

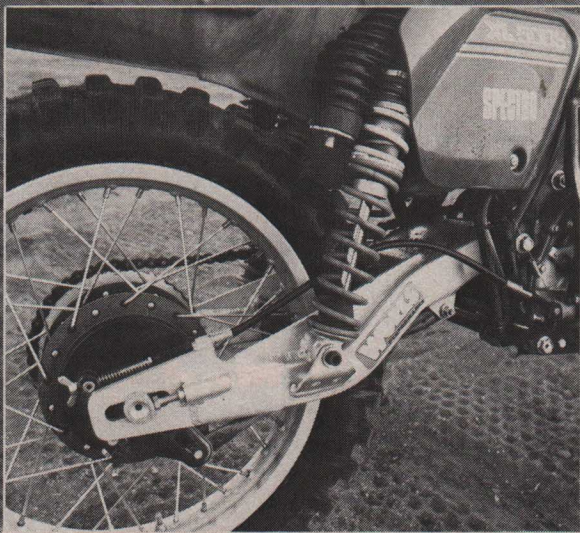
EXCITING



# **XL ECSTASY**

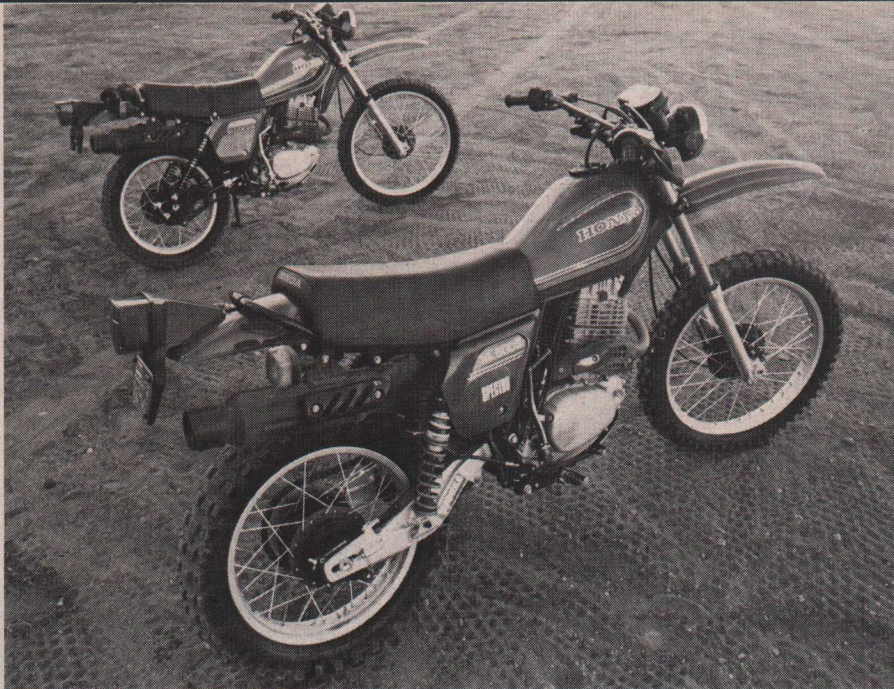
## How 10 Inches Of Travel Can Make Your XL500 An Off-Road Killer

By Rich Cox



**W**ith the Honda XL/XR500s in their second production year, just about every suspension specialist there is has taken a shot at bettering the Honda's off-road capabilities. Some are offering exotic frame kits at exorbitant prices, while others are simply bolting on longer swingarms and shocks to stretch wheel travel. However, we don't think anyone has managed to extract the optimum rear suspension performance from the Honda's stock frame like Gil Vaillancourt has. Gil, who is the man behind Work's Performance Products in Chatsworth, California—and one of the most respected suspension technicians in the field—has developed a new banana-bend aluminum swingarm for XL/XR500s which, when coupled to a pair of his 15-inch Work's shocks, pumps out a healthy ten inches of desert-going wheel travel. We squeezed in a 100-mile test ride aboard his personal XL500 which was so equipped, and there's no question that it's the best-suspended dual-purpose bike we

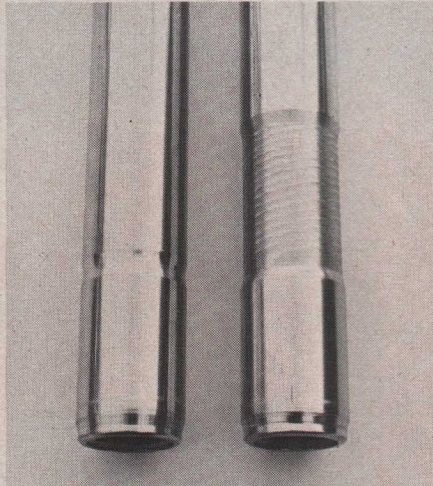




Gil's bike has so much more stability than the stocker that you can really get "wild and crazy" off-road without getting pitched off. Swingarms for the XL/XR250s are next on Gil's list.



The Work's Shocks will be supplied with triple-rate springs—they do a good job of effectively soaking-up the small bumps and handling the XL's enormous weight too.



The left hand tube is used in early model XL/XRs—the right hand is 1980 type.

have yet ridden. In fact, Gil has been so impressed with this bike's overall suspension performance that it's become his favorite desert sled—in spite of the fact that his stable is overflowing with highbred cross-country mounts.

True, there are other accessory swingarms and shocks on the market capable of improving the Honda's ride, so what makes Gil's system any better? The difference is in the shock leverage ratio. Those other swingarm/shock combinations still retain the stockers 1½ to 1 leverage ratio (which means the axle travels 1½ inches for every inch of shock travel). This system is a bit outdated and definitely not capable of supplying the optimum performance. Gil's banana swingarm design is more in step with today's technology because it allows the shorter shocks to be mounted further forward producing a 2 to 1 leverage ratio, which is basically the same as used by all the lat-

est motocrossers. The suspension is much softer and more responsive to sharp, jolting bumps because there is less initial shock resistance and the shocks don't have to react so quickly to the initial impacts. Actual shock action can be better regulated, too, because the piston speed is slower and there's less heat build-up. Due to the hefty weight, an XL will always pound through off-road terrain and be considered somewhat of a handful, but Gil's rear suspension pretty much obliterates the harsh bottoming, the gyrating sidehops and the spine-jarring impacts which the stocker's rear end can dish out at speed—and the overall stability and ride is so much more controlled that it's amazing.

It's only logical that if you jack up the rear travel you'd better increase the front or you'll have a real strange handler on your hands. In the XL's case, one of the easiest and least expensive alternatives is to install the

XR's longer damper rods—which will boost fork travel to roughly nine inches. However, Gil took the stock forks to their limits by installing a 9½ inch travel Terry fork kit and he used XR springs because the XL's will coil-bind from the increased travel. Gil has filled each leg with 210cc of oil and he runs air caps and 10 psi. If you follow in Gil's footsteps it's best to opt for the XR's longer brake and speedo cable as the stockers are a real stretch fit. When installing the Terry kit in either the XL or XR forks, here's a word of warning: For some unknown reason Honda reduced the fork tube's lower bearing surface on the later '80 models—enough that it wouldn't be wise using them in conjunction with the long-travel Terry kit. If in doubt as to which tubes you have—and we're not really sure when Honda made the switch—disassemble your forks and compare the legs with those we have pictured.

You'll notice that Gil has fitted a

21-inch front wheel and Metzeler tire up front just for experimental reasons. For trailblazing we didn't think this set-up offered any handling or steering advantage—or disadvantage—over the stock 23-incher, other than the fact that better quality 21-inch knobbies are more readily available. We did notice that the XL's street prowess had suffered slightly by the change in steering geometry, taller suspension and increased seat height. When pitched into tight corners the bike had a tendency to oversteer, requiring some additional arm-muscling to straighten it back up. But this is really a small sacrifice considering this machine will make absolute fools of any other fully lighted, big four-stroker when the going really gets nasty off-road.

The Work's Performance swingarm, which will retail for \$189.95, is pretty much a bolt-on item. You can use the stock swingarm bushings and brake cable, but because the arm is two inches longer than stock, you'll have to add a piece of chain. If you're mounting it on an XL, the rear frame loop must be bent up slightly for rear wheel clearance. Gil has tested this prototype swingarm without a tensioner or chain guide for roughly 1000 miles without any chain derailments, however the production arm will accept the stock tensioner and will be drilled to accept a chain guide that will be sold as an accessory item later on. Gil has added three teeth to the XL's rear sprocket for increased pulling power, but the larger sprocket does have an additional advantage: it gives the chain more clearance around the swingarm pivot. Although Gil hasn't had any problems with the chain sawing away at the pivot point, the production arm will have a replaceable plastic pad for protection.

Gil has two 15-inch gas shocks which will work beautifully with this swingarm: the \$295-a-pair Supercrossers (as pictured) and the \$199.95-a-pair Gassers. The Supercrossers, which feature reservoirs, are generally the choice among motocrossers because they're less prone to fading. But in this light application Gil states that the less expensive Gassers will handle the job quite adequately.

We'll admit that \$400 is a hefty cash outlay, but for those who are seeking the ultimate performance from their XL/XR's stock chassis, we don't think you'll find a better working rear suspension on the accessory market. Those interested can get the Work's swingarm and shocks through respected dealers or contact Gil directly at: Work's Performance Products, 20970 Knapp Street, Chatsworth, CA 91311. **M**

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