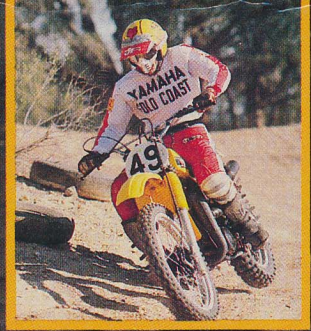


# SUZUKI

**"DeCoster Replica"**



# TRAILING YAMAHA'S IT-175!

34120 JUNE 1978 \$1.00

**POPULAR**

# CYCLING

ARGUS IND

## SUPERCROSS '78 KICK-OFF!



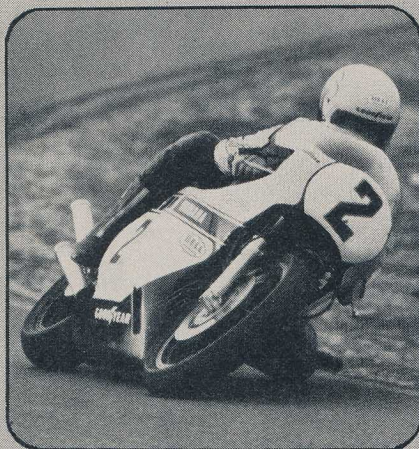
## INTERVIEW: '78 125 CHAMP

# BROC GLOVER!



## KAWASAKI'S SILVER BULLET STREET CUSTOM!





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On the cover:

The shot of Roger DeCoster (by Steve Reyes, of course) accompanies the Suzuki RM400 test article. Since we're taking the liberty of calling the bike a Roger DeCoster Replica, we thought we should put a photo of the man himself on the cover. Consider it also a tribute to Roger D. for coming back so strongly and quickly from his serious accident.

The photo of the Kawasaki KZ650 "Silver Bullet" street machine is by Don Luczak, whose byline appears more frequently in PC's companion publication, *Wild World of Skateboarding*.

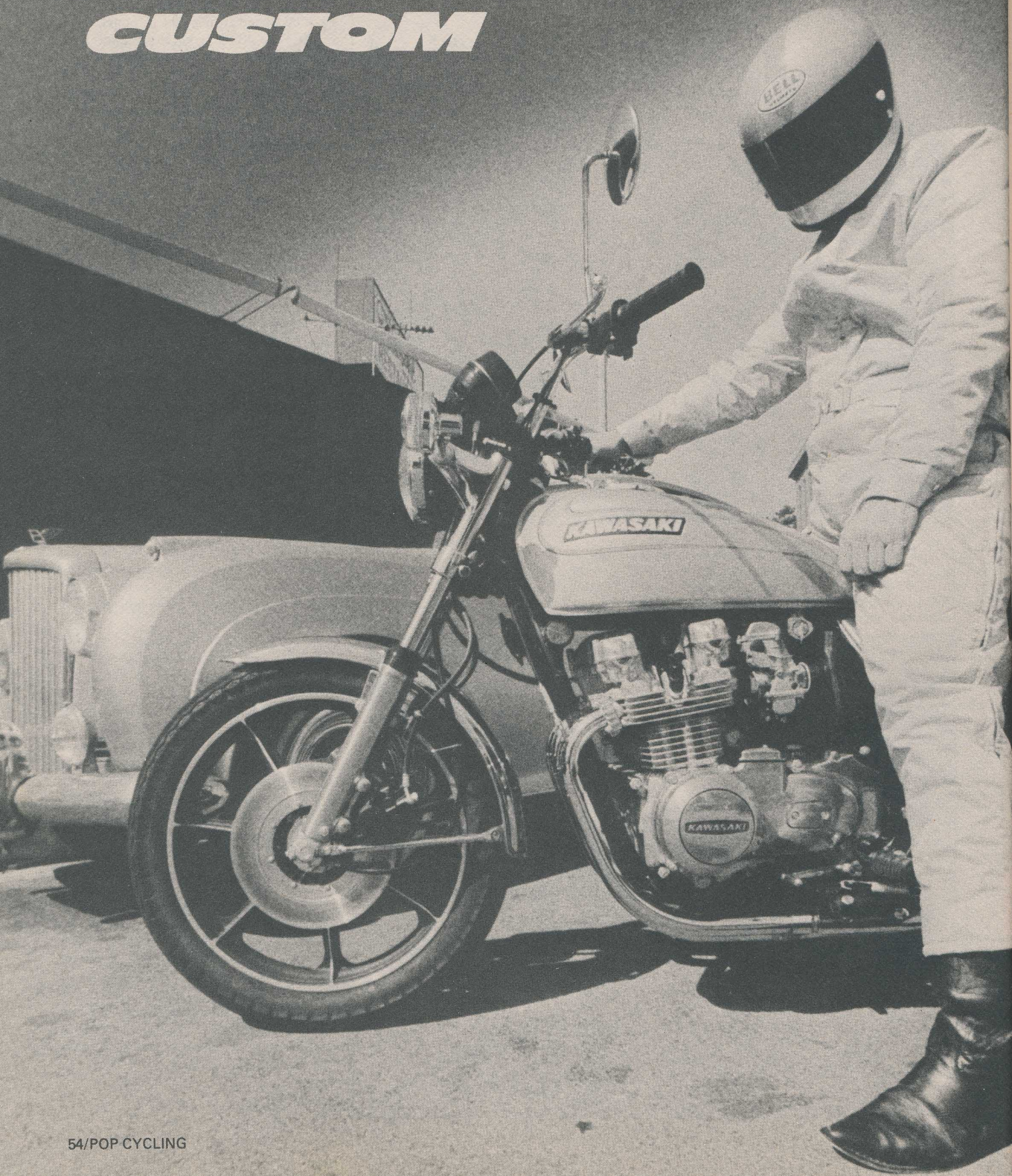
The top photo of motocrosser Don Kudalski, who won the two classes of the Florida Winter-AMA series, is by contributor Jim Gianatsis, one of the top freelance moto-journalists in the business.

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# **KAWASAKI**

# **KZ 650**

# **CUSTOM**



# Down the road on a silver bullet

"Superbike" is a term that's been tossed about quite a lot lately in reference to street motorcycles. Generally speaking, a "superbike" is a large-displacement sporting machine designed more for performance than for utility. The bikes normally placed into this category are the current crop of multi-cylinder machines displacing about 1000cc. If you've taken notice, there are a bunch of them on the market, and they're getting very similar to auto-

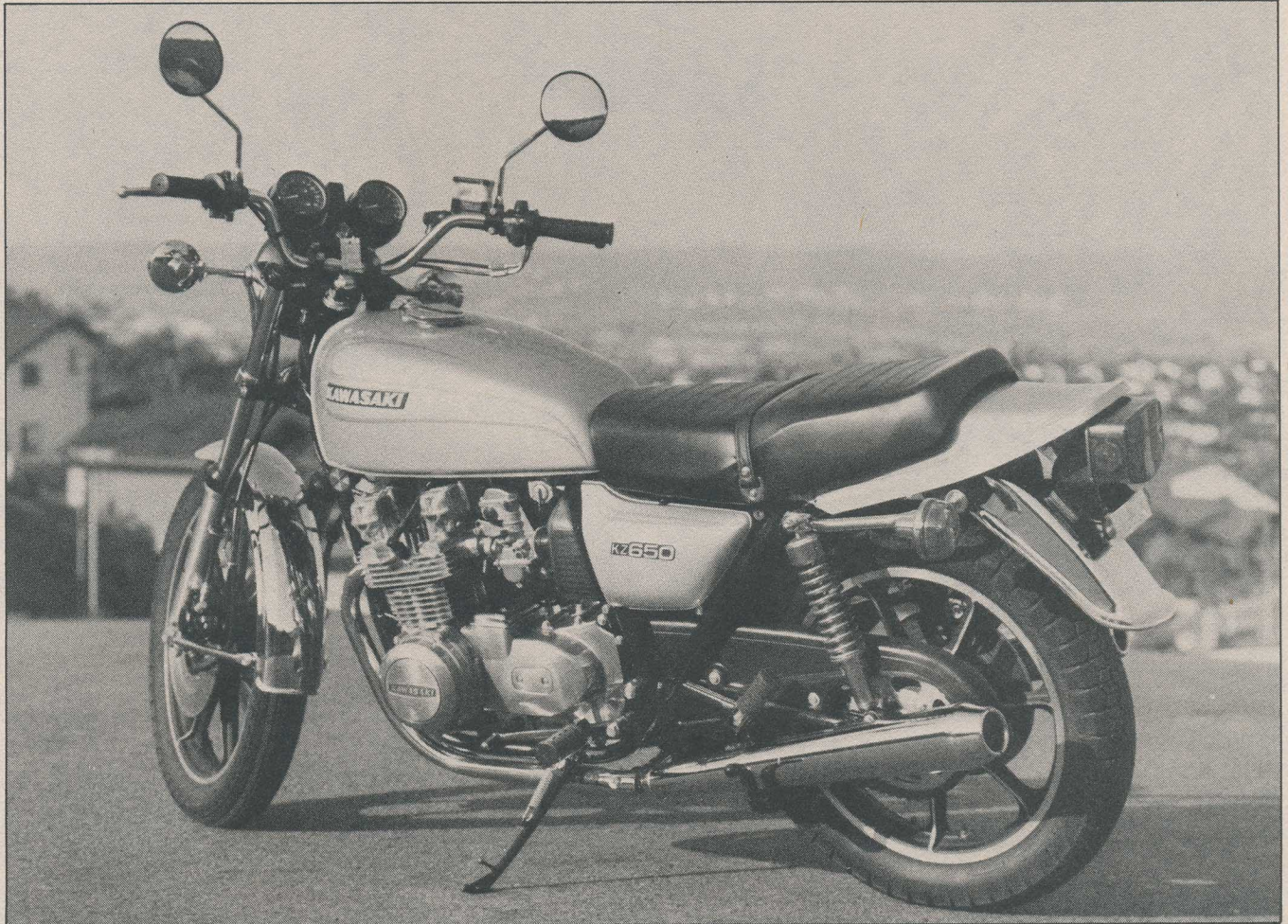
which is the bike that Kawasaki officially touts as their superbike. The 650 is a four-cylinder double overhead-camshaft four-stroke and it's one honey of a motorcycle. Kawasaki made a big

By Kevin Smith

marketing push when they introduced the model, and they haven't been in any way disappointed with the sales results. What's that old saying about the proverbial hotcakes?

and that is the intentional result of Kawasaki's engineering and marketing plans for this motorcycle.

When the KZ650 was introduced, Kawasaki called it a bike that would "out-perform any 750 in the world." That claim has since proven to have been a bit optimistic, but that doesn't really matter. The point is this bike was conceived, built, and presented with blistering performance as its main object, and within that framework it is a



The Custom is a real slick looking machine. Mag-type wheels, triple discs, and graceful pipes give it a racy image. Plain silver paint is subdued and very classy, and the beautiful pinstriping adds a tasteful touch. The tail section is strictly ornamental and lacks the storage compartment of the Z-1's similar piece.

mobiles in three important areas: engine displacement, number of cylinders and price.

But there's one motorcycle that doesn't come anywhere near the 1000cc mark that we'd like to see admitted to the superbike club. It's the Kawasaki KZ650 Custom. It may not have the piston displacement, physical bulk, or price tag of some of the other street rockets, but it has everything that matters.

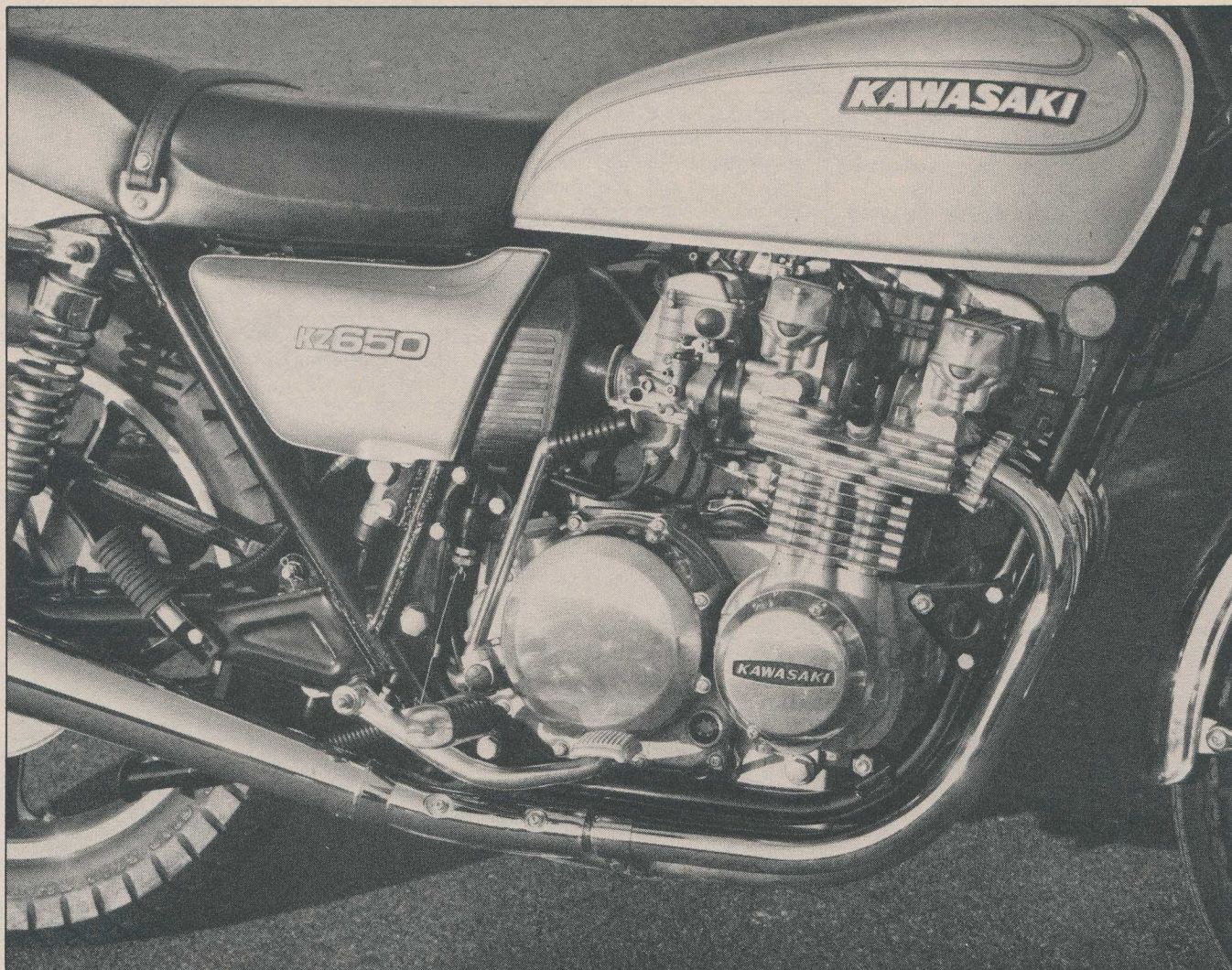
Kawasaki's 650 is sort of a compact KZ1000 (or Z-1 as it used to be known),

And we are not surprised by this success, because we feel that the KZ650 is THE best motorcycle that Kawasaki has ever built. Bar none!

Even though the 650 isn't exactly like the larger 1000cc model, the state-of-the-art technology is the same and the bike may be as near perfect as assembly line production can get. It is cast in much the same mold as the Z-1, and, for that matter, most of the other big-bore street cruisers from Japan. But even though it is similar to a number of other models on the market, it has its own personality,

thrill-packed success.

In the world of street riding, performance can be something of a tricky game. A bike with impressive acceleration times can develop a popular reputation, but actually riding a motorcycle has nothing at all to do with numbers and stopwatches. A 13.5-second quarter-mile run doesn't *feel* any different from the saddle than a 13.7-second effort, and that's all that matters in determining how much you enjoy a motorcycle—what it feels like from the saddle.



Engine is a DOHC four that thrives on revs. Displacement of 650cc is interesting. That was the big-bike bracket a decade ago and there hasn't been a new model of that size in a long time. Engine can be taken out to 750cc or more, and the extra mid-range torque would be welcomed.

## KAWASAKI KZ650 Custom

### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

#### ENGINE

Engine type ..... 4-cylinder DOHC  
 Bore and stroke, mm ..... 62 x 54  
 Displacement, cc ..... 652  
 Horsepower/rpm (claimed) ..... 60/8000  
 Torque/rpm (claimed) ..... 41/7000  
 Compression ratio ..... 9.5:1  
 Air filtration ..... Dry paper  
 Carburetion ..... 22mm Mikuni (4)  
 Lubrication ..... Wet sump  
 Ignition ..... Battery/coil

#### DRIVE TRAIN

Transmission ..... 5-speed, constant mesh  
 Clutch type ..... Wet, multi-plate  
 Primary drive ..... Hy-vo chain  
 Final drive ratio ..... 41/16 = 2.63

### CHASSIS

Chassis type ..... Tubular, double cradle  
 Overall length, in. .... 85.6  
 Ground clearance, in. .... 5.6  
 Wheelbase, in. .... 55.4  
 Dry weight, lbs. .... 464  
 Tires, front ..... 3.25H-19  
                   rear ..... 4.00H-18  
 Brakes, front ..... Dual disc  
                   rear ..... Single disc  
 Fuel capacity ..... 4.4 gal

Max.

Pts.

### NUMERICAL EVALUATION

10 Starting ..... 8  
 10 Power ..... 10  
 10 Powerband ..... 10  
 10 Transmission ..... 5  
     (5) Ratios ..... 5

(5) Operation ..... 5  
 10 Comfort  
     (5) Freeway ..... 4  
     (5) City ..... 5  
 10 Brakes  
     (5) Effectiveness ..... 5  
     (5) Waterproofing ..... 5  
 10 Handling  
     (5) Low-speed maneuverability ..... 5  
     (5) High-speed stability ..... 5  
 10 Instrumentation  
     (5) Readability ..... 5  
     (5) Adequacy ..... 5  
 20 Miscellanea  
     (5) Quality of craftsmanship ..... 5  
     (5) Electrics ..... 5  
     (5) Noise level ..... 5  
     (5) Economy ..... 5  
 100 pts.      Overall Rating      97 pts.

It's in that regard that the KZ650 truly shines. To be sure, this motorcycle is very fast in the objective-numbers sense. But it's even faster in terms of subjective feel, and that's something you can enjoy every time you ride the bike, without having to take it to a dragstrip.

The 650 we rode for this test was the Custom model, which is distinguished from the standard version by its paint job and its wheels and brakes. The wheels are one-piece cast alloy beauties styled along the lines of roadrace mags. They are slightly heavier than standard spoke wheels, but they are stiffer, never require tightening of spoke nipples, and look spectacular.

The Custom's brakes are more than just different from the standard 650—they're different from just about everything else you can buy. We'll say right here that, for its weight, the Kawasaki KZ650 is wearing more brake than any production street bike, with the possible exception of the Yamaha RD400E. Dual hydraulic discs grace the front wheel, and there's a single disc mounted on the rear. Together, they provide braking that is smooth, controllable, and extremely powerful. It may border on a case of overkill, but the braking department is not a bad place for that.

The standard 650 has a single disc in front and a drum in back, and is not at all short of braking power. To be honest, the Custom's brake configuration was probably dictated primarily by styling considerations. The cast wheels require discs, so that's what went on the back, and the cafe racing craze established the appeal and visual "correctness" of front double discs. The front discs are each smaller than the standard's single disc, and the hydraulic system's mechanical advantage is limited, so the bike doesn't stand on its nose every time a bug hits the brake lever. But you do have all the braking power you could ever need.



Perhaps the other most outstanding feature of the KZ650 is its engine. That's entirely proper for a performance machine. The inline four is of a now-conventional design, but there is an eager willingness about it that contributes much to the whole thrill of riding this speedster. It loves to rev (redline is 9000), and it makes a nice though not-too-loud sound when it is working.

The reason the engine loves to rev is simple: it has to. Moderate-displacement motors get high horsepower by spinning fast, and torque in the lower rpm range is traded away. This makes for some interesting operating characteristics in the case of the KZ650.

For one thing, our staff riders frequently found themselves reaching for another gear after getting into fifth on the freeway. The high-revving engine just gives the impression that there is more going on than should be necessary for maintaining a relaxed cruising pace.

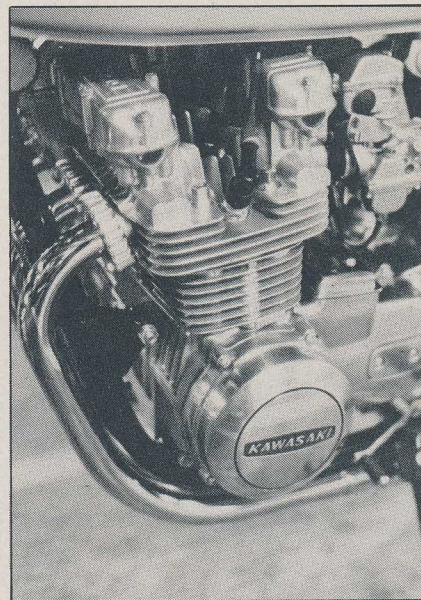
The lack of torque at lower engine speeds also requires winging the engine and slipping the clutch to get under way, which felt a little overly dramatic in congested city traffic. Once or twice we even hit the shift lever to make sure we had gotten clear down to first gear. Maybe what the bike needs is a six-speed gearbox to make its penchant for revving a little easier to live with in the hum-drum world of street commuting.

Whistling along on the open road, though, where the engine can run the way it is meant to, the power characteristics are just right. The bike loves to be ridden quickly. For example, the smoothest shifts are the fastest shifts, since the gear ratios are spaced very closely, the clutch friction point is narrow, and the engine's lack of flywheel effect lets the revs die away instantly. The engine also begins to vibrate—though not uncomfortably—at about 5000 rpm, which is right where it begins to go to work. All of this results in a very racy feel, and creates that sensation of speed we mentioned.

The suspension also contributes to that sensation, but in a less welcome way. The ride is quite harsh by modern standards, and going quickly over even mildly rough pavement gets the bike dancing around in a fashion that is really too thrilling to be completely comfortable.

But the KZ650 is designed for performance, not lounge-chair comfort, and on that scale it is an exceptionally well-balanced package. The engine has lots of peak power, the braking is superb, and there is enough ground clearance for real, get-down-to-it corner carving. The stiff suspension makes for some imprecision at high speeds, but the bike does nothing unexpected or dangerous and it happily changes direction with real nimbleness.

Nimble is something the rider must be when starting a cold KZ650. The bike will not fire unless the choke is full-on, and then the revs immediately skyrocket. You quickly grab for the choke lever and back it off a hair and the engine promptly dies. The whole affair is complicated by the starter interlock, which demands that you hold the clutch lever in while pushing the starter button. The interlock keeps you from unexpectedly lurching forward when you try to start the bike in gear, but it also makes it impossible to monitor the too-sensitive choke while cranking the engine.



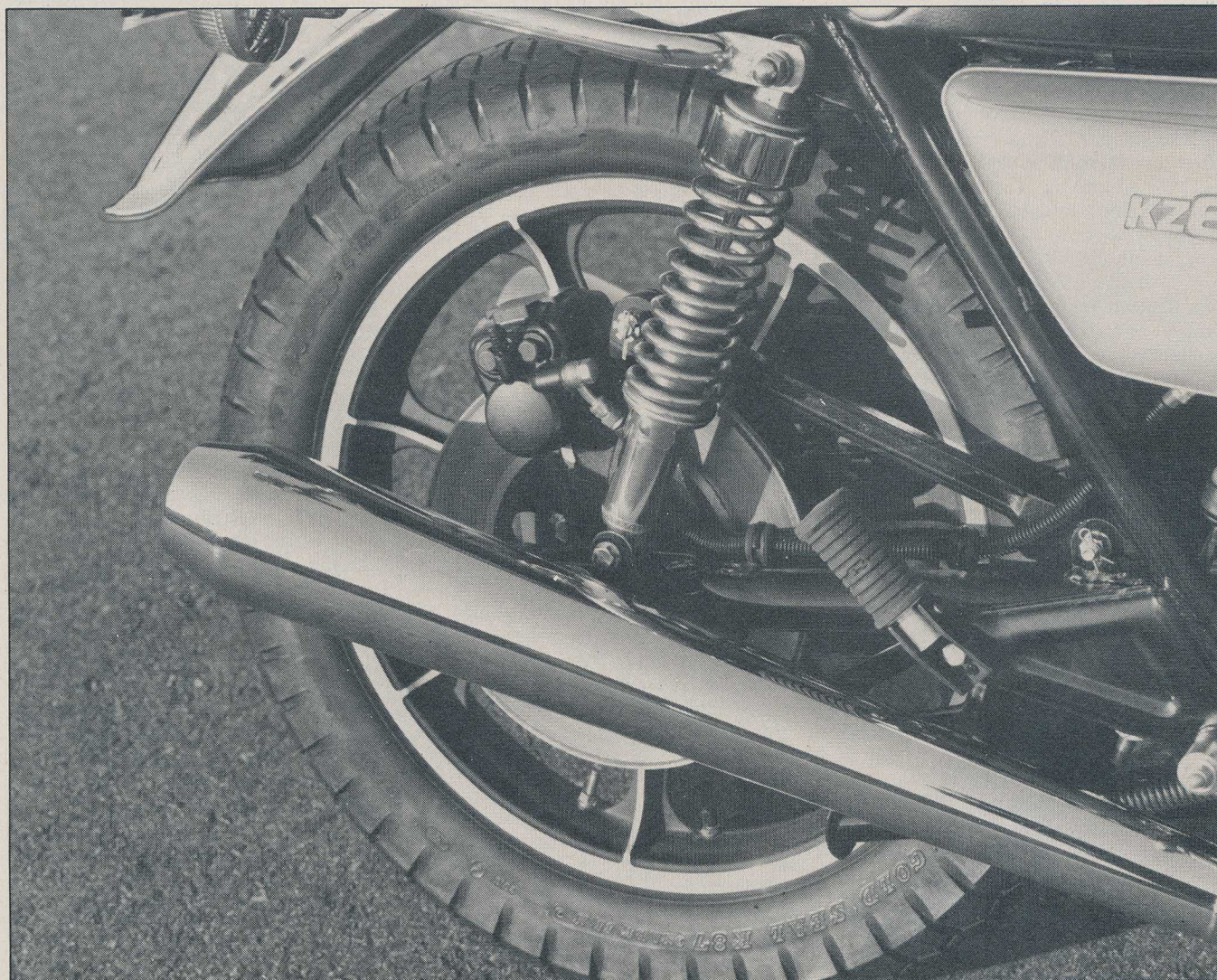
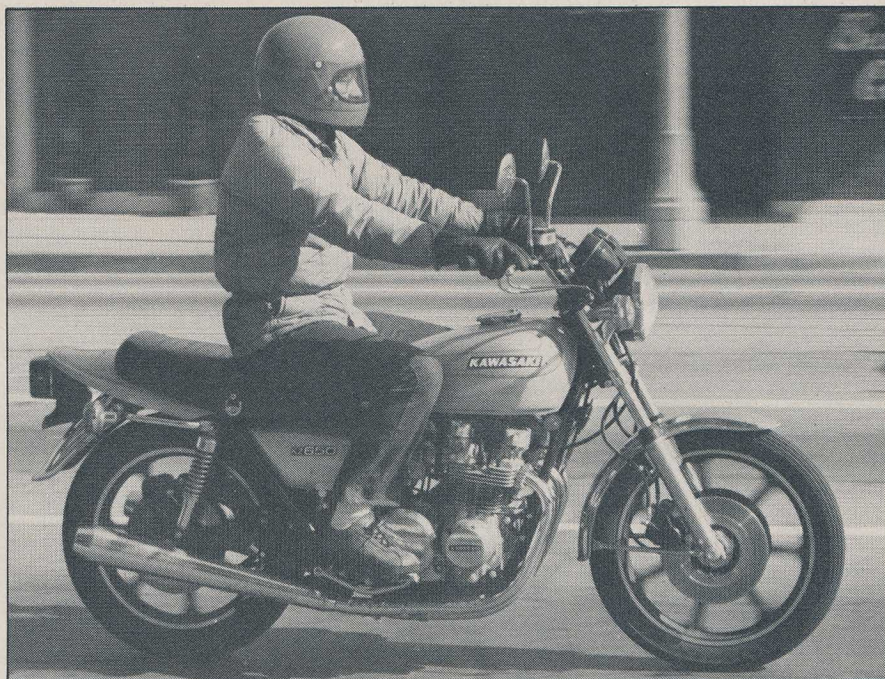
The carburetors drew our suspicious scowls for other reasons. Our engine was extremely cold-blooded and had to run for some time—alternating between dying and screaming as the rider fought the choke lever—before it would accept any throttle opening at all. Once warmed and under way the metering is accurate enough, though we did detect a slight surging condition at sustained speeds around 70 mph. Somehow, it feels like they quit on the carburetors just a little too soon.

While we're picking nits, the handlebar curve created a riding position that was not ideal for us, but that is primarily a matter of personal preference and bars are easy things to change. Also we still don't like the stop light indicators on Japanese instrument panels. They don't really tell you anything you need to know, and a bright red light is a distraction the rider certainly doesn't need.

Sure, there are details we can complain about—there are with any motorcycle. But we said the KZ650 Custom was our favorite Kawasaki, remember? It's not our favorite because it's the fastest; the Z-1 still holds that distinction. And it's not our favorite because it is the best handler; the KZ750

twin (not offered in 1978) is fractionally lighter to the touch and more stable. The KZ650 is our favorite because it is a well-balanced and manageable jet of a motorcycle. All the controls work nicely together, it gives the rider lots of cooperation, and everything about it says "Ride me."

Perhaps the best thing we can say about the KZ650 is that it would make one super production-class roadracer. And that's quite a recommendation when you realize that kind of work demands good horsepower, good handling, good braking, and good reliability all rolled into a package that will work with you at the limit instead of against you. And we aren't the only ones to recognize the raceability of Kawasaki's light-heavyweight; in 1977, the American Federation of Motorcyclists' 750cc production class was handily won by a KZ650. 🏍️



Cast wheels and disc brakes are what set Custom apart from standard KZ650. These wheels are strong and maintenance-free, and the brakes are excellent. It's nice to see that Japanese motorcycle manufacturers have finally adopted the much cleaner-looking seamless mufflers.