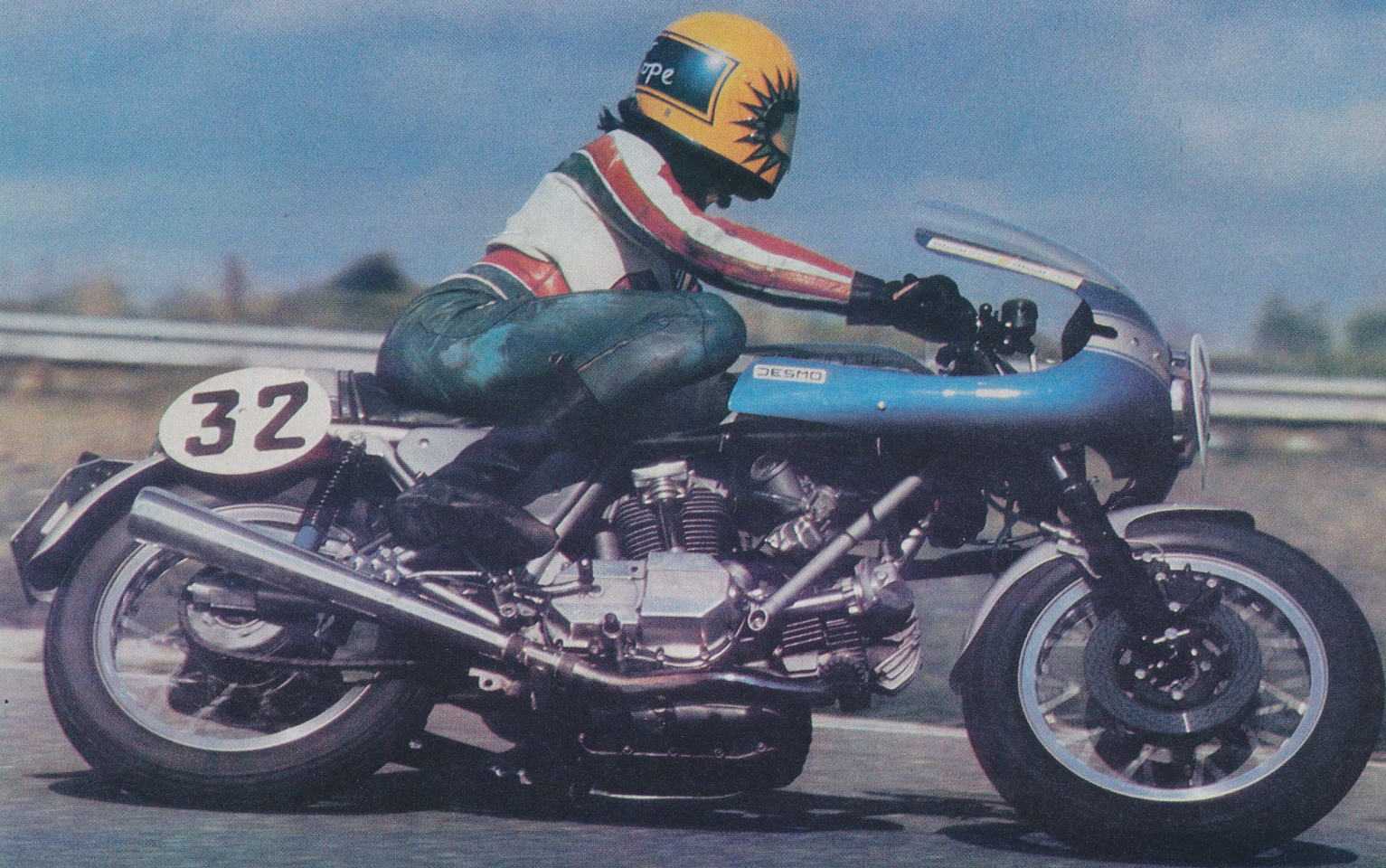


Motorcycle Sport

NOVEMBER 1976

VOLUME 17 NUMBER 11

PRICE: 25p



**Honda 550 Test ★ Foreign Touring
Six Days Trial ★ Visit to Benelli
Sport Down Under ★ One Track**

Motorcycle Sport

VOL 17 NO 11

NOVEMBER 1976

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FRONT-COVER PICTURE shows Roger Cope (Ducati 900SS) at the Thruxton long-distance race



Early-season shot of Graham Noyce, winner of the "Motor Cycle" British moto-cross championship

Roads and Roundabouts

IF THE present boom in motorcycle sales is not to backfire in its face, the industry will have to be seen to be making a very real effort itself towards reducing accidents. This comment was made a few weeks back by Alan Kimber, chairman of STEP and chief executive of Cossack Motorcycles. He said that the industry had a golden opportunity with the current revival of interest in two-wheelers to re-establish this form of personal transport on a firm long-term basis.

"But it's not enough just to cash in on this market without doing something practical towards overcoming the one real threat to its continuance—accidents. However exaggerated and sensationalized the reports, comments and statistics about these may be when related to motorcycles, they can never be successfully refuted or challenged in the press. Only positive action will have any effect at all and it's high time the industry showed itself to be the initiators and leaders in matters of safety instead of having to be led and directed by Government legislation. What we don't want to see are organizations like the BMF distributing, as they have been doing, questionnaire leaflets on the compulsory wearing of safety helmets which are subversively designed to stir up fresh opposition on this matter.

"Surely, rather than fight measures which obviously make sense, we should all be doing everything we can to improve rider safety. What is more, as distributors and dealers, we should urge the manufacturers to incorporate every known and proven safety device into their machines, from side reflectors to ignition-activated daytime headlighting. In this latter regard the GLC are to be congratulated on the success of their campaign to encourage motorcyclists to ride with dipped headlamps during the day. For our part, we must let the public know that the people who sell these machines to them or their youngsters are not motivated by a 'We'll take the money—you take the chances' attitude, but are genuinely concerned to see that safety is in-built into every bike and that those who buy them, have every facility to learn how to ride safely."

Fighting words, and he may be right—though the BMF takes issue with him on several points. Says Harold Booty, BMF chairman . . . The accident rate is the one big threat to motorcycling's failure. However, methods of cutting the accident rate are open to discussion and motorcyclists generally are against any more forms of compulsion. We are a consumer organization and thus must make ourselves aware of our members' feelings in these matters. The Sikhs Helmet Exemption Bill has brought the whole issue of compulsory helmets to the fore once again with calls for further exemptions and even for repeal of the Act. Because we needed to know more about the feeling in the country we carried out the survey. Now we have the results we are taking certain legal and parliamentary advice to guide us in our future policy for we have no time to waste if battles are to be futile.

Mr. Booty concludes . . . Our aims must be very similar to Mr. Kimber's. It seems totally unwarranted that he should choose to attack the very people upon whom he and all others in the trade ultimately depend for their livelihood. I need hardly remind Mr. Kimber of the rise of consumer power and our Federation intends to continue to find out what its members want and to make any responsible representations we feel necessary after democratic discussion and consultation. . . .

All of which allows us to come to the subject of idiot drivers and idiot "mini roundabout" systems that local authorities seem to throw down at the drop of a paint tin. Without exception they provide endless amusement to casual onlooker and regular user alike. There's the "I'm on the major road and I'm going straight ahead" type who, if you asked him later, probably didn't even notice all those lines and arrows on the junction—he just drives through as he always has done for 40 years. Unlike the "what the hell have they done here now?" variety who seem to have some sort of mental breakdown when confronted with so much road paint and at the approach of another vehicle from any direction whatever jam on the anchors and wildly gesticulate to the other driver to go ahead. ("Hang back" from this sort as much as you can.) Then the "got it the wrong way round" breed, frequently

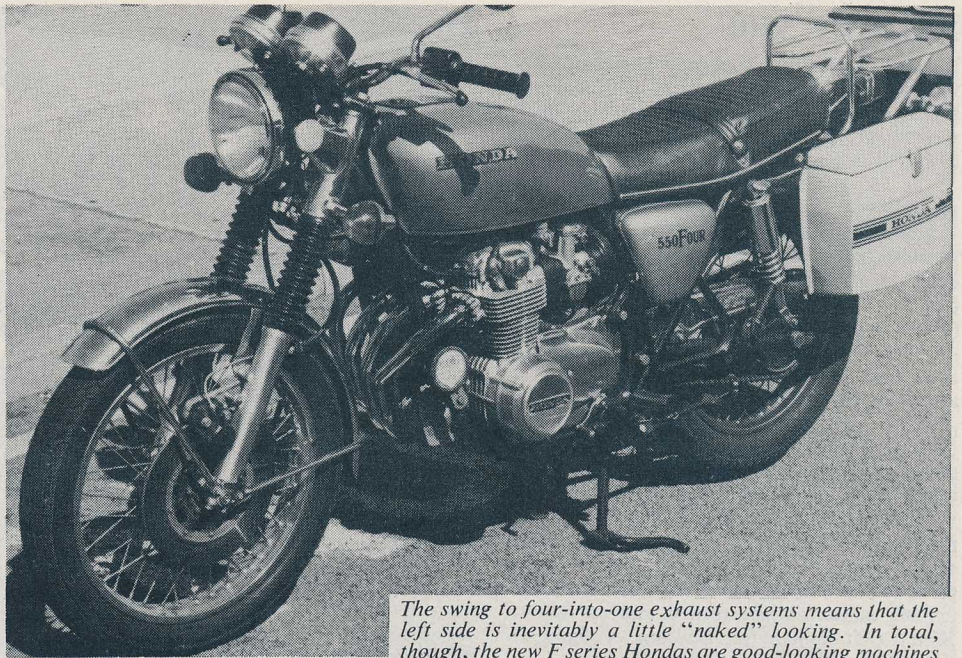
Continued on page 427

Honda 550F

Lower gearing, more torque give the new "medium weight" four the edge over the CB500

THE Honda 550 is certainly a *civilized* bike, though possibly the experienced tester in one of the weeklies who wrote that it made a Rolls seem rorty was overstating the case. It's been on sale in the USA for at least a couple of years, during which time we in the UK have had the long-established CB500. With the introduction of the 550 in the spring of this year the Honda "F" line-up was made up to three (the others being the very successful 400-4 and the uprated 750). Like the others, this one has "Super Sports" in its name tag—and, like them, it is doubtful if the title is fully deserved. The 550 is, basically, the 500 with the bores enlarged by 2.5mm to 58.5mm to make 544 c.c., and with a compression ratio a shade higher than the 500's at 9.1 to 1.

The carburetors, four 22mm constant-vacuum Keihin's, are as before but with revised jetting. Claimed power output is 50 b.h.p.



The swing to four-into-one exhaust systems means that the left side is inevitably a little "naked" looking. In total, though, the new F series Hondas are good-looking machines

(DIN) at 8,000 r.p.m., where before it was 48 at 9,000. Maximum torque is 30.4 lb ft at 7,500 (29.7 lb ft/7,500 for the 500).

Carrying on with the "hidden" changes . . . the primary reduction is 3.062 (3.246) with drive sprocket of 17t (17t) and rear-wheel sprocket of 37t (34t), giving a final reduction of 2.176 (2.00) and a top gear ratio of 6 to 1. Before, it was 5.6 to 1.

The air-filter system has been changed a

little, with crankcase emissions recirculated through the engine.

In looks, of course, the changes are striking. Gone is the not particularly elegant set of four silencers (cf the CB750's layout). Now there is a fashionable collector system with the four pipes cranked to the right and thence into one large—very efficient—silencer. The tank has a "cleaner" shape, is finished in one colour with no lining or glitter striping at the base, and has

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HONDA 550F

the latest flush-fitting fuel cap. Dimensionally the two models appear identical, with gaitered forks, 55½in wheelbase and 420 lb "dry" weight. The handlebar, though, is a couple of inches wider, and no better for it, at 32.5in.

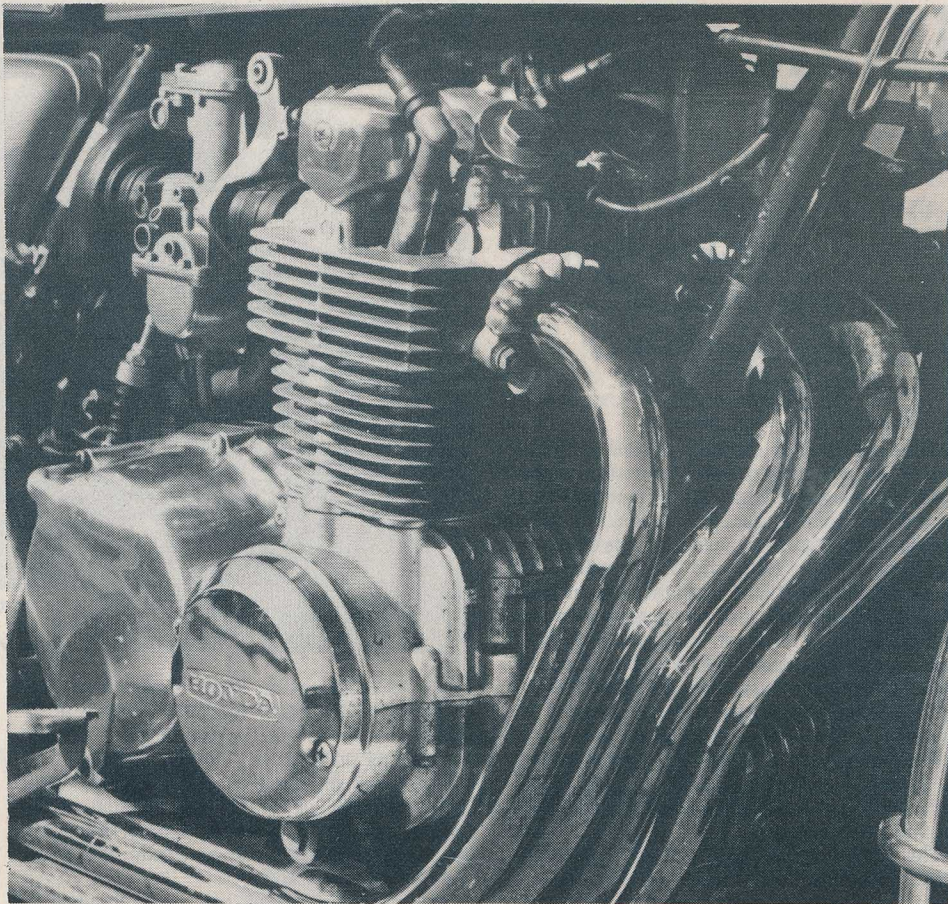
The 550 is undeniably better looking than the CB500.

Lower overall gearing for the five-speed gearbox has made the 550 livelier at almost every stage in its extensive rev-range, with plenty of power available from 3,000 r.p.m. (about 36 m.p.h. in top gear) right up to 8,000 — about 95 m.p.h. Top speed, rider crouching, is around 105, perhaps a shade more . . . a mile or two an hour up on the CB500.

There was some take up feedback in the transmission, enough to give a little jolt when getting away, more pronounced with the extra weight of a passenger. Gearbox action was very reasonable: quick, almost invariably positive (that's to say, one or two misses did occur . . .) but showed the usual Honda reluctance to slip into neutral at a standstill.

Fuel consumption worked out at about 50 m.p.g. at 70-80 m.p.h. cruising, dropping to the mid-40s with town use thrown in.

Handling was very fair, though front-fork action was hard and the rear units had inadequate damping in some situations. Clearance, on the right side, was marginal during fast cornering, especially with a passenger aboard. Braking was good although the front disc squealed irritatingly, like the front brake on the 750F we rode recently, which leads us to think that there may have been a change in pad specification for Hondas in the past year.



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Switchgear and dials are as for the 750F, which means that speedometer and rev-meter heads are bigger than on the CB500 and are illuminated, when you want them to be, by a soothing green glow. The indicator switch activates a "bleeper", with exactly the advantages and drawbacks of the identical 750 system described at length in these pages recently.

We found that there was some noticeable vibration, enough to blur one rear-view mirror (but not both) at high r.p.m., but all of it was very mild by the standards of much contemporary machinery.

The riding position was mediocre—footrests high and too far forward, the handlebar too wide and with not enough rearward set. After 150 miles riding in one hop we had aches across the back of the shoulders.

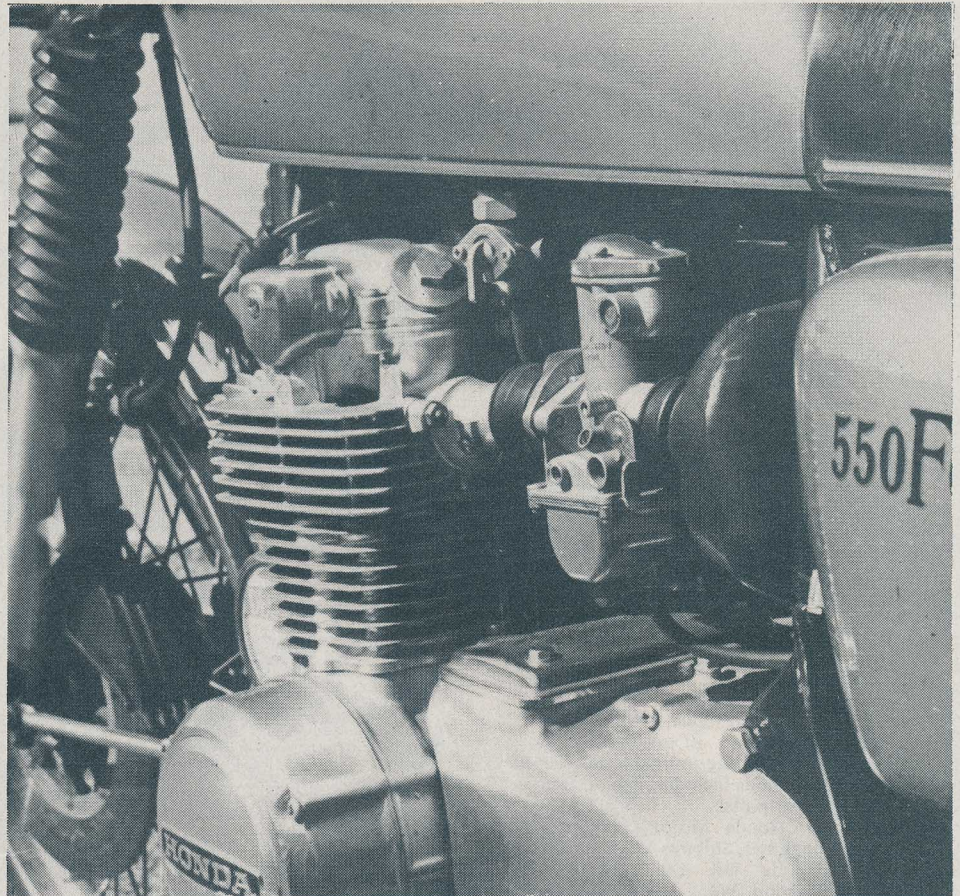
The lights? All right; which is to say, not quite as good as they should be. . . .

The 550 remains, in retrospect, as likeable enough . . . fast, good-looking, not too thirsty, well finished . . . but without the edge and style of the 400, its nearest neighbour among the fours.

SPECIFICATION

Engine: 554 c.c. (58.5 by 50.6mm) overhead-camshaft transverse in-line four. Light-alloy cylinder block and head; steel liners. Five plain main bearings, plain big-ends. Wet sump lubrication. Compression ratio 9.1 to 1. Four 22mm-choke Keihin CV carburettors. Paper-element air filter.

Transmission: Primary chain and spur gears. Wet multi-plate clutch and 5-speed gearbox. Overall ratios: 15.7, 10.9, 8.5, 6.9 and 6 to 1. Endless $\frac{5}{8}$ by $\frac{3}{8}$ in final drive chain (ratio, 2.18 to 1). M.p.h. at 1,000 r.p.m. in top gear: 12.5.



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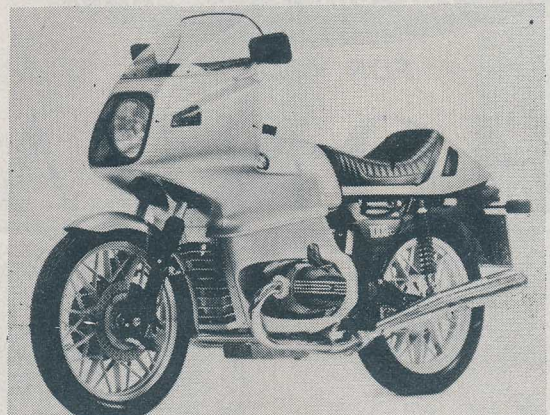
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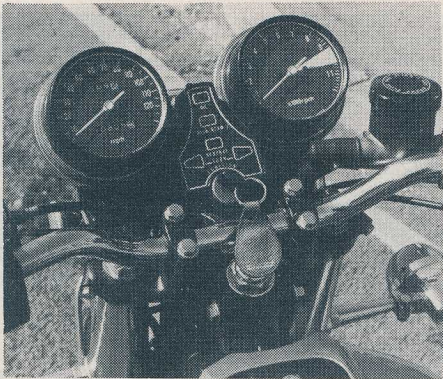


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Brakes : 11in diameter stainless steel disc front; 7in diameter drum rear.

Suspension : Telescopic front fork. Pivoted rear fork.

Frame : Duplex tube cradle with pressed steel spine.

Price : £925 including VAT.

Road Tax : £16 a year, £5.85 for four months.

Dimensions : Wheelbase, 55½in; seat height, 31½in; ground clearance, 7½in; handlebar width, 30½in; turning circle, 15ft; castor angle, 64 deg.; trail, 4.1in; all unladen.

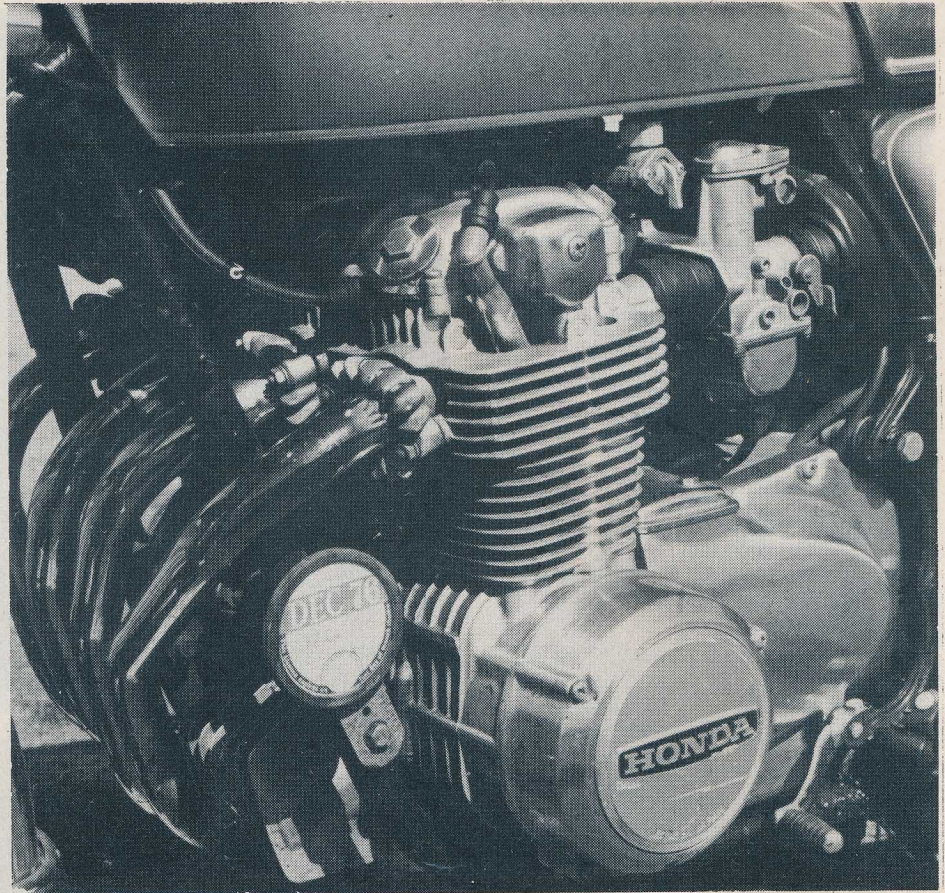
Weight : 434 lb, including approx. a gallon of fuel.

Fuel tank : 3.7 gallons including 7-pint reserve.

Oil capacity : 5.6 pints.

Manufacturer : Honda Motor Co. Ltd., 28-7, 6-Chome, Jinqumar, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo, Japan.

Importer : Honda UK Ltd., Power Road, Chiswick, London, W4.

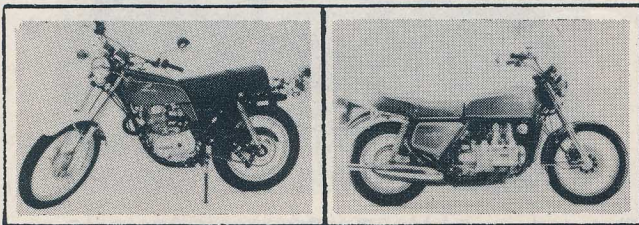


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