

trail & track

AUSTRALIA'S OFF-ROAD MOTORCYCLING MAGAZINE

November '77 - 80 cents

**IT 175
Yamaha**

**New
lightweight
Kwaka**

**Buying
a used bike**



HONDA XL vs KAWA KI

trail & track

November 1977 No. 50

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Station Rd, Cheltenham,
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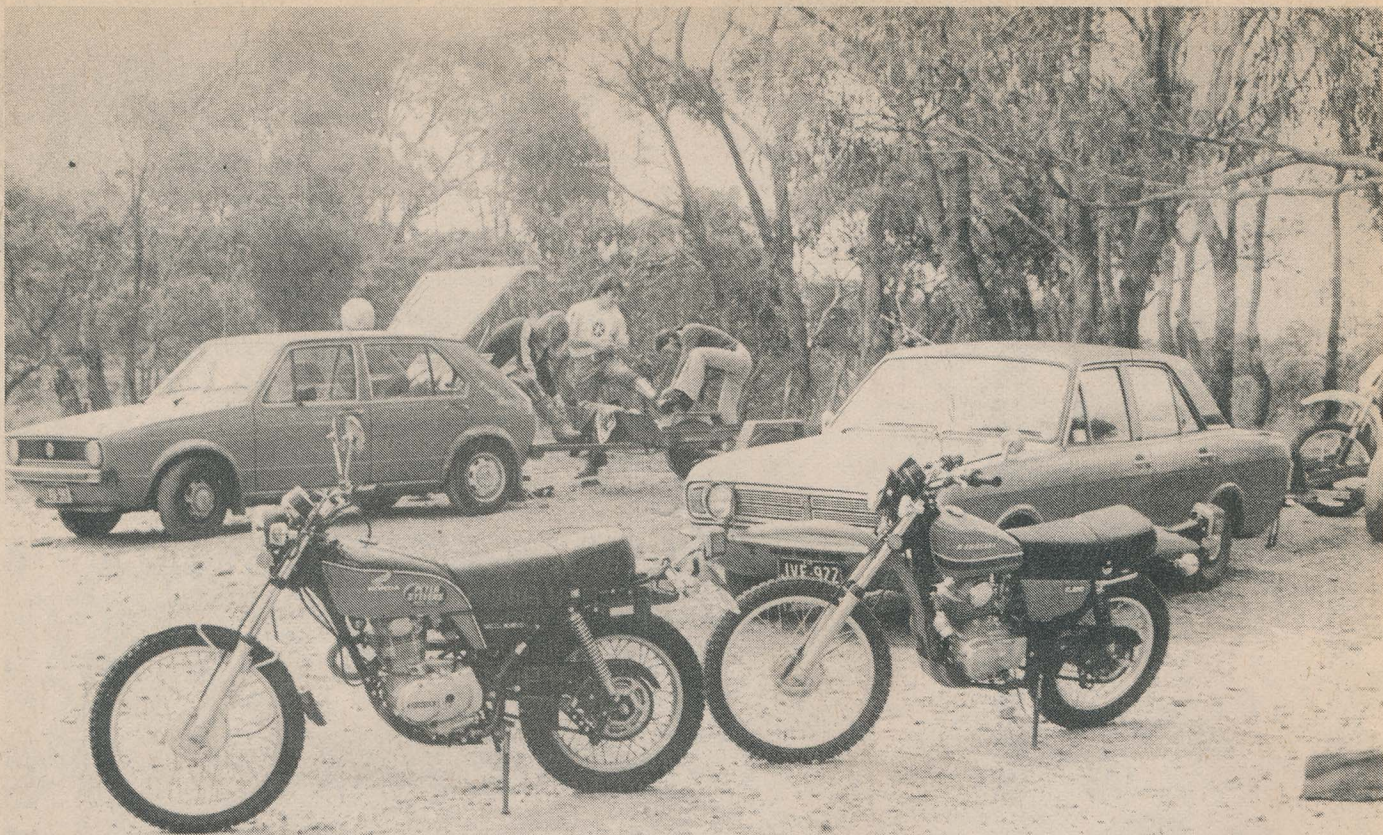
Trail and Track is printed Webb
Offset by Progress Press, Keys Rd,
Moorabbin, Vic.

Comparison:

XL VS. XL

The new boy versus the old stayer. This issue we put Kawasaki's latest off road offering up against Honda's XL250 which has been around now for almost 5 years, to see just what, if anything has been learnt in the last half decade.





We first saw the new Kawasaki KL250 over a coffee and an Arnotts biscuit, when it was released to the "press" before being flown around Australia for various motor shows. Right off we couldn't help but notice the similarities between it and Honda's XL250. Surface similarities that is. Yeah, they're both 4 strokes, sure. But we mean a similarity of intent. They're both designed for the same slice of the market. It's evident right from the start.

The Honda is an off road bike sure. But one with limited off road use. While Yamaha and Suzuki worry about increasing wheel travel, extracting more power, and generally designing their bikes more for the bush and less for the road, the Honda XL250 remains a true 50/50 road trail compromise. Sure its not going to out perform the others on the trail, but then they're not going to out perform it in the Monday to Friday ride to the office. So its horses for courses.

And this is what we felt Kawasaki had come up with as soon as we saw the KL250 4 stroke. A Monday to Friday commuter, that on the weekends you can take trail riding, and as long as you don't expect to

win enduros with it, you will have a lot of fun.

The immediate comparison between the Kawasaki and the Honda were obvious. Not only because both were after the same slice of the bike buying public. Not only because (in Victoria) they were priced exactly the same. But because of the two very different histories. The XL250 was one of the first of the new breed 5 years ago. Our very first XL250 test appeared in Trail and Track number 1, compared alongside 3 bikes now no longer in production.

So we approached this comparison with a lot of interest in whether anything has been learnt in 5 years. Would the Kawasaki prove to be released 5 years too late. Or was the XL 5 years ahead of its time.

Well on the second point the XL was ahead of its time 5 years ago. Before any other trail bikes it had mag-alloy engine cases in an attempt to lose some excess poundage. It had a half width front hub before the other Jap trailsters, alloy rims, and was innovative with its 4 valve head.

So yes, 5 years ago the XL did have features that were later to become standard on almost all road/trail

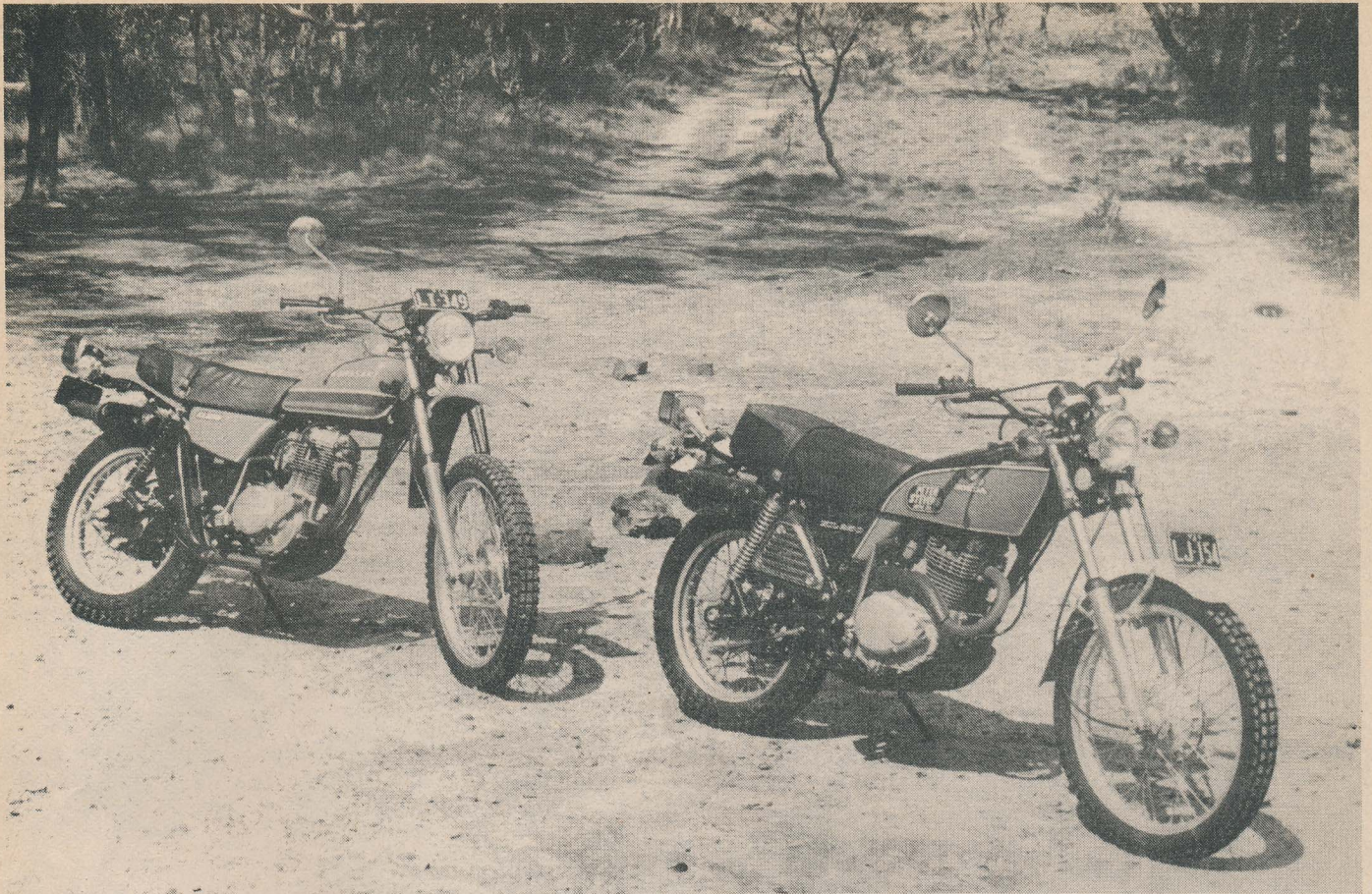
bikes. But anyone who followed dirt bikes knows the incredible advances that have been made (especially by the Japanese) in the last few years. Advances that have meant handling improvements beyond recognition, and better off road power spreads. All these improvements Kawasaki have the benefit of when designing their frame and running gear.

Remembering that both makers weren't after an all out dirt bike, but rather a practical road/trail compromise we began our 250 4 stroke comparo.

BACKGROUND

Kawasaki are no newcomers to the 250 road/trail class. In 1967 the 250cc twin cylinder "Samurai" road bike was also available in a version with upswept pipes. A year later, that historic year of Yamaha's DTI, Kawasaki had their "Sidewinder". An electric start, rotary disc valved single every bit as good as the DTI. Which meant it was too high, under-powered, and handled like a pig in the dirt.

In 1970 came the F8. A vastly improved 250 rotary disc valved trail bike which won the first Sunraysia



desert rally a couple of years later. In 1972 their trail 250 was the F11. By far the best 250 trail bike of its day, and one that should still be sold now. But sadly isn't. A gap remained in the 250cc trail lineup for two years until now.

Honda also put upswept exhaust pipes on their twin cylinder road models to make what were called in the late 60's "street scramblers". They put a restyled seat, tank, mudguards and tyres on their CB350 and called it an SL350. A beast which many people will remember. Their XL250 appeared in 1972 and their first 2 strokes, the CRs, in 1973. Cashing in on the CRs instant motocross success they released their MT250 2 stroke trail bike. It was down on power and didn't handle too well, and faded from the scene 2 years later. Thus the XL250 was left. It was first the K1, then the K2, K3 and the latest in the K4. It got one major facelift in K3 stage, doing away with the old silver grey paint job, and round petrol tank. At the same time it has had a number of small internal mods to improve it over the years.

Externally, both engines look similar. Inside however they are very

different. The Honda has their famous 4 valve head, using 2 inlet and 2 exhaust valves. The Kawasaki simply has a 2 valve head. The Honda has a much longer stroke of 74mm, compared with a bore size of 58mm. Against this the Kawasaki has a shorter stroke of 70mm with a bore size of 64mm. So on paper at least the Kawasaki should have the quicker responding engine, while the Honda should have more torque.

Both, in fact, claim equal horsepower of 21 and torque at 2.1 kg-m.

The Honda has magnesium alloy engine cases. The Kawasaki does not. Both have 28mm Keihin carburettors, and both were able to return in excess of 100 kilometres per gallon.

As far as running gear goes, neither machine could be accused of being extra "trick". We've known the XL for a long time, and we know its a docile STREET/trail bike, but we did sort of expect the Kawasaki to maybe have a few "goodies". Like gas rear shocks, leading axle forks or even just quick detachable lighting for easier converting before the weekends trail ride. Unfortunately its not to be. As far as trick goodies go, both bikes are

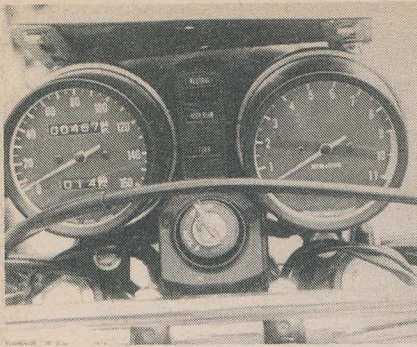
ordinary to the point of being boring.

Instrumentation is standard Japanese style on both bikes, although a plus in the Hondas favour is that its speedo and tachometer can be more easily removed. Both machines have long metal blinker arms which will bend or snap easily with hard trail use. A minus to the Kawasaki is the fact that there are no connections in the rear blinker wires, so removal for trail riding is difficult.

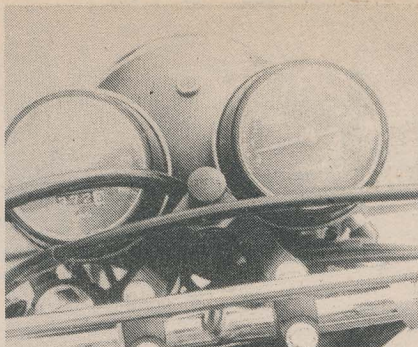
Both bikes have very large, and very quiet two stage mufflers. While the Honda's comes back through the frame, the Kawasakis loops down, like the early model XT Yamahas, and so is more susceptible to a dent from a sharp rock.

Both petrol tanks are steel. The Hondas is larger, holding an extra 2.7 litres. Also the Honda has a tank cap breather.

Due to the Hondas through the frame type of exhaust, the tool box is hung from the rear frame member. The Kawasakis is a plastic box under the battery. Half way through our test the end vibrated off, and the tool bag rattled our and was lost. Also the tool box end held on the plastic sidecover, which flapped from then on.



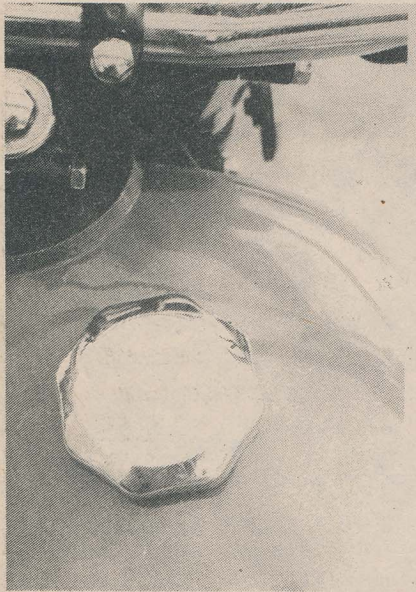
Very "roady"



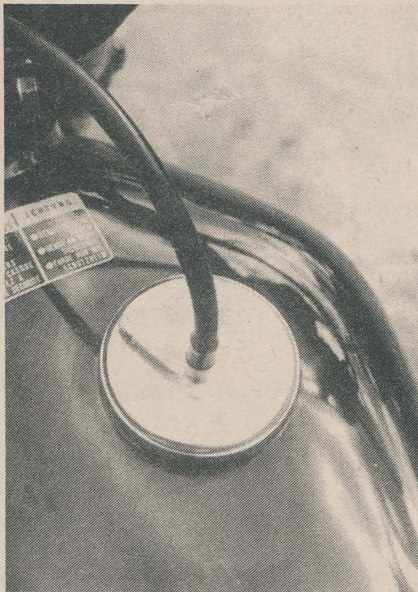
Hondas simpler layout.



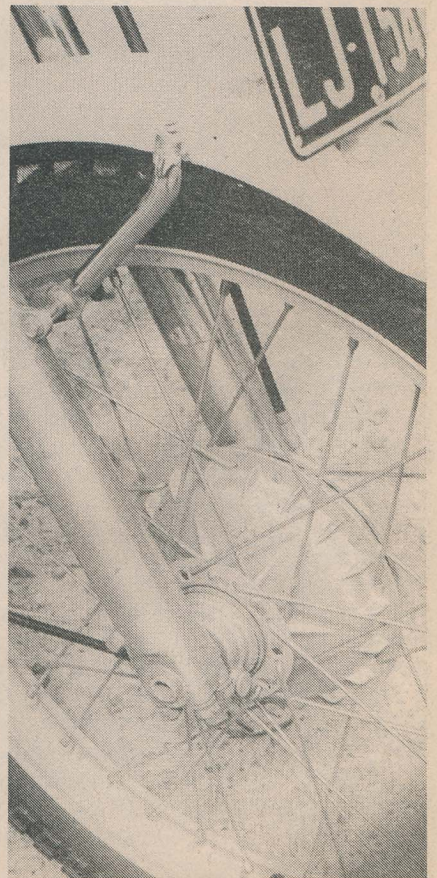
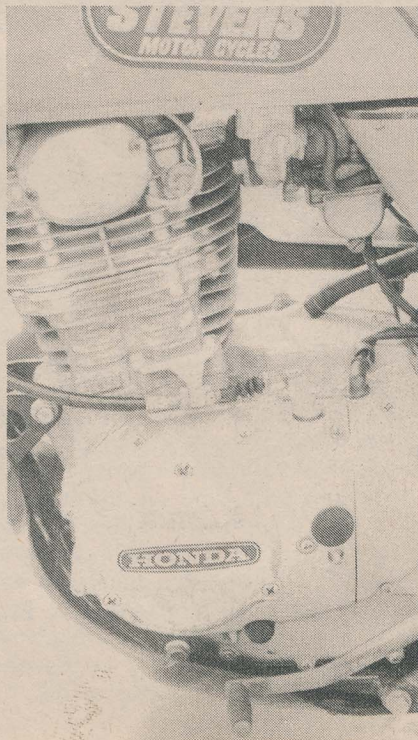
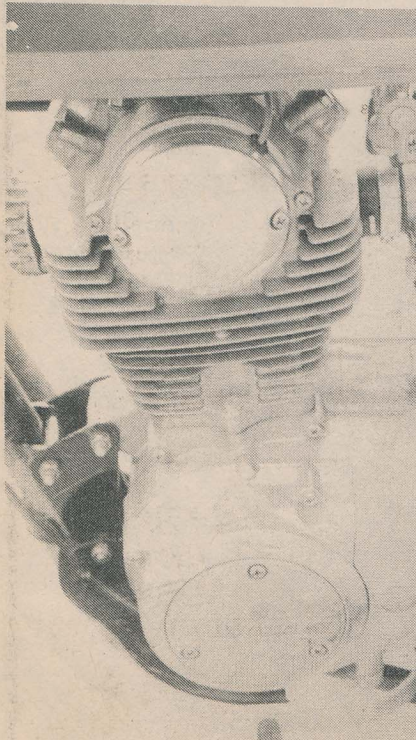
Front ends are very similar. Note the Hondas low mudguard.



No breather on the Kawasaki.



The top of Hondas noticeably larger fuel tank.



specification:

	Kawasaki	Honda
MAKE	Kawasaki	Honda
MODEL	KL250	XL250
PRICE	\$1,159	\$1,159
CATEGORY	road/trail	road/trail
engine	OHC single, 4 stroke	OHC 4 stroke
bore x stroke	70 x 64mm	74 x 57.8
capacity	246cc	248cc
compression ratio	8.9:1	9.1:1
carburettor	Keihin	Keihin
lubrication	wet sump	wet sump
starting	primary kick	primary kick
ignition	magneto	magneto
TRANSMISSION	5 speed	5 speed
clutch	wet, multiplate	wet multiplate
ratios (internal) 1	2.64	2.35
2	1.73	1.66
3	1.30	1.28
4	1.05	1.00
5	0.88	.80
frame	single cradle	single cradle
castor	61 degrees	n.a.
trail	127mm	n.a.
suspension (front)	telescopic fork	telescopic fork
damping	oil	oil
travel	185mm	180.34
suspension (rear)	swinging arm	swinging arm
damping	oil	oil
stroke	110mm	106mm
brakes front	140mm s.l.s.	164mm s.l.s.
rear	150mm s.l.s.	152mm s.l.s.
tyres front	300 x 21	300 x 21
rear	400 x 18	400 x 18
DIMENSIONS		
wheelbase	1400mm	1409.7mm
ground clearance	205mm	259mm
weight	125 kg.	135 kg.
tank capacity	8.8 litres	11.5 litres

Neither machine had a rear mudguard long enough to pass Victorian registration requirements, and some sort of mudflap was needed. Up front the Kawasaki sported an unbreakable plastic mudguard which was quite efficient for average trail needs, while the Honda had a low mounted type which might be needed to get past registration legislation in some states, but isn't really very useful in muddy conditions.

The Kawasaki makes more extensive use of plastic and this is one of the reasons that ready to go its over 15 pounds lighter than the Honda. The other main reason is that the Hondas 4 valve head weighs more

Even though both bikes have similar wheelbases of 1,400mm (or about 55.5 inches) their geometry is different. The Honda has less trail, so its steering is quicker. On the trail it feels much more front heavy than the Kawasaki, which we feel has the better dimensions. The Kawasaki feels longer, even though it isn't, and both its road and trail stability seem steadier.

Both machines have oil damped front forks. The Kawasakis suspension stroke is 185mm compared with the Hondas 180mm. A difference of less than a quarter of an inch. Springing, although we couldn't find out the exact spring rates, is very similar. Both are typically soft road/trail front ends.

Rear suspension stroke is almost identical too: Kawasaki 100mm; Honda 107mm. The Kawasaki's shockers have two springs for true twin rate springing.

We began our riding by putting some around town miles on both machines. Engine wise both behaved very much alike. They would pull well from very low down, and accelerate up through the revs with a very flat power curve. Neither showed excessive power response high in the rev range like the DT250 D Yamaha or TS250 B Suzukis do.

In straight acceleration tests on bitumen, the Kawasaki had the edge, and would pull in front.

We considered as around town machines, from a number of other points of view as well.

Vibration: With trials universal tyres, and road going tyre pressures, small tingling vibration could be felt, but on neither bike was it enough to



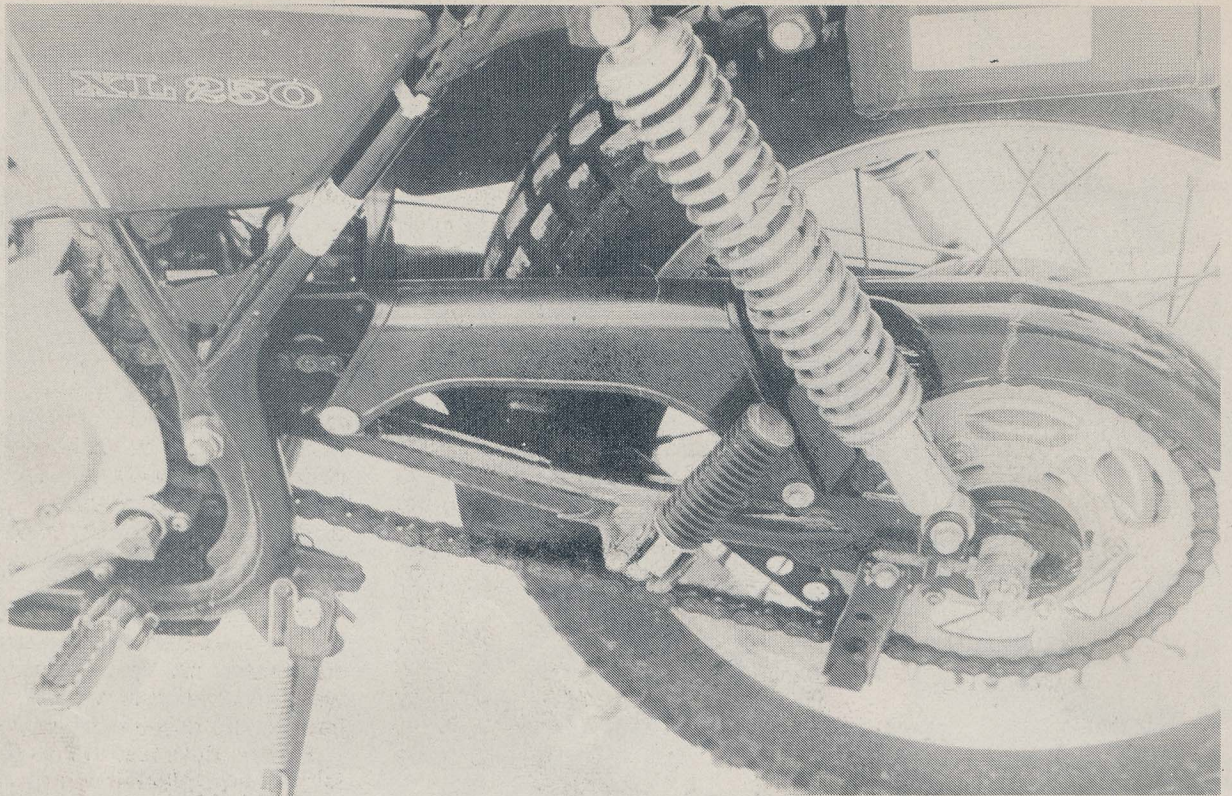
worry about.

Suspension: On both machines the suspension was more than adequate for commuting where suspension is not so critical. The soft trail type of springs made both machines very comfortable. In some corners, when we were braking and changing lines quickly both machines had a tendency to wallow about slightly as their front ends dipped and extended. This is compared, of course, to road machinery, whose shorter travel and firmer springs are set up for flatter bitumen surfaces.

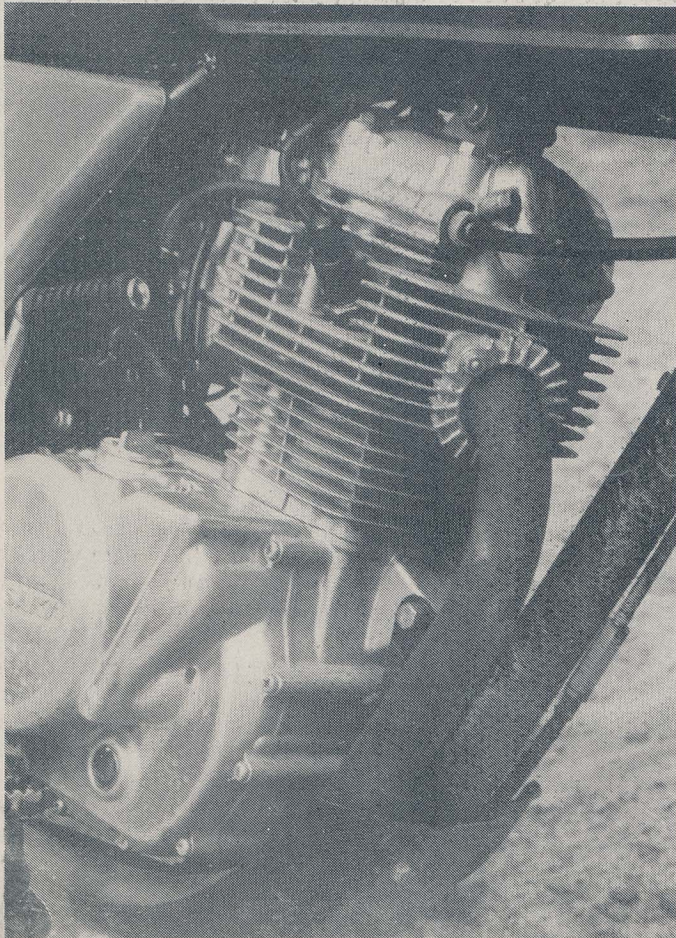
As a direct comparison between the two machines we'd say we preferred the feel of the Kawasaki, as it seemed to remain steadier at all times.

Brakes: We've been over the brake thing before. All brakes are a compromise between sensitivity and power. On any brake operated by a small handlebar lever you can't have loads on non fading power and expect the sort of sensitivity feel that will allow you not to lock the brakes up on gravelly or dirt surfaces. The reason road bikes use disc brakes,





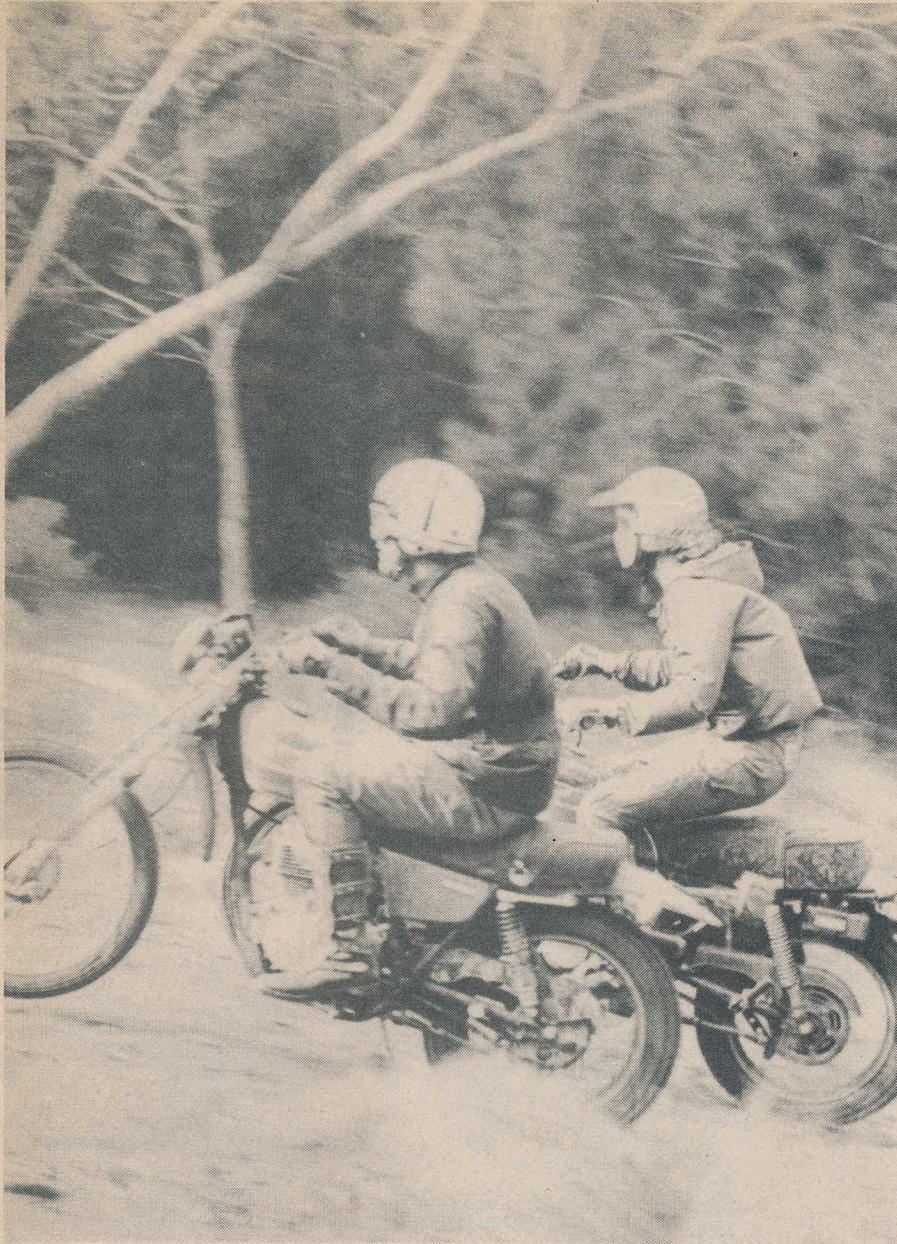
A very ordinary rear end.



Kawasaki more responsive engine.



Honda magnesium, 4 valve wonder.



and dirt bikes use drum brakes).

The brakes on the Kawasaki and the Honda are remarkably similar, both in design and performance. On bitumen both were able to slow rapidly repeatedly before they began to fade. Under normal operation they will be adequate and quite safe.

Comfort: Both bikes are very comfortable, with good seats, grips, and general layout. A few people expressed the opinion that they didn't like the shape of the Kawasaki handlebars.

But while the machines feel very much alike on the road it's only once we got them into the dirt that the small differences became magnified. The main points we felt were these.

Starting: Cold both bikes would start easily with a little choke. Hot the Honda sometimes had the tendency to be a bit difficult. Either bike could be push started easily, as their 4 stroke compression wasn't so great as to lock the back wheel in 2nd or 3rd gear.

Power: Here's where we always enjoy riding a 4 stroke in the dirt. They could be trickled along, ticking over in 1st gear all day long without loading up. Meandering along slow trails was very easy and very relaxing. Power from either is the super quick, back snapping responsiveness one can expect from a 2 stroke, but it's quick enough for any riding situation these two bikes will get into. Of the

two the Kawasaki seemed to increase its revs with a little more speed, due no doubt to its shorter engine stroke. Through their well spaced 5 speed gearboxes they could get mobile enough to test the rest of the bike, and the rider to the full. Higher in the rev range there was no sudden come on of power. They both just accelerated quickly and evenly. Very predictable as far as this goes.

Handling: Here we thought the Kawasaki had the advantage for two reasons. Its lighter weight, and its front end geometry. In terms of riding the Honda felt much heavier at the front, because it steered quicker, changing line suddenly whereas the Kawasaki felt more stable. It stayed on line better, tracking straight over ruts and bumps, and at the same time the front end felt lighter. The rear ends hopped around a lot, but this is to be expected with such basic suspension set ups. On neither bike was it so bad that we had to keep backing off, or get into trouble.

Brakes: Both rear brakes locked up fairly easily. Neither were great, but then neither were as bad as some we've tested. The front brakes were both very good. In this area we couldn't really separate the machines.

Comfort: Neither bike we'd like to ride flat out day after day, because their weight would make them quite fatiguing compared with a good 250 enduro. Nevertheless they were good to ride all day at average trail riding speeds.

Fixtures: We've already talked about these, and it's the area where we think the Honda wins out. It's got the bigger fuel tank, and the lights that come off easier. Actually both factories could benefit from a good long look at a Yamaha DT250 D.

CONCLUSION:

Normally we'd have to take price into consideration, but as (in Victoria) both bikes have the same recommended retail of \$1,159 we don't have to.

So for us it would be the Kawasaki. Why?

Well it's not 5 years ahead of the Honda by any means. In fact there's a few lessons we'd have thought Kawasaki would have learnt by now (like those rear indicators, which should be easy to remove). But for us these things are minor compared to weight, power and handling, and here Kawasaki have done their homework.