

Quarter-litres In The Spotlight

WHILE the lion's share of the publicity in new models (plus much of the developmental effort) is directed towards the top-of-the-rangers, expect to see a lot more sparks flying in the smaller classes. Indications from Japan are that the march of technology in the big bikes has stopped for a breather while the factories wait to see how the world reacts to their turbos. With not inconsiderable sums invested in turbo R&D, they want to be sure before springing for too much more.

In the meantime, the process looks to be one of refinement to the existing one-litre brigade, a continued push in the middleweights (evidenced by models like the XZ550 Yamaha, VF750 Honda and GPz550 Kawasaki), and some fairly startling new machines popping up in the under-350 bracket.

The 250s are where the spotlight is shining squarely. After years of being neglected, or treated as a commuter bracket, riders of quarter-litre machines are going to have some pretty hot sports machinery dished up to them.

The interest in sports 250s has been prompted by the ongoing sales success of Yamaha's super-sharp RD250LC. When the other manufacturers had all but abandoned their high-performance 250s (particularly the two-strokes)

Yamaha flew into the face of what seemed to be the trend in turning the RD from a quite quick air-cooled roadster into a pocket-rocket water-cooled spitfire. What looked at first to be a beautiful plaything for the few revheads and stroker fanatics still left (hangovers from the bad old days, before bikes got smooth, and quiet, and non-smoky) turned into a goldmine for Yamaha. In Europe and Britain particularly, the RD250LC is one of the biggest-selling roadster models. People may have graduated past noisy, smoky, plug-fouling two-strokes with light-switch powerbands, but they sure as heck haven't lost the taste for performance. And while the LC may not be the most civilised bike on the road (it's no ratbag, either) it bows to none in the 250 muscle-stakes.

Enter the Big H, purveyor to the gentry over these many long years of very ordinary middle-of-the-road four-stroke twin 250s. They sell in zillions, of course, and Honda would have long ago amortised the development cost of the 15-years-old basic design, but to see Yamaha pulling off a marketing coup like the RD250LC must have galled.

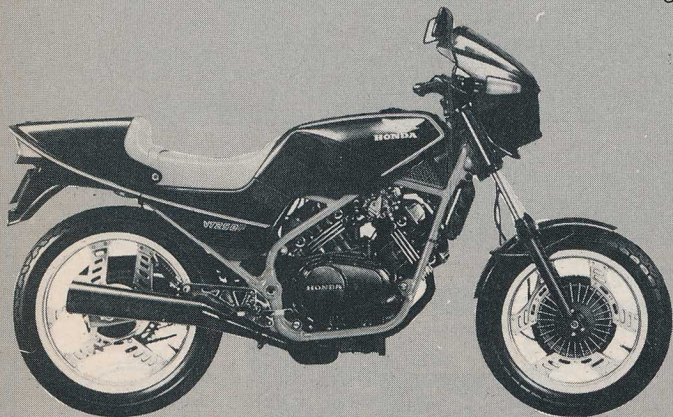
First shots in the battle

Honda's first shot in the battle of the 250s was to follow the imagery of its Grand Prix racing approach, and fight

established two-stroke performance with advanced four-stroke technology. The image (and the link with the VF750 further up the range) was intensified by adopting a V motor layout. And since the Yamaha was water-cooled, then why not for the Honda? Persistent rumours of the new bike circulated late last year, and at one stage it seemed a transverse V layout like the CX500 would be adopted, but the machine's basic design was confirmed (albeit very sketchily) in February, when selected Japanese dealers were shown several mock-ups in secret, to gauge their reaction to the concept.

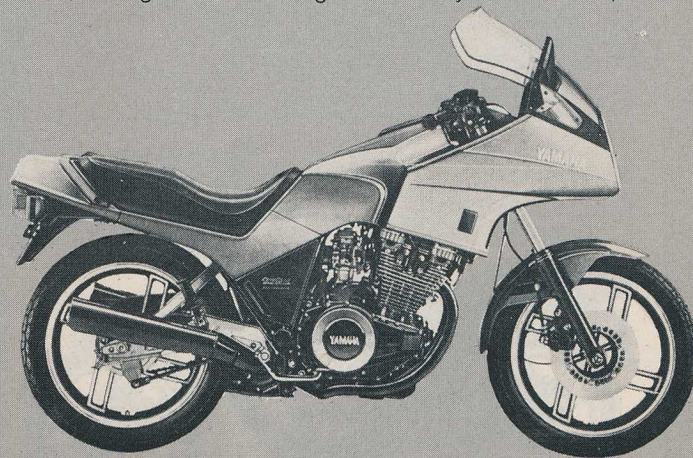
Two prototype versions of the new model — designated VT250F — were reported later that month as being in Mildura and Broken Hill with factory technicians who were at the same time conducting heat endurance testing on a group of 50 cm³ and 80 cm³ Lead scooters. The bikes were heavily disguised, one sporting Yamaha tank badges, and the other masquerading as a Suzuki. We have not been able to extract from Honda Australia confirmation that the VT250Fs were being tested in this country, but eyewitness descriptions of the bikes tally too well with what is now known of the model to be mere coincidence.

The bike was due to be released at the Birmingham Motorcycle Show in April,



Honda's mini V-bomber, the VT250F. Watch out, RD250LC!

Opposite: Caught during a secret test session, the new Honda looks compact and fast.



Clear the decks! Yamaha's rumoured counterattack is a 250 twin turbo.

but the launch was delayed for a logical — but nonetheless impressive — reason. The factory being built in Hamamatsu to produce the bike had not been completed in time. That's right — a brand new factory! Honda is getting super-serious.

The results of its labours show how serious. Our scoop shots (courtesy of Autoby magazine) demonstrate that the VT250F is going to be a very upmarket model, bristling with all the features normally expected on top-of-the-range flagships.

The 90-degree V-twin sits in a frame which bears more than a passing resemblance to the chassis of the NR500 GP four-stroke. Wheels are "boomerang" Comstars, the front being a 16-inch unit, while ProLink rear suspension is adopted. The rear seat section lifts off in the same manner as the CB1100RC to convert the bike for passenger carrying, while turn indicators are integrated into the bodywork in the style of Yamaha's 650 turbo.

The exhaust system is novel for a V-twin. The exhaust headers from the two pots meet underneath in a collector, which feeds two mufflers. The header from the rear cylinder appears to snake behind the transmission to reach the collector.

The engine is a double overhead cam, four valves per cylinder unit. Bore and stroke measurements of 60 x 44 mm give a capacity of 249 cm³. Power output is quoted at 26 kW at 10,500 rpm. A top speed of 168 km/h, and a standing 400 metres time of 14.5 seconds are claimed. Now that's performance from a 250!

Claim and counter-claim

By comparison, 159 km/h and 14.8 seconds are claimed for the RD250. In a real-world head-to-head confrontation the figures are likely to be a good deal closer, however. The Yamaha makes the

Suzuki's GSX250E. Likely to be swamped in the looming quarter-litre power battle.

same power as the Honda, and is about 6 kg lighter than the VT250's 145 kg. The fact that Honda has been able to get a water-cooled dohc four-stroke down so close to the skinny stroker shows how hard the designers have worked to pare the weight.

The high-revving motor in the V-twin is likely to lack the mid-range punch of the RD, so getting the best performance from the bike will require extensive use of the six-speed transmission.

Rounding out an impressive features package, the VT250 will be fitted with Honda's patented TRAC anti-dive system, air-assisted front springing, and an enclosed front disc brake as fitted to the CBX550 four.

In the clash between Honda and Yamaha for top quarter-litre musclebike, Suzuki's Katana-inspired GSX250E will be well and truly outperformed. Some 12 kg heavier than the Honda, and down 4 kW on power compared with both models, the GSX will need more than what its TSCC four-valve motor presently delivers to stay in the fight.

On the other hand, the Suzuki should carve deeply into the market segment traditionally dominated by Honda's CB250N, its combination of good looks, smoothness and fuel economy more than matching the Honda.

Enter the tiny turbo

Honda has tipped *its* hand in the Battle of the Littlies, and it says "four stroke" and "turn-of-the-century engine layout". Despite wide acceptance for the RD250, the future of two-strokes is still in some doubt. So what will Yamaha's counterattack be? Would you believe a turbo 250? Yep, it appears the company is working on a forced induction 250 version of the new XS400 dohc twin, which promises to combine the space-age looks of the 650 with staggering performance and light weight. Whereas the 650-class models which are being used as the basis for the first-generation production turbos end up only marginally lighter and no more

powerful than conventional one-litre bikes once they've been pufferised, 250s will start with a huge weight advantage. The XS250T promises the size of a 350, the weight of a 500, and the performance of a 750.

The ultimate Wild One for quarter-litre throttle jockeys? No, rumour has it that there are even more startling machines taking place on the drawing boards at the moment. One of the most persistent stories centres on a pair of 250/350 twins from Kawasaki, water-cooled, rotary-disc intake beauties derived from the KR-series GP racers. Kawasaki is remaining tight-lipped, but remember the firm's early reputation was built on wickedly-fast rotary-disc 250 and 350 twins. This was in the time before the powerhouse triples which established Kawasaki at the top of the performance ladder right across the board.

But real action is likely to come once again from Honda, with a counter-counterattack in the form of a sensational water-cooled, triple-cylinder two-stroke producing some 28 kW. Although it is believed the motor will be a transverse three rather than the two up-one down V of the NS500 GP racer, the roadster is likely to use much of the advanced transfer-port theories found in the NS500.

At the moment, the bike — tentatively designated the MBX250 — is little more than a forward project attended by rumour and speculation. As such, it may well go the way of many such projects — shelved not for any deficiency in the concept or design of the bike, but because it simply didn't fit into the market as the forward analysts predicted it. But as a fire-with-fire counter to anything that Yamaha can toss up in the high-performance 250 bracket, and coupled with the image projected by the two-stroke triple NS500 racer, the MBX250 could well see the light of day, to become the sensation of the mid 1980s.

A foretaste of the future? Honda's two-stroke triple MBX250.

