

trail & track

AUSTRALIA'S OFF-ROAD MOTORCYCLING MAGAZINE

June '77 - 80 c

MINI SHOOTOUT

Part 1

Camping on
the cheap

Lectron
Carbys

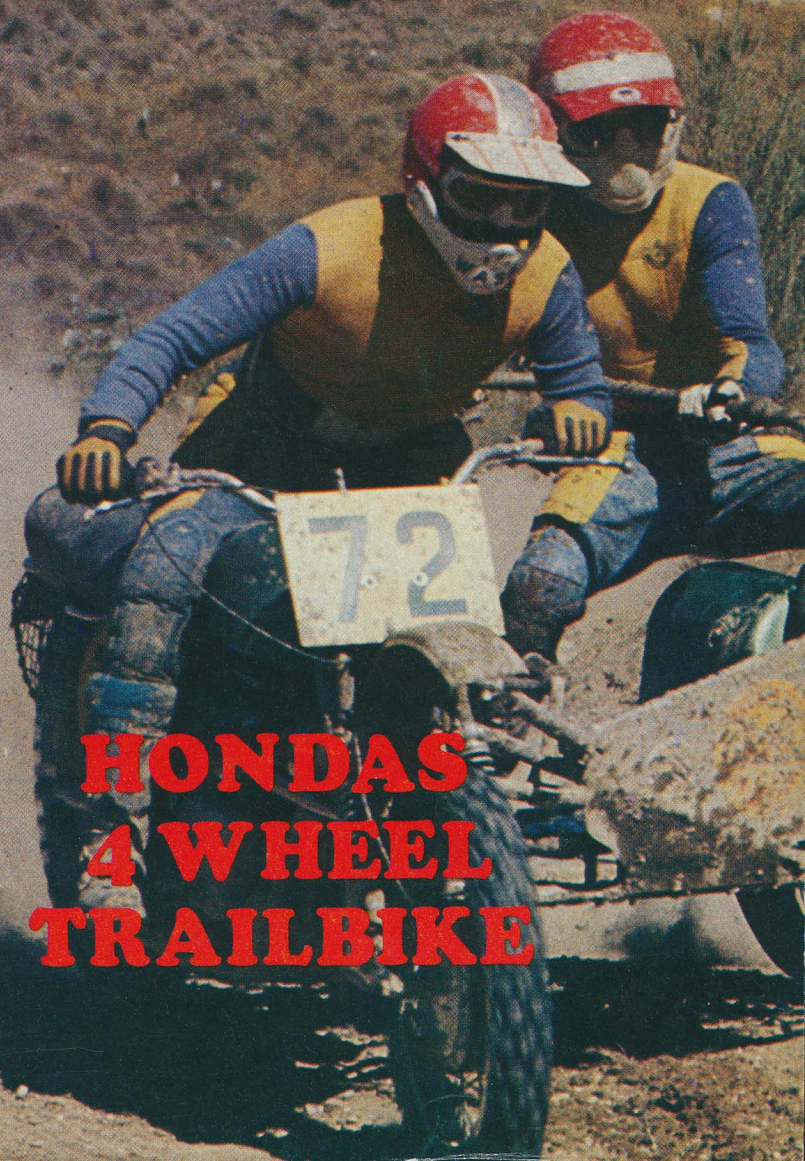
Peter Paice

Honda
500 Trail

SCOOPS

YAMMYS
IT250
ENDURO

HONDAS
4 WHEEL
TRAILBIKE



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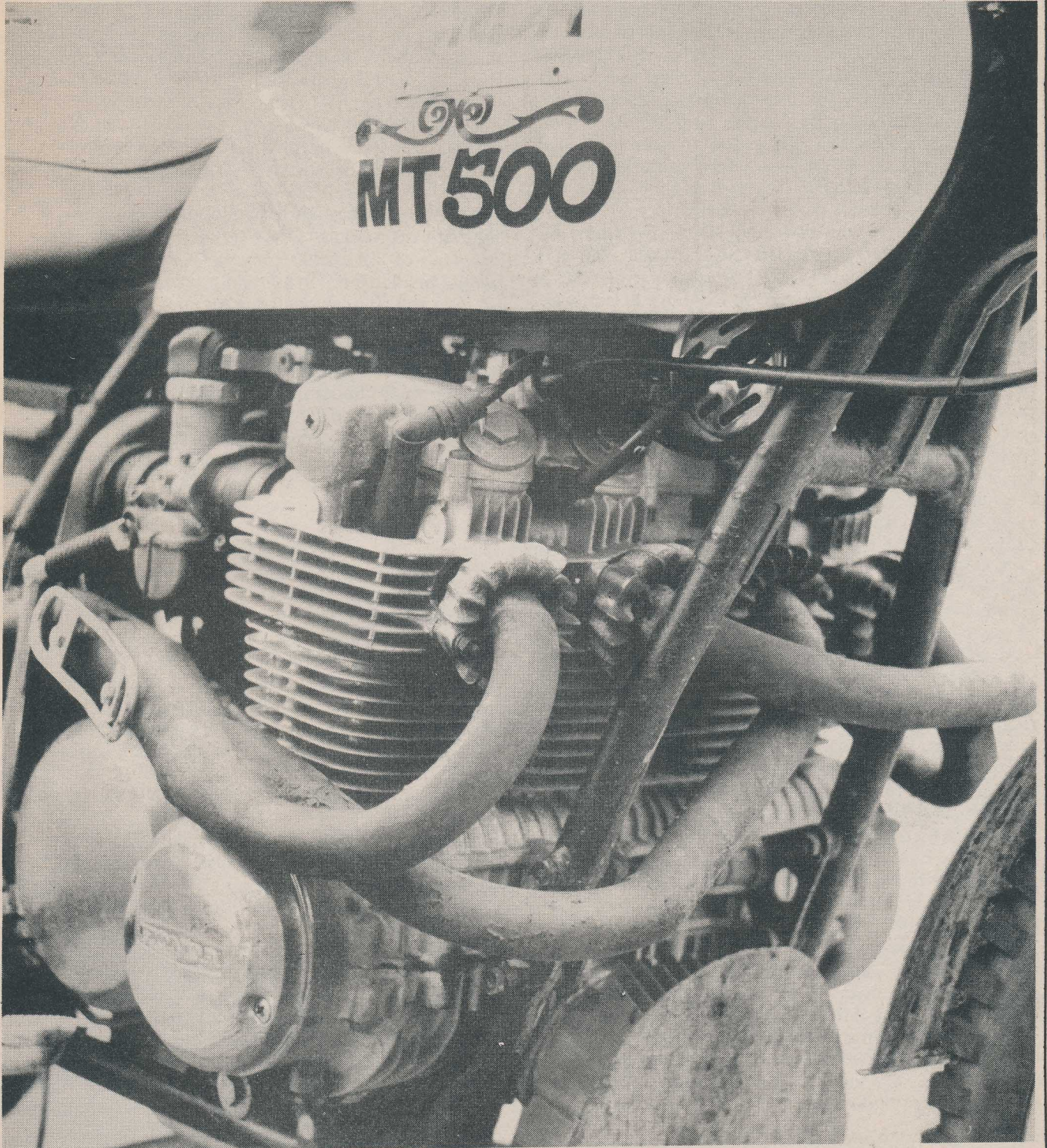
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Howes (Norton 850 Wasp) power up
the hill at Monza, Victoria. Watch for
our special sidecar feature next issue.

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would you believe An MT500 ?



Adelaide bike enthusiast Wally Morgan has a powerhouse machine that shakes up the Adelaide Hills tracks and trails like nothing else.

When you hear it coming - and you can't help but hear the beautiful exhaust roar of a high revving, multi-cylinder four-stroke - you wonder whether it's a trail bike, a souped-up roadie or a bitumen circuit race bike that has somehow found its way into dirt riding country.

In a nutshell: Wal Morgan's special is a little of all three bikes, trail, road and racer. It is a Honda 500 four-cylinder road bike, modified for solo racing and now modified again for trail riding; so it's quite an unusual mount, and quite a beast. And it also shows that the trail biker still has scope to create special one-off machines in an era where road traffic act regulations and Australian Design Rules have shut the doors on highly modified cars and bikes.

The trick Honda trail bike originally came from the factory as a 500-four road bike. Wally Morgan converted it into a road racer. He sold the bike to a Tasmanian road racer who moved to Adelaide last year. Morgan saw the bike and made a successful bid to re-acquire it.

He's tried just about every form of motor cycle sport there is - bitumen and dirt - and is currently campaigning a road race sidecar with his wife Ellen as passenger. But it is only recently he has caught the trail bike bug. Would you believe he fitted some knobblies to his big BMW....but he reckons it was not really at home in the thick mud and sand. So when the Honda 500-four reappeared on the scene he decided to make it his "toy." And what a fantastic chunk of trail bike it is.

It still runs in road race tune. It has a polished head, four Honda 750 carbies and a racing camshaft which help give the motor an estimated output of almost 60 bhp (45 kw). S.A. racer Steve Townsend manufactured some special four-into-two exhausts that run high up along the sides of the bike as needed for off-road conditions. The exhausts not only work well, they sound glorious: enough to turn heads when a fistful of throttle is wound on but not so loud as to become annoying when riding for long spells.

Only because of convenience, a Yamaha 650 road bike rim was used for the back wheels and carries a 4 by 18 Dunlop trail tyre which has already done some big-track racing and has the odd missing knob to prove it. The front wheel has a 3 by 19 Metzeler. Interestingly, the front wheel retains the original single disc brake, an unusual sight on trail bike.

A giant rear cog was put on to shorten the overall gearing, so it's no surprise it has almost frightening get-up-and-go from any rev in any gear. And it still races out to about 145 kph in fifth, which most of us would agree is fast enough for most trails work.

To please the men in blue, mirrors, lights and horn were affixed. A rough steel plate sump guard was fashioned for under the big motor and trail bike handlebars were an obvious necessity.

Wally Morgan has invented the model designation of MT500 for his special Honda and has also painted its nickname "Mean Machine" on the big white metal tank. The first ride on the monster brings home where it got its name from. It has to be kick started as the electric start was removed for road racing. Of course it has to be kick started, everyone thinks, ALL trail bikes are kick started. But not all trail bikes have four high compression pistons to kick over. However, it's a reasonably ready starter so long as the right heel doesn't slam into the pillion foot peg. Ouch.

The MT500 handles well on the bitumen where it has enough power to worry, say, a Kawasaki Z650 roadie. Although there is an obvious limitation with the trail tyres it makes for quick, effortless getting-to-the-trail riding.

The Mean Machine shows its weight and sheer bulk on the tight off-road stuff. It's certainly no trials bike. It's not keen of lifting the front wheel due to the engine weight holding it down so trying to pick the front wheel up over the sharper bumps is just not on - a tweak on the quick action throttle merely makes the bike roar ahead in this sort of work as the rear wheel spits out stones with so much power. The bike bucks about needing much hanging on and determined body work by the rider to keep it in line.

On the smoother dirt trails the Honda special shines. Here its weight makes it stable and steering can be aided by sliding the back wheel under power, speedway style. It has so much power that stepping the back wheel out to the side in a curve is merely a matter of rolling on a bit of throttle. Happily, it all feels very light and is quite controllable in playing Phil Crumps. Although it's best to keep the machine near upright; none of this laying it over to the handlebar tips business, it is too darn heavy to be picked up again.

The sheer power is a real sensation. Given its head, the Honda will start pulling from about 3,500 rpm. At 6,000 rpm the big brute is charging like a mad train and it still goes way past that. The brave (reckless?) riders could see 9,000 rpm on the tacho and Morgan says it has pulled 11,000 rpm in its road racing days! Second gear acceleration is incredible and the others aren't too far behind.

The front disc brake is initially inclined to be treated with a lot of caution because disc brakes are supposed to be very grabby and this was the one that dragged down the MT500's high racing speeds when on the bitumen circuit. Perhaps it may prove too strong for the dirt? But no, the front disc can be called on for some quite heavy work without locking up. It gave good feel too and sure stable braking was possible from high speeds. The rear drum complemented well.

Riding the Honda MT500 Mean Machine is a barrel of fun with so much power on tap, providing there's a good respect held for its weight. Perhaps a few more of this type of trail machine can be prepared before new vehicle regulations finally put the clamp right down.

