD2 road racer which had set it at 64.65mph in 1971.

What a feather in mild-mannered Honda's cap!

The team of three who took the record originally turned up with a tuned and bored 360cc version. The bike also featured a twin leading shoe front brake from a 500 Suzuki, and a CB750 Honda fuel tank.

During practice the 360cc motor blew up. Fortunately they had a spare stock bike as a runabout with them and simply robbed the motor from it!

When the XL250 was tested by *Motor Cycle News* in the October 25 1972 issue it was



Oversquare motor thrives on revs. Full use of the red band was necessary for maximum performance. Centrally located choke lever seizes up if not regularly lubricated.

SPECIFICATION IN 1973

■ ENGINE:	248cc sohc four-stroke single. Bore and stroke: 74mm x 57.8mm. Compression ratio: 9.1 to 1. Carburettor: Keihin 28mm piston valve type. Claimed power output: 20bhp at 8,000rpm. Claimed maximum torque: 14.11bs ft at 6,500rpm.
■ TRANSMISSION:	Primary drive by gears. Wet multi-plate clutch. Overall gear ratios: 1st, 23.52 to 1; 2nd, 16.66 to 1; 3rd, 12.80 to 1; 4th 10.00 to 1; 5th, 8.06 to 1.
■ ELECTRICS:	6 volt battery and flywheel magneto. AC generator.
■ LUBRICATION:	Wet sump pressure fed..
■ BRAKES:	Front 6.3 x 1in. Rear 5.5 x 1in. Single leading shoes.
■ DIMENSIONS:	Wheelbase 54.53ins; overall length 83.46ins, overall width 33.07ins, ground clearance 7.48ins, seat height 32.3ins, footrest height 13.00ins, weight 308lbs (with oil and one gallon of petrol).
■ CAPACITIES:	Petrol 1.76 gallons; oil 3.1 pints.
■ TYRES:	Dunlop 2.75 x 21 in front; 400 x 18in rear.
■ PRICE:	£405.00.

headlined: "The civilised dirt bike from Honda."
American tester Dan Hunt analysed the newcomer in the following fashion:

"The engine reeks of hidden horsepower. Yet Honda has stifled it down to most civilised proportion.

"Civilised. That's the key. Honda have civilised the four-stroke single, because they are after new converts, not die-hard enthusiasts. The die-hards can go ahead and strip it, tweak it, race it. They have the knowledge. But casual riders may not want to bother and they are by far the majority in America, for which the XL was designed.

"Accordingly, the XL is simply marvellous for doing just about anything.

"The Honda is still fairly heavy at 296lb ready to run. This helps hide the power produced by its nicely silenced, spark arrested engine. However the bike does not feel over heavy to ride.

"The engine itself may be characterised as docile, with a broad powerband, generous flywheel effect, ability to turn at more than 8000rpm, and that unmatched four-stroke ability to deliver ground grabbing power impulses to the rear wheel and negotiate heavy terrain at speeds barely over an idle.

"While its weight makes the XL250's quarter-mile performance unspectacular, my calculations involving performance and power/weight ratio show that the engine has a peak power output close to that of the two-stroke enduro 250s selling against it. That, and its formidable low rpm pulling power, make the XL250 a great hillclimber.

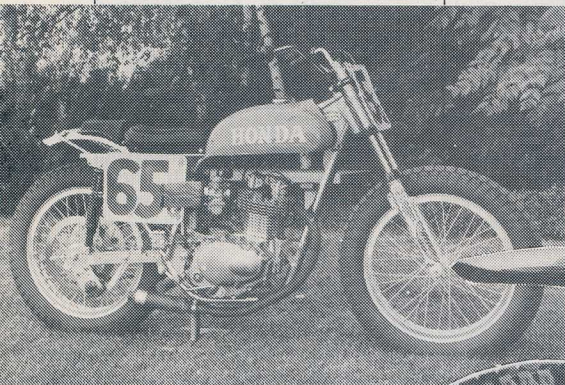
"It would be feasible to tour Europe on an XL, arrive at the start of the Vallee Bergamsche and not have to re-gear for the event.

"While the bike is no smoother than any other 250 single at 65 and 70 mph it does run tirelessly at that speed.

"Good frame geometry reveals itself in a generous amount of trail effect — enough to resist jolting deflections at the front end.

"Ignition is one of the bike's weaknesses. Yes, it is reliable in the sense that it keeps firing all the time. But it is not quite adequate for the wider range of operating conditions intended. Further the ignition is quite susceptible to wet conditions.

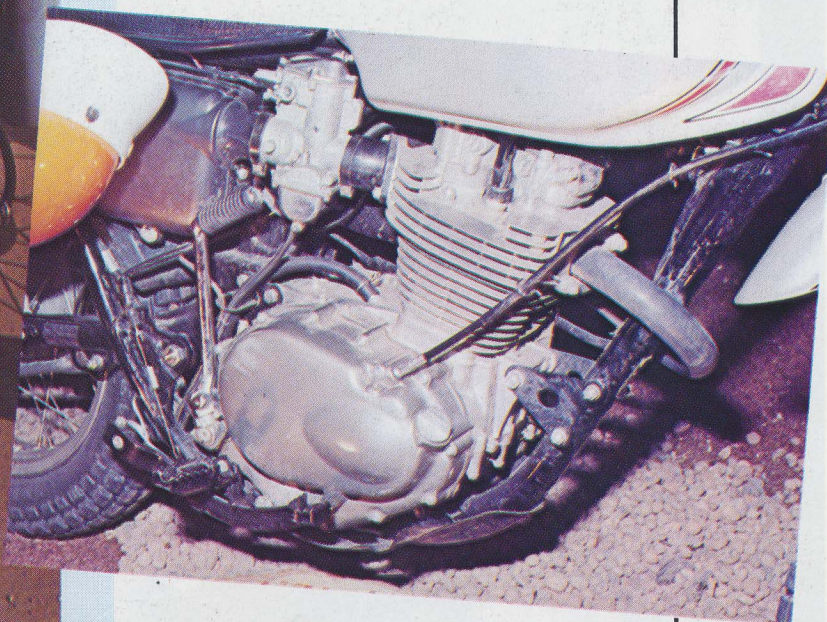
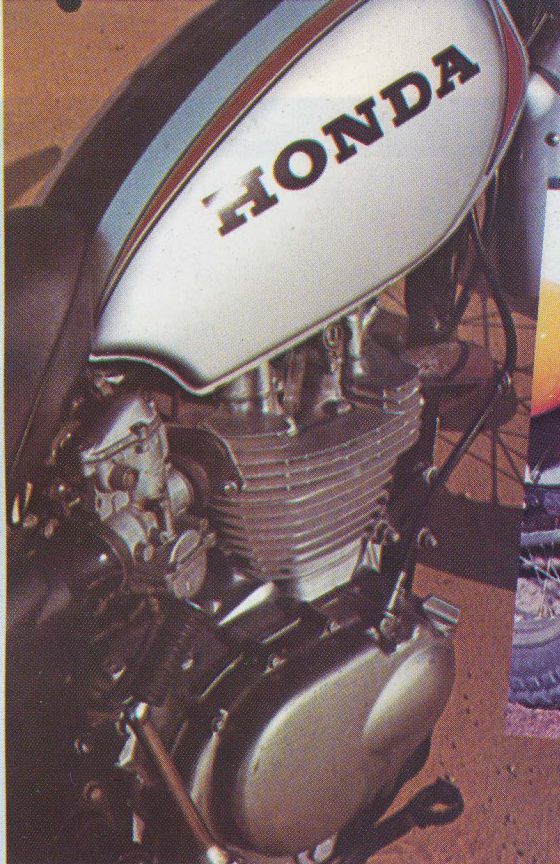
"But rarely has the motor



The XL motor found its way into all sorts of competition including U.S. short track racing. This version with Mikuni carb has a Red Line frame.



First of the four-valve XLs. Showa shocks have dual springs. Indicators and pillion rests were fitted to UK models.



cycle industry come up with a machine that is so comfortable in so many situations at once and yet offers a taste of truly good handling."

Talking personally the XL250 was the first bike I ever rode off the public highway, apart from a 70mph excursion along a grass verge on a 350 Triumph when a car forced me off the road!

After joining MCN in 1971 one of my jobs was to return an XL250 tested in 1973.

En route I saw a patch of scrubland and thought that since the bike was a trail model I would try it.

Now this may seem terribly naive, but from my point of view at that time bikes were purely for burning up tarmac.

When I found that the Honda felt relatively safe on dirt it was a wonderful experience. It opened up a whole new world for me, and ever since then I have been keen on off-road riding as well as scratching round corners.

Maybe it was purely because the Honda was the first machine I had "trail" ridden that I decided I wanted one.

Later in 1973 I saw a secondhand model advertised in MCN and decided to go after it.

I came home with not one, but two. The advertiser's XL-owning friend had just come off his mount, bent the bike and broken his arm. He wanted to sell it, so I struck a deal for the pair of them.

Though those two are now gone I have owned a silver tank XL since that time. I trail bike raced one in 1977. Now my present example is for road use only.

The motors on every one have sounded rather loose, but

they are reliable if looked after.

I agree with most of what Dan Hunt said. The ignition is a weak point for fierce competition, particularly when it sees water.

The machine is very heavy, and the weight bias is at the front. I well remember belting along the straight on one course which featured a small bump halfway along. The front wheel always stayed firmly in

fuel, which usually lasts about 70-80mpg on the road, has been used up.

A model used on the trail a lot usually fatigues the footrests bolt threads, the seat cover rips and the splines on both kickstart and gearlever wear.

The standard shocks and the fork seals soon weep, the exhaust pipe rusts and the six volt lights are poor.



This XL250 in a Cheney 250 BSA frame was put together by Northampton dealer Mick Berrill for employee Sam Smith (pictured) to debut at Hawkstone Park in March 1973. Weight was pared to 231lb.

contact with the ground while the back wheel always kicked up!

Steering geometry was good for fast corners, but the sheer weight of the machine called for a lot of physical exertion to set it up for corners and jumps. But it gave a great sense of satisfaction when I was able to overtake some of the lighter two-strokes.

For general riding after the machine has done a few thousand miles the seat packs down. It starts to get uncomfortable after a gallon of

If you want some speed out of the motor you really have to rev it unmercifully. This tends to go against the grain since four-stroke singles have always been known for low rpm power.

The XL delivers its muscle in direct proportion to revs. If you want to use what it's got you just have to thrash it.

To see how fast one of my Motosports with road tyres would go it was speed trapped at Radlett airfield at 86mph. By fitting a 34mm EI carburettor in place of the standard 28mm Keihin speed went up to

88.5mph and it was crying out for taller gearing because the rev needle had passed right through the red sector. So I felt confident it would go well over 90mph.

The same machine was run on the dyno. It had 10,000 miles on the clock and recorded 18bhp at the back wheel. With the EI carburettor this went up almost 21.4bhp.

After the Motosport, Honda introduced the 1976 red tank model with centrally located instead of offset carburettor. More power was claimed, but Honda made a cardinal sin by making the machine heavier than the original. This was put right with the XL250S of 1978, a model distinguished by its twin tube exhaust front pipe.

I didn't get to ride the red tank model. But I did ride the S version which was much better off-road but disappointingly struggled to pull top gear on the open road.

It didn't feel as powerful as my leaden personal machine, and sure enough when it was put on the same dyno there were only 17 and a bit horses making its insides, including balancer mechanism, go round.

The original model had its faults and idiosyncrasies — lightweight magnesium sidecases yet the rest of it built like a tank — but it was a firm foundation for what has become a positive army of Honda four-valve singles.

It hit the American market at a time when noise and pollution were of increasing concern.

The ultra quiet, almost innocuous XL with its efficient burning stood out amid the raucous haze of its two-stroke opposition.

Another success story for the factory with the Flying Wing emblem had begun. □