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TWO WHEELS

JUNE, 1979

STEPTHROUGHS:
A Shootout
To Find What's
Sacrificed For
Economy

**THE '79 STYLE
DIRT IRONS**

- MONTESA 360
- YAMAHA IT400F
- HONDA'S
XL/XR500s

Plus:
ANA BRANCH:
**OUR WILDEST
SOCIAL
TRAIL RIDE**



two wheels

Volume 20, No. 4, JUNE 1979

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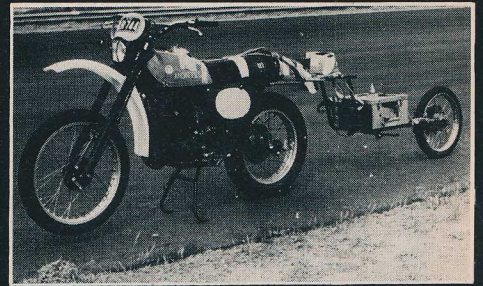
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Would you believe this Montesa is being tortured? See page 16.

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HONDA

XL500S



HONDA'S 500 SINGLES

They left us with just one burning question: "WHY BOTHER?"

It would be difficult to find two more contrasting standards than those set by the new Hondas. The 750 Four, our lead story test machine, is genuinely brilliant.

There are also significant improvements in the new XL/XR off-riders — but that doesn't save the 500s.

After wringing out a couple of pre-production bikes, the best we could hope for was the unlikelihood that their imminent ADR compliance surgery would transform the beasts to something beautiful . . .

IN RECENT years Honda Motor Company has been labelled with the lot: anything from "master of innovation" to "bogged down by conservatism", Machinery such as the earliest CR250M, the CX500, and even the current CBX megabike bear testimony to the extent of Honda's capabilities, while best-forgotten ventures such as the CB350 Four, the CB500T and the MT125/250 are products even Honda does not wish to recall.

Consider the modern Japanese motorcycle: a result of market demand keyed to production feasibility. Hence the Elsinore survived and thrived in a booming and unexploited marketplace while the CB mini-Four faded into obscurity.

It was Yamaha which predicted the demand for a large-capacity four-stroke single-cylinder dirt bike and introduced the nostalgic TT500C. The TT (and its XT derivative) were shrewd marketing; Yamaha is undoubtedly the best marketer of *timely* and *stylish* two-wheelers. The TT theme boomed — straight into a growing street/trail interest of the simple and straight-

forward let's-play-it-again-Sam good old days style bike riding. Well, not quite, but the Yamaha was nearly that. And it sure did more to satiate the lustings of the "thumper" freaks than big-bore kitted XL350s (often a 420 cm³ version crammed into a CR250 frame).

Although equipped with both side and front number plates the TT was obviously no motocrosser; witness the boom in the model's aftermarket swingarms, suspension, front forks and allied accessories. But it also had no lights, no speedo and no brake light switch or oversized fuel tank so it failed to cut it in the enduro scene. It did however have a lighting coil, wide ratio gearing and sufficient torque to harvest legends.

All that in a bike which inherently suffered total loss in long term marketing direction. When the initial (and limited) hordes of singles freaks had already signed up for their TTs, who would then be left to continue the interest and profitability in the model? The motocrossers? Sorry! The enduro freaks? No way! The playriders? They had

one already and didn't want to know!

In the winter of '79, some five models after the original TT Yamaha, Honda has made the big-bore scene with *two* specialist machines. Its newest four-valver is aimed directly at the hard core enduro market; an area where the company is obviously confident it will score both a direct hit on the existing two-stroke opposition and also a blast below the TT500's waterline. To reinforce the assault there's also an XT challenger in Honda's newest XL, the XL500S.

Significantly, both machines should carry ADR compliance plates and be registerable when they become available. The two machines loaned to us for evaluation by Bennett Honda (NSW) were both pre-production models based on earlier prototypes and neither machine was fitted with the compliance plates needed for local registration. Our only "road" impressions were those obtained during a short stint on a private farm access road in north-west NSW. All other major testing was conducted in our own favorite riding area and the 320 hectares of Hungry Creek Motorcycle Park.

The XR/XL 500 is Honda's first attempt at infiltrating the over-350 cm³ dirt bike market. The company's record in four-stroke trail development is as conservative as it is successful, with both the XL250 and XL350 firmly established with a hard core group of riders who'd rather "fight than switch".

Lots in common

As in the Yamaha singles, the XR and XL models share a similar design concept with both frame and engine near-identical and interchangeable. The cloning doesn't stop there; both wheels, hubs, brakes and front forks are also common as well as triple clamps, footpegs, rear swingarm dimensions and many other minor hardware items. The burden of street legality raises the XL's weight from the XR's 123 kg to 135 kg (we weighed both bikes dry). The added flab of battery, bulky exhaust plumbing, some added steel hardware and more refined lighting gear place the XL on a similar weight scale to the Yamaha XT500.

As one rider commented after spending a few hours with the Hondas: "If the XL was as light as the XR, and the XR was just a little lighter, I'd be rapt".

Considering the benefits of modern suspension systems in terms of both performance and rider comfort we're inclined to offer an alternative assessment. Our test file shows that the original Honda XL350 hit the scales at well over 141 kg with only 15.9 kW to provide the punch and suspension performance that could best be described as "Okay, maybe; but don't tell us if you fall off".

The new XL500 shaves several kilos off the smaller, older XL, adds more than 50 percent to the 350's dyno figures and has suspension advanced in extreme to that of the "Great Days Of The XL350".

Both 500s also share many design features introduced on the heavily-revised XL250S and the subsequent XR250 and XR185 models. The "diamond" frame, which uses the powerplant as a stress-bearing frame member, is virtually identical in dimension to that of the lighter and less potent XR250.

The welded, mild steel frame carries a totally new four valve, dual exhaust port version of the proven sohc Honda single. Bore and stroke dimensions (89 × 80 mm) are in no way related to the 79 × 71 mm statistics of the XL350, and are indicative of a higher-revving potential than the comparatively long-stroked Yamaha singles. No power claim is made for the XL but the slightly more breathed-upon XR, with its free-flow enduro exhaust system is claimed at 26 kW at 6000 rpm with maximum torque at a mere 5500! Yamaha's TT reaches its maximum torque at identical rpm, but with only 20.8 kW on call it's at a 25 percent disadvantage over the more potent XR500 motor.

Honda's latest half-litres feature maintenance-free CDI ignition and an in-built decompression device for starting. Unlike the Yamaha set-up, Honda's is geared directly to the kickstart lever. There are no

handlebar-mounted levers or "kick now" windows. The Honda's compression bleed-off valve is engaged as soon as the kickstarter begins its arc of travel but the unit fitted to our XR was temperamental in early testing. It returned to form later but even then the XL was a far easier starter at all times. Honda's set-up means the decompression device is useless as a clutch start aid if either of the big singles is stalled during a steep descent on a rocky slope. The TT/XT device is far more versatile and apparently with fewer inherent problems.

But something's wrong

Excluding the problems encountered with the XR's decompression valve, both bikes cold-started with a minimum sweat during the test period. Carburetion on both machines left a lot to be desired though. The two bikes ran roughly on long, loose climbs and would stall instantly when riders grab



Honda's latest XL variant features the much-advertised 23 in. front wheel and many design features of the lighter XR500. Bike is nevertheless a BIG machine!



The visual appeal of the XR range carries over to the 500 cm³ version. Finish is Honda red, complete with the detail features characteristic of the make.

bed a handful of gas in an emergency. For smooth, casual playracing, fire trail sliding sessions and even some none-too-casual battles against our KX250-A5 test bike the XR ran superbly, while even the less serious XL performed crisply and evenly. But again on rough downhill runs both bikes would stall suddenly and become almost impossible to fire without a bump start!

We tackled some rocky hillclimbs and were consistently disappointed by the XR's poor response and almost unusable power in the rough. Low speed climbing over loose rocks was far too demanding for even the more experienced test riders, all of whom felt that the constant surging and uneven power flow was the 500's biggest drawback. The same situation is not unknown on the Yamaha XT/TT models and is one major reason for the machines' lack of popularity in enduro events. With the Hondas it was just that little worse!

On anything but broken terrain climbs the Hondas are veritable jets by comparison to both the SP370 Suzuki and Yamaha 500s. On our test bikes anywhere where the riding situation did not call for trials-like throttle control and extreme low rpm response the XR/XL motor delivered more than adequate punch.

Spreading the muscle of the new Honda powerplant is a rugged, smooth-shifting five-speeder with a range of ratios well-suited to the XR's alleged enduro orientation. The XL receives a taller final drive (a la XT Yamaha) and does not benefit the small amount saved by the XR's light alloy rear sprocket. It uses a heavier (and presumably cheaper to replace!) steel item. Both bikes use recessed Allen head bolts to mount the sprockets to lightweight alloy brake hubs, but constant vibration and punishment resulted in one loose sprocket bolt on the XR, along with

one missing and several more badly loosened on the XL.

A quickly-removable rear brake torque rod is used for both machines. It simply slides into a tapered slot on the brake backing plate. The rod itself is a light alloy extrusion on the XR, with a heavier steel tube doing service on the less exotic XL. Rear wheel removal is quick and easy and will partially compensate for the hassles which most riders are likely to encounter with the flimsy six-ply Bridgestone "claw pattern" tyres of the XR. As in our test of the XR250, a split tyre sidewall occurred on the XR500 rear tyre!

Enduro? Who's kidding whom?

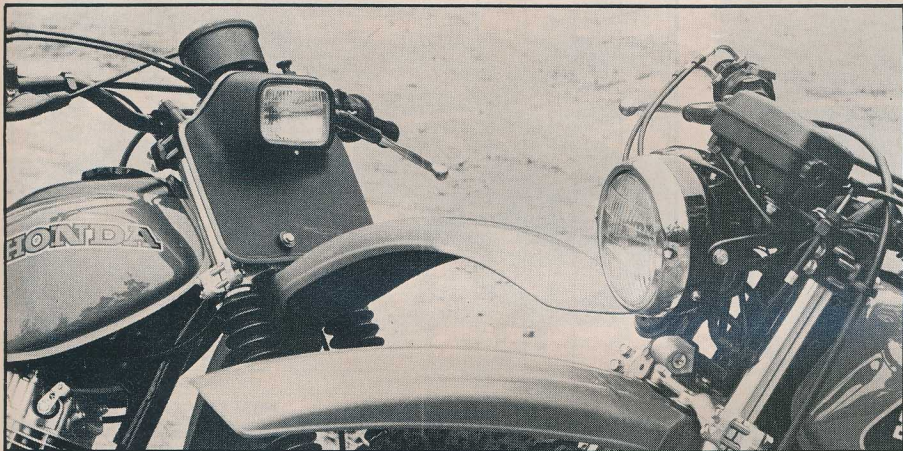
Light alloy rims are fitted with time-wasting rimlocks on the XR in lieu of the more desirable rim screws or Sun-type rim studs. On the XL they make good sense, as they do on any *trailbike*, but they're simply far too time-consuming for enduro work. Our views on the new six-ply "claw-o-cross" tyres have not changed since our encounter with the XR250. In the wet they're hopelessly inadequate and soon clog with mud and gloop. Over dry rocks, through sand or on a fast, dry trail they're adequate only — and of course proved constantly prone to sidewall failure. The trials universal patterned equivalents fitted to the XL are as good as any other "compromise" tyre type available on the market. None of our test crew had any plans to swear off Metzlers after the encounter with the new Japanese rubber.

Front suspension has received the forward axle treatment common to both the XR185 and XR250. Both bikes use seemingly identical fork legs mounted in cast triple clamps with rugged dual bolt mountings. Handlebars are rearset from the top fork yoke and no air caps are fitted to allow any adjustment of front fork spring rate.

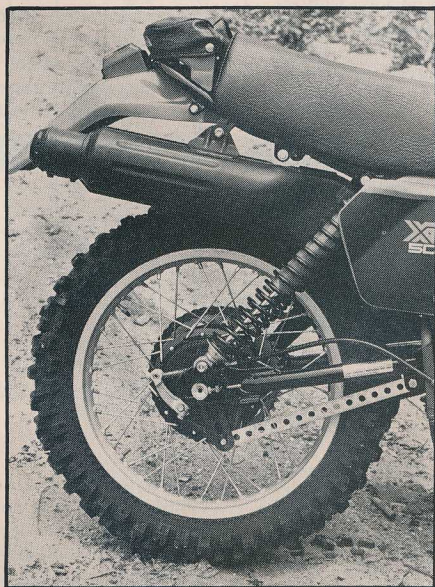
The use of springs of different rate and free length gives a variation of around 24 mm in front end travel between the XR and XL, with the enduro bike best at around 224 mm. Rubber fork boots are an added bonus for the XR buyer, as is improved damping and overall suspension better-suited to serious dirt riding. By comparison the XL feels poorly damped as well as oversprung, with little of the exacting feedback which is available through the XR's front end. Both bikes use Honda's latest image-builder, the 23 in. front wheel. As we reported in our XR250 test, the wheel gives improved steering control over rocky ground but even that translates poorly when the XR's disappointing throttle response is considered under the same circumstances.

Gas/oil shocks mounted at approximately 45 degrees are fitted to the extreme rear of the swingarm on both machines. The XR uses a heavier, large-volume bodied unit which allows 198 mm of wheel travel, while the inverted, lighter-duty shocks of the XL permit 180 mm of movement for the 18 in. rear wheel.

Ground clearance is adequate on the street/trail XL with 255 mm available between the ground and the lowest point of the heavy duty aluminium sumpguard. The longer-suspended XR offers the rider an added 25 mm and the blessings of a larger,



Head-on comparisons mark simplicity of XR against ADR-legal XL500 equipment. XR headlamp is adequate and compact and instrumentation effective. But Honda is working on making the XR registerable.



The bulk of the street. XL street/trail rear end (left) features bulkier muffler/spark arrestor, ADR legal lighting, flexi-mount blinkers and steel inner guard. Steel torque arm and less refined suspension are disappointing touches! The more refined XR rear end carries small, light toolpouch, plastic guard and still bulky muffler. Suspension performance outstrips that of both the XL and Yamaha's latest TT/XT models.

Honda XL500S and XR500 Enduro



Note: Both our pre-production bikes lacked ADR compliance but Honda's advice is that both will be registrable by their release later this month. Specifications may then differ slightly.

In this table the XR specifications are shown in brackets where different.

ENGINE

Single-cylinder air-cooled SOHC four-stroke with four valves per cylinder and dual exhaust ports and header pipes. Pressed together crank with ball bearing mains, needle roller big end and plain little end serving three-ring piston. Engine uses a pair of chain-driven balancers and wet sump lubrication. CDI ignition and primary kick-start incorporating automatic decompression.

Claimed power	26 kW at 6500 rpm
Claimed torque	40 Nm at 5500 rpm
Bore × stroke	89 × 80 mm
Displacement	498 cm ³
Compression ratio	8.6:1
Maximum engine speed	7000 rpm
Carburetion	1 × Keihin 34 mm (1 × 35 mm)
Air filtration	Oiled polyurethane
Ignition	CDI

DIMENSIONS

Dry weight (actual)	135 kg (123 kg)
Seat height, bike unloaded	860 mm (880 mm)
Wheelbase	1300 mm
Ground clearance	255 mm (280 mm)
Width	890 mm (875 mm)
Footpeg height	280 mm (305 mm)
Fuel capacity (inc reserve)	10 litres

FRAME AND BRAKES

Welded mild steel diamond frame using engine as stressed unit. Roller bearing mounted tubular steel swing arm with laid down nitrogen gas-charged inverted shocks. Single leading shoe drum brakes front and rear, cable and rod operated respectively. Leading axle front forks housing 23 in. front wheel, aluminium alloy upper and lower triple clamps.

Front suspension travel	200 mm (224 mm)
Rear suspension wheel travel	180 mm (198 mm)
Fork rake	28.5 deg
Fork trail	138 mm
Front tyre	3.00 × 23 in. Honda "claw pattern" on shoulderless alloy rim
Rear tyre	4.60 × 18 in. "claw pattern" on shoulderless alloy rim

TRANSMISSION

Geared primary drive to wet, multiplate clutch. Five-speed constant mesh gearbox with one down, four up pattern. Left side shift.

Internal ratios:	
First	2.462
Second	1.647
Third	1.250
Fourth	1
Fifth	0.840
Primary reduction:	2.379
Secondary reduction:	2.786 (3.429)

TEST MACHINE

Manufacturer	Honda Motor Co., Japan
Test machine	Bennett Honda, Tempe, NSW

SUMMARY XL500S

RATINGS

	Poor	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Outstanding
ENGINE					
Responsiveness		●			
Smoothness		●			
Low rev power			●		
Midrange power				●	
Top end power					●
Fuel economy				●	
Starting				●	
Quietness				●	
TRANSMISSION					
Clutch				●	
Gearbox operation				●	
Ratio suitability				●	
Drivetrain freerplay			●		
SUSPENSION					
Front			●		
Rear			●		
Front/rear match			●		
DIRT RIDING					
Ground clearance			●		
Steering (overall)				●	
Braking on dirt				●	
Sliding			●		
Jumping			●		
Hillclimbing		●			
Slow, nadjery work		●			
Ease of throwing around			●		
Ability to forgive rider error			●		
STREET RIDING					
Riding position				●	
Seat comfort				●	
Ride comfort				●	
Highest cruising speed				●	
Touring range				●	
Street handling (overall)				●	
Stability at speed			●		
Braking on tar			●		
Tyres			●		
GENERAL					
Location of controls			●		
Lighting				●	
Rearview mirrors			●		
Toolkit			●		
Quality of finish				●	
Overall styling				●	

SUMMARY XR500

RATINGS

	Poor	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Outstanding
ENGINE					
Responsiveness		●			
Smoothness		●			
Low rev power			●		
Midrange power				●	
Top end power					●
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Starting			●		
Quietness				●	
TRANSMISSION					
Clutch				●	
Gearbox operation				●	
Ratio suitability				●	
Drivetrain freerplay		●			
SUSPENSION					
Front				●	
Rear				●	
Front/rear match				●	
DIRT RIDING					
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Braking on tar			●		
Tyres		●			
GENERAL					
Location of controls			●		
Lighting			●		
Rearview mirrors			●		
Toolkit				●	
Quality of finish				●	
Overall styling				●	

Best points: The XR has good handling for such a large machine. It presents a well-matched frame and suspension and broad and strong powerband (after tuning!). Pleasing detail such as rear-mounted tool pouch and folding gearshift and brake lever tips. Generally shows stronger intentions than Yamaha's TT. The XL by comparison is no great revolution in dirt bike design, either on its own or compared to rivals.

Worst points: Our text reports numerous problems with throttle response and starting which we assume will be rectified by Honda on production machines. There is room for refinement of the basic XL package. The XR could benefit from more serious tyres as an option.

light alloy sumpguard with greater engine side protection. Folding tips on both gear and brake levers are included on the XR, but not on the XL. It uses the hardware common to older XL models.

Rear suspension performance is aligned predictably to the bike's roles. The superior XR units give more precise damping control and springing which is far more suited to the bike's intended role: Low speed action is, however, harsh by comparison to the

XR250's and none of our lighter riders was impressed. The stiff springing will suit only the fastest of cross country riders and production models will need a rethink of rear spring rates. The XL's rear suspension treads the traditional line of compromise between street and low-key trail performance. For casual trail riding it's okay — little more — and does not mark any significant development. It goes up and down and has few bad manners, points which only a

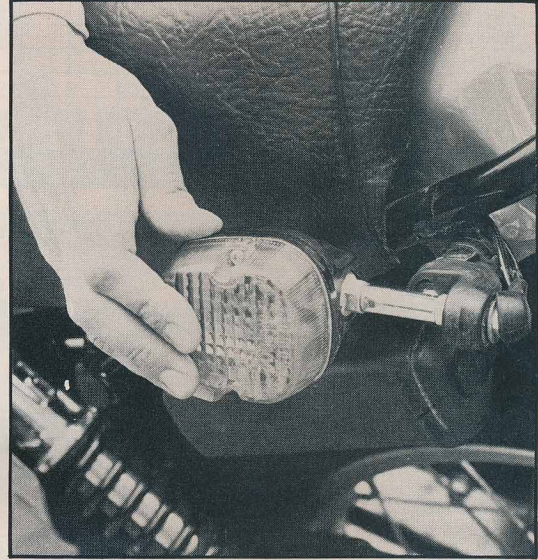
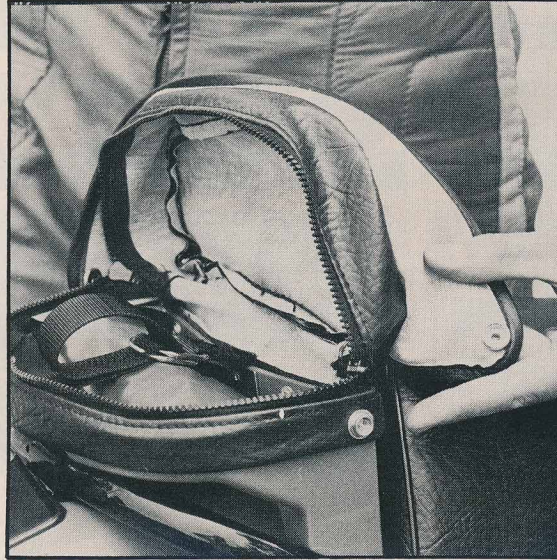
few other manufacturers can legitimately claim for their soft-core dirt bikes!

The detail's the best point

Surprisingly, the 10-litre fuel tank capacity is common to both bikes and only a change of graphics distinguishes the hard-core from the soft. A wide, easily-filled spout carries a common twist-n-lift filler cap while the XR tank receives an added dose of "No Passenger" and "Preserve Nature"

Far right: Flexi-mount blinkers are effective but bulky compared to Yamaha's XT/DT items.

Right: Toolpouch in "showerproof" vinyl holds basic tools and some minor spares. Press studs break easily and need some rethink.



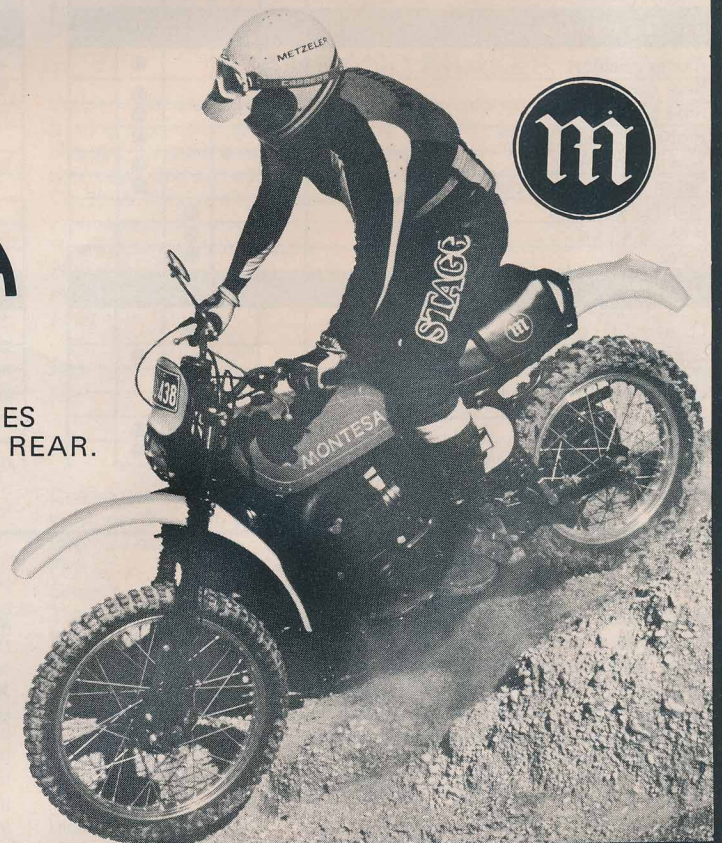
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stickers. Range on both machines is good: the 500s support the age-old myth of miserly fuel consumption which is an inherent part of the Honda single's charisma.

A triple clamp-mounted choke button is used on both machines while the XL hits the scene with a vastly simplified instrumentation pack that leaves all earlier efforts in the dust. The road-going tacho has been eliminated to make way for a compact, one-piece housing containing a single speedo/odometer and all necessary idiot lights. A large knob offers quick trip meter-reset and there's even gearchange points marked on the speedo dial.

Lighting is the usual ADR standard stuff with a monstrous headlamp and vast tail lamp, both of which must appear absurd to the serious dirt rider. Flexi-mounted blinkers are used (XT Yamaha style), and plastic guards are fitted both front and rear. Of course the rear is burdened with the inevitable reinforcement plate needed to cope with the superfluous weight of the street-legal tail lamp.

By comparison the XR is an exercise in sheer simplicity and a machine that would challenge even the Suzuki PE in the race for styling and detail honors. A smaller Preston Petty-styled headlamp/number plate is flexibly mounted to the front fork triple clamps while a simple, rubber-mounted speedo/tripmeter checks the distance. The front hub and speedo drive gear is identical on both machines.

The XR also adopts the same quick reset button and tripmeter, on/off indicator, and effective killswitch and foolproof push-pull throttle assembly of the XL. Handgrips are soft and comfortably thin on both bikes while the wide, low-rise bars should be well suited to all but the tallest of riders.

Both machines share an identical rear frame loop with the XR mounting a neat enduro-styled guard which incorporates a compact tail lamp mount and sufficient space for the rear-mounted tool kit. The kit pouch is not included with the XL. Both press studs soon fell apart on the XR's enduro pouch and the nylon straps allowed the tools to rattle annoyingly over the bumps. Velcro fasteners would work far more effectively on a pouch of this type.

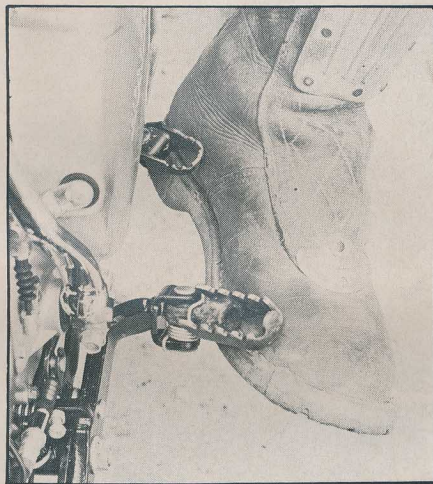
Conclusion

Both machines represent an enormous breakthrough for Honda and a great improvement over the outmoded XL350. However, we can't help but feel that the introduction of two models is not really needed, as neither will completely fulfil all that any specialist rider requires. The casual railrider will buy the XL but we wonder about the reality of living with a 135 kg trailbike? The enduro freak will also find the XR's lack of hillclimbing prowess, imperfect suspension and weight problem (123 kg still isn't light!) sufficient deterrent to steer him in the direction of something "harder". If the XR is to be imported with full ADR compliance for registration, as Honda suggests, it merely adds to the argument "Why bother with the XL?"

After all who really wants a 135 kg dirtbike? *

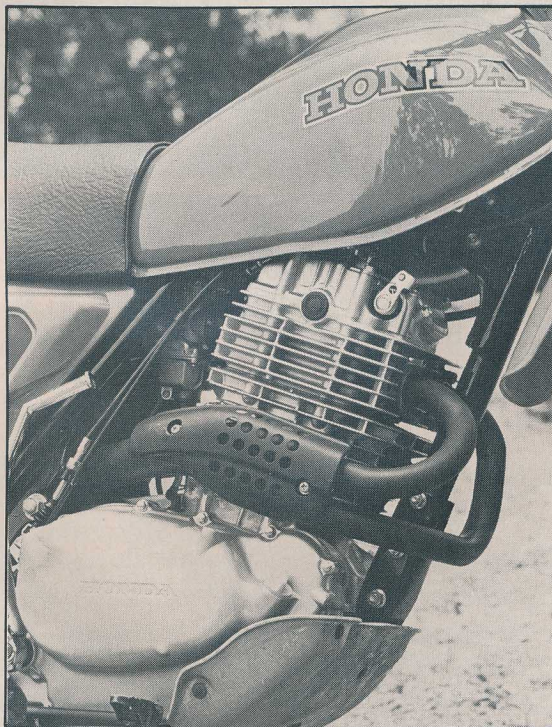


Did you say Honda's contribution to "Save The Whale?" XR trailiecross doesn't strengthen impressions of the enduro mount's adaptability. Not at all. . .



Revised XL instrumentation is a welcome relief from the speedo/tacho pack of older XL350s. Bar-mounted choke is convenient and the speedo/tripmeter is well-suited to the needs of the casual dirt rider.

XR features good steel pegs and folding brake lever tip. Gear lever also folds out of harm's way.



Both tanks use large, easy-fill cap and hold 10 litres.

Left: Without being unkind, we figure this is the best part of the bike. The XR motor (pictured) is slightly more potent than street/trail XL version, and easily identified by its large sumpguard. Decompression device is geared direct to kickstart lever.