

The Ultimate Streetbike Magazine


February '87 £1.00

**PLUS**

World's Quickest  
Ducati?

300mph Jammer  
Custom (eh?)

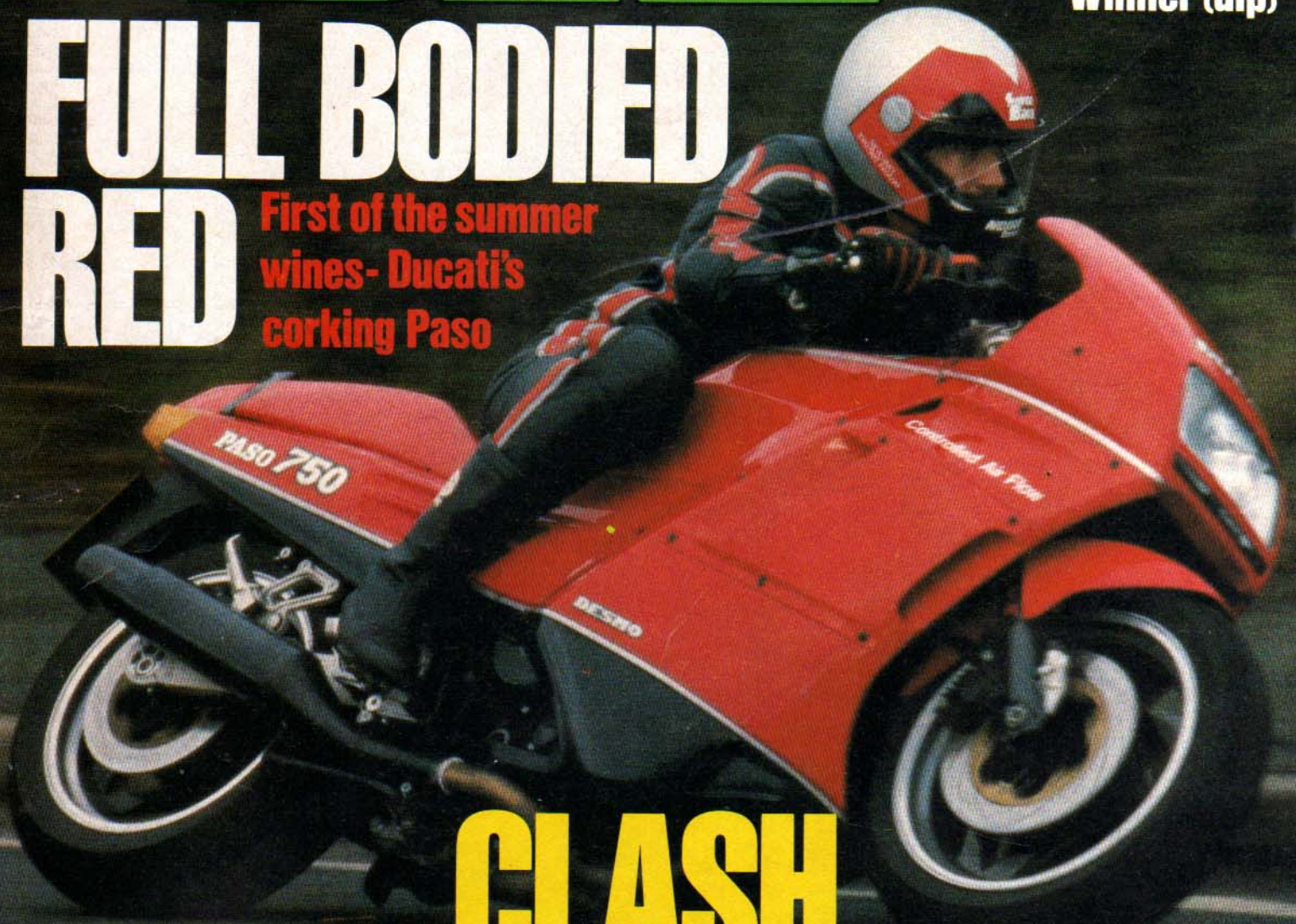
Triumph's Oriental  
Winner (ulp)

 A Link House  
Publication

# SUPER BIKE

## FULL BODIED RED

First of the summer  
wines- Ducati's  
corking Paso



## CLASH OF THE HYPED ONES

Titanic Tests:  
Honda CBR1000  
v Yamaha FZR1000



**PLUS** Honda CBR600, Transalp, Yamaha FZX750, TZR250...we ride 'em all!







# SHOGUN SHOTGUNS'



Do Honda's new CBRs rewrite the sports bike rules? TM goes off to Japan in search of . . .

## Hidden Power

When a motorcycle firm lays out the kind of money required for large quantities of European and Australian journalists to fly out to Japan and stay in £120-a-night hotels across the country for a week or so, in order to ride their latest models for a total time of less than a couple of hours, it's safe to draw certain conclusions.

One conclusion is that the firm in question is on the one hand deadly keen to gain publicity for their new bikes, and on the other hand seized of a curious kind of death wish to screw the whole idea up by way of incomprehensibly inadequate planning.

This was very much the story of Honda's launch of their important new CBR sports bikes and Transalp dual purpose machine. After early rumours of a launch in either Australia or the States had been scotched, we found ourselves pitched into a week-long odyssey of travel on various forms of transport — apart from the one we'd gone out to Japan to sample, viz Honda's '87 machinery.

Banging this out as I am, 26 floors above Tokyo's teeming metropolis, I don't feel particularly inclined to detail here the frustrations of the past week. Suffice to say that at some point in those last seven days I dimly remember a brief interlude (in between countless interminable coach journeys and scuttlings between hundreds of hotel dining rooms) during which we actually rode the bikes. At Suzuka circuit, I think it was . . . Yes . . . that's right . . . it's coming back to me now.

I only wish I could remember what day it is today . . .

### THE VENUE

The venue chosen for the launch was indeed Suzuka circuit, three hours south of Tokyo by the famous "bullet train". Unfortunately, we went by motor coach via the curiously misnamed "expressway", so it took us over seven hours of misery, relieved only (if that's the word) by videos of sumo wrestling, which is without doubt the most stylised, ritualistic and downright boring "sport" I have ever seen.

Anyway, the circuit. As at the VFR750

launch at Jerez last spring, work was underway to bring the track up to scratch in time for the first bike GP of the '87 season. Luckily, this work was being confined to the trackside rather than being allowed to spread across the circuit itself, so there were no rivers of mud or conveniently situated piles of cement dust to worry about, a blessed relief to many quavering hacks.

After a day of rain, the elements smiled on us for the test session, early damp patches quickly drying out as the morning wore on. It even became quite warm, a pleasant sensation in mid-December. Regrettably, the organisation wasn't quite so hot: our promised allocation of test vehicles had not materialised, a situation which obliged us to share with a small party of Belgian journos (do they ride motorbikes in Belgium?) Compounded by our Japanese hosts' puzzling insistence on bringing the riding sessions to regular halts for what seemed to be somewhat dubious reasons, this shortage of test tackle meant that the Brits would have even less time than is customary on these occasions to learn the track.

The circuit is 5.9km (3.7 miles) long, and is unusual in that the track goes over itself,

Scalextric-style. The main pit straight is about the same length as that at Donington Park, and turns into a large radius right hander, followed by another (tighter) right. After a short straight there's a left-right-left-right complex, all uphill; the first left has no run-off, just a big fence to stop you going straight on into a pond. The last right is constant radius but bumpy — it was to claim a victim from the British contingent before the end of the day. After that there's a very long, unwinding left-hander, a short straight, then down a gear for a very tricky decreasing radius right. Under the bridge, short straight, and holding the throttle open through a right kink before cramping on all the anchors for a 180 degree left hairpin, which leads you onto a long, long righthanded sweep to a 90 degree left, the first element of a double-apex left. After negotiating a rough patch on the exit, it's flat-out along the back straight, braking and notching down a gear as you cross the bridge in time for a testing fast left. Then another squirt of power before braking right down to practically walking pace for a Mickey Mouse right-left chicane. Then it's fast as you like down a steep right sweeper onto the pit straight.

I heard some of the journos voicing the opinion that Suzuka was a difficult circuit to learn. Without in any way wishing to sound arrogant, I wondered why they said that; I found a line that I was happy with after less than five laps. There are no particularly nasty bits, and quite a few "easy" but thrilling bits. It's a circuit very much in the American style, Laguna Seca-ish but easier. The bike that wins the Japanese GP will probably be the one with the most ground clearance, piloted by the man with the daintiest boots (that can be moved out of the way).

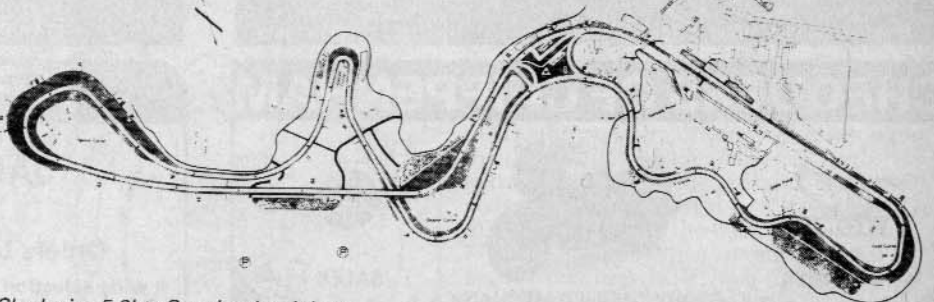
### THE BIKES

#### Transalp 600V

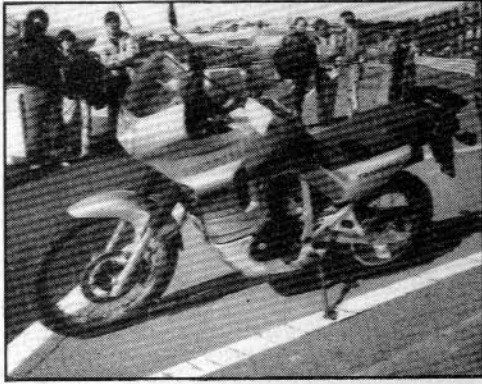
This was the first bike I tried at Suzuka. It proved to be a good learner's bike, despite (or because of) the fact that the racetrack is one of the few environments not to form part of the Transalp's wide repertoire.

You'll all know by now the thinking behind this machine. It represents the road-going development of the NXR750 Paris-Dakar trail bikes, sanitised and homogenised for a type of use which is being hailed as "new" by Honda. Of course, it isn't actually new at all, since Honda themselves (with the totally lame and

#### INTERNATIONAL RACING COURSE SUZUKA CIRCUIT



Clockwise 5.9km Suzuka circuit hosts first '87 GP, is fast and easy to learn



meritless XL600LM) along with any number of other manufacturers have been trying to flog off bikes supposedly capable of performing well both on and off road for quite some time now.

But the Transalp is different, because it would appear from our admittedly brief sampling that it is actually capable of fulfilling the on-road part of this hard equation. None of the Brits had enough time to make the 3km bus ride (aaargh) away from Suzuka to the off-road course, but an Australian colleague who did make it came back duly impressed by the bike's easy neutrality on the dirt. It's far from being a small bike: in fact, with its 33.5in seat height and 59.3in wheelbase, it could very well have been designed for the average German giant. At less than 395lbs though, it's reasonably light, and the comfy suspension does mean that once you've swung your leg over it, there's enough sink to give most British riders a decent chance of getting the balls of both feet on the ground. At six foot, I found it no strain, but lady riders will definitely be struggling (again — sorry, gels).

The engine is a 583cc cousin of the 3-valve, 52 degree VT500, with two centrally-situated 32mm carbs. It's mechanically very quiet, thanks to liquid cooling (there are twin radiators, one with an electric fan), but there's a decent thrum from the dual exhaust system. "Preasing", as the Honda press pack calls it 53PS is claimed at 8000rpm (redline is at 9000rpm), with 73% of the 40ft/lbs maximum torque figure available from as little as 2000rpm.

It certainly impresses with the way in which it hustles up to its top speed, which was an indicated 173km/h (108mph) at Suzuka, equivalent to a couple of hundred rpm short of redline in fifth. There's no comparison between the feeble old XL600 and this bike; there is some distant vibration from 6000rpm, but in no way could it be described as intrusive. Gear selection is slick, and the fairing turned out to be surprisingly effective.

With a 21-inch front wheel, it would be churlish to expect razor-sharp steering on the racetrack, and of course it isn't. But, given the limitations of the semi-knobbly tyres, the Transalp acquitted itself very well indeed at Suzuka, easily holding its own with the CBRs on the twistier sections. There was a degree of wallowing and

squirming, but nothing unmanageable, and the single front disc/twin leading shoe rear brake system proved eminently usable — whenever it was necessary, which wasn't often. Apart from at the hairpin and the chicane, the Transalp could be left in top gear all the way round, with only minimal improvements in progress to be gained from redundant cog-swapping.

Instrumentation and switchgear I thought were first class; to be honest, I couldn't really fault the bike. With all that expensively painted bodywork on it, I do wonder at the cost of dropping one off your chosen Alp, but that aside, I think it is a motorcycle of tremendous appeal. I can see both the young and flash, as well as the older, more mature rider, being tempted by it. Expected price about £3000.



**CBR1000 & 600**

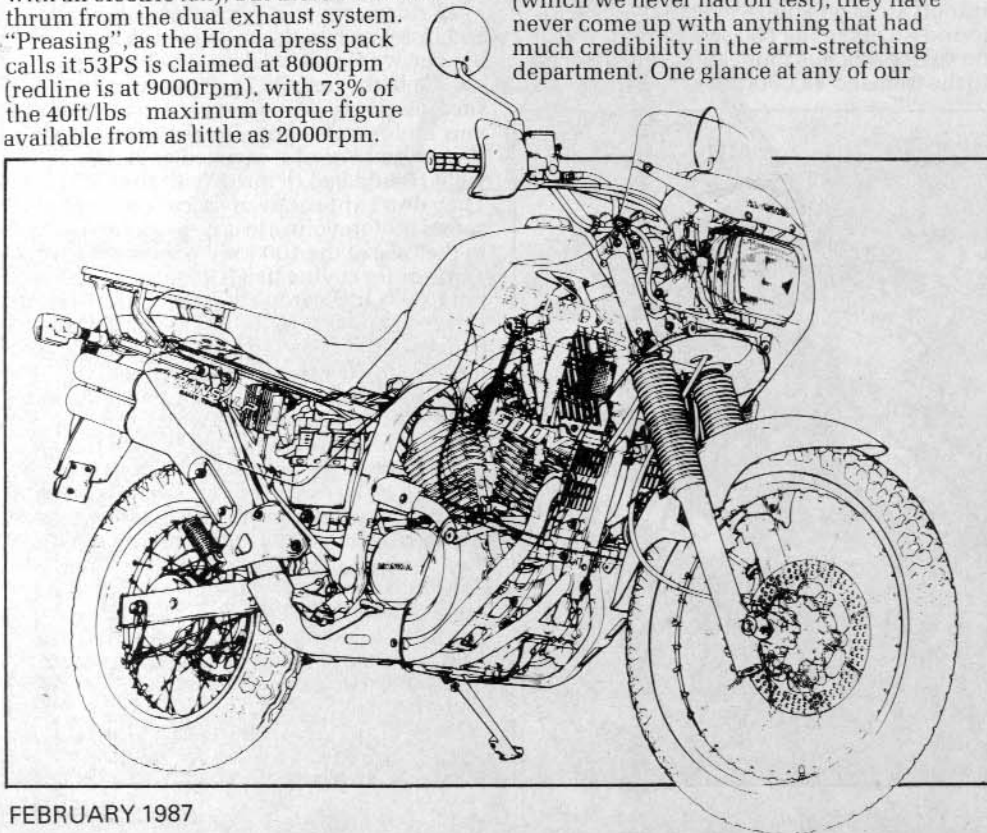
Honda have a problem when it comes to producing big sports bikes. With the possible exception of the early CB1100R (which we never had on test), they have never come up with anything that had much credibility in the arm-stretching department. One glance at any of our

Ultimate Streetbike results sheets will underline this strange fact.

The CBR1000 is (one assumes) Honda's attempt at catching up in this area, which after all is of paramount importance image-wise if not sales-wise. It and its smaller brother the CBR600F take as their basis the side-beam/cradle chassis first used on the successful VFR750. The engines are old in concept but new to Honda, watercooled transverse fours with four-valve heads and heavily oversquare internal dimensions and classic displacements, 998cc and 598cc. Each bike has hollow camshafts and a six-speed gearbox; access to the 600's cylinder head is via the VFR method, ie a radiator which swings out to one side, whereas on the 1000 all that needs to be removed is the petrol tank.

Considerable comment has already been aroused by the CBRs' all-enveloping bodywork. Air inlets at both sides of the headlamp and the bottom of both sides of the fairings are designed to route cool air to the base of the petrol tank and to the carbs; the larger air outlets on the fairing sides utilise the pressure difference between the inside and the outside of the fairing to extract hot air from the radiator. Even the swingarm-mounted rear mudguard helps to duct air away from the back of the engine. Much thought was also given to frontal aerodynamics, with a flush-fitting headlamp and wind tunnel designed front mudguard.

I rode the 1000 first, which generally speaking is not the best thing to do on a





## SHOGUN SHOTGUNS

strange circuit when there's a smaller and presumably better-handling 600 available. But it was offered so I took it. My first impression was of how low and compact it was. My next impression was of how heavy it felt. Well, not heavy exactly, but... dense. The centre of gravity feels very low indeed, and with a 30.9in seat height even quite short people should have no trouble getting along with it. You're faced with an impressive bank of instruments, including temperature and fuel gauges, a 12,500rpm tach redlined at 10,500rpm, and a 185mph (gulp!) speedo. The new style mirrors are both attractive and functional, and the whole bike looks pretty. The UK will be getting all three available colour schemes, dark blue, black and red, and white and red (which is the flashiest of the lot).

One of Honda's stated aims in designing the CBR range was to combine performance with comfort. There's lots of stuff about "organic shapes" and "fusing man and machine" in the press pack, and the CBR1000 certainly lives up to the comfort objective. The one I rode was exceptionally plush. Too much so, unfortunately. Plushness turns to porkiness when you're attempting to nip around a racetrack, something I'd already noticed while riding behind 1000-mounted journo on the Transalp. More than one of them experienced some difficulty in getting the rear end to behave on the tighter sections; it would step out on braking and on acceleration. In some respects, the engine's big power output was the bike's own worst enemy; less than perfect throttle twirling coming out of corners would have the rear tyre all over the place, while the sheer momentum the bike was able to gather on the straights meant that all the brakes had to be used for the corners, and the rear disc just didn't have enough feel or progression to enable it to be used with reasonable safety.

The 1000's ultra-flat torque curve meant that I soon learnt to stick the thing in a high gear and rely on the grunt to get me through the bends. Although the motor revs freely enough to its redline, you certainly know there are large things going up and down inside the crankcases. There's noticeable vibration from 7000rpm, but it is as well suppressed as on the Transalp thanks to the employment of a balance shaft. Below 7000rpm it is incredibly smooth for a big transverse four: such is the performance available at these lower engine speeds, this vibration problem need never raise its head



on British roads. Honda claim 10.5 standing quarters and 162.5mph top ends for the 1000. Judging by the contemptuous ease with which it reached 150mph on the main straight, this top speed figure may well prove to be pessimistic. I took the opportunity to try out its low-end ability, and was impressed by the snatch-free pickup from as low as 1400rpm (less than 20mph) in sixth.

I found it desirable to ride the 1000 as smoothly as possible around Suzuka. It needed particularly delicate control around the bumpy righthander I mentioned earlier, where constant throttle openings were essential to avoid the kind of load reversals that quickly upset the bike's composure. Poor old Julian Ryder of *Motorcycle International* learnt a hard lesson when he dumped a 1000 at this very spot towards the end of the day, fortunately incurring no damage to either himself or the bike in the process, but nevertheless earning the dubious distinction of being the first non-Japanese person to chuck one away (maybe even the first person ever). The fairing received remarkably little damage, which is a good sign; the bike was soon back in action.

One other journo felt the 1000's bite, although not on the track. The editor of Australia's *Two Wheels*, Bill McKinnon, had one roll off its sidestand onto his leg while he was standing facing forwards (ie against the knee joint's normal plane of movement). He was hobbling for a couple of days afterwards. The sidestand is definitely on the short side; I was nearly caught out by it myself once.

The 1000 quickly establishing itself as a bike to be survived rather than enjoyed. Riders seemed to be sailing off onto the run-off areas on almost every lap I rode round Suzuka. The 600 seemed to be posing no such problems though. Having listened to the frenzied 12,000rpm shriek of its

motor as it zinged past the pits, I approached my time on board with a degree of pleasurable anticipation. Riding it, I soon discovered why it was being revved so furiously: there wasn't much in the way of power below 7000rpm. In fact, the 600 only starts to take off at 8000rpm, from which point it really shifts right the way round to 12,000rpm. Honda claim 143mph and 11.7 second quarters for the bike, but I reckon you'd need to be a bit of a hotshot with the old clutch lever to score consistently similar times on the strip. Once it's in the powerband, it's a little jewel, and despite the absence of a balance shaft it's smoother at high rpm than its bigger brother.

It too feels low and little. The alternator, which sits behind the block on the 1000, is conventionally mounted on the left end of the 600's crank to reduce generator drive friction losses. The two engine widths are identical for this reason. The 600's rear shock linkage is above the swingarm level though, with a forward inclined shock to keep the seat height and the centre of gravity down low. Compression and rebound damping functions are controlled separately by two valves, but the rates of damping are non-adjustable. This was a pity because I thought the bike was slightly over-damped for the smooth Suzuka circuit. With a run-in bike on British roads though it will probably be perfectly fine.

Preload is adjustable, but by the time you'd found out at Suzuka that the bike was too softly sprung, it was too late to do anything about it. I grounded the bike out on both sides on the bumpy right (already mentioned)-left combination, but after I'd calmed down a bit I had no more problems. The 600 shares a 17-inch front wheel with the 1000, a development I think is long overdue; both bikes steered with great precision and neutrality. I would expect all manufacturers to come round to the 17-inch way of thinking before too long. It's such an obvious solution to the slow/quick steer argument that's been raging for the last five years.

Summing up bikes on the basis of a test track ride is never easy or especially valid, and less so when the session is as short as the one we took a week to get. But I could only vote the new CBRs as a moderate success. Given the short gestation periods of new motorcycles from the drawing board to showroom, I'm a bit puzzled as at quite what Honda had in mind with the CBRs. They don't appear to advance the cause of sports motorcycling to any great degree, and in the case of the 1000cc model there are grounds for saying that the cause has been put back a little. It's rather revealing to read from my notes that the best all-round ride I had all day was on the VFR750 (slightly modified and available in an attractive metallic light blue in '87); although the 600 handled slightly better, it was a much more difficult bike to keep on the boil. In the case of the 1000, it looked to me as if cycle parts technology as practised by Honda is just not quite up to the engine (and to a lesser degree the chassis) capability they've reached. As a combination of performance and comfort, it definitely errs on the side of comfort. It's more of a GPZ1000 than a GSX-R1100. And while there's nothing wrong with that, the CBR1000 could never be said to represent the high water mark of megabike motorcycling in 1987.

Mind you, it'll be interesting to see if anyone enters one for the Ultimate Streetbike this year...

