

June 1982

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TwoWheels

Tests

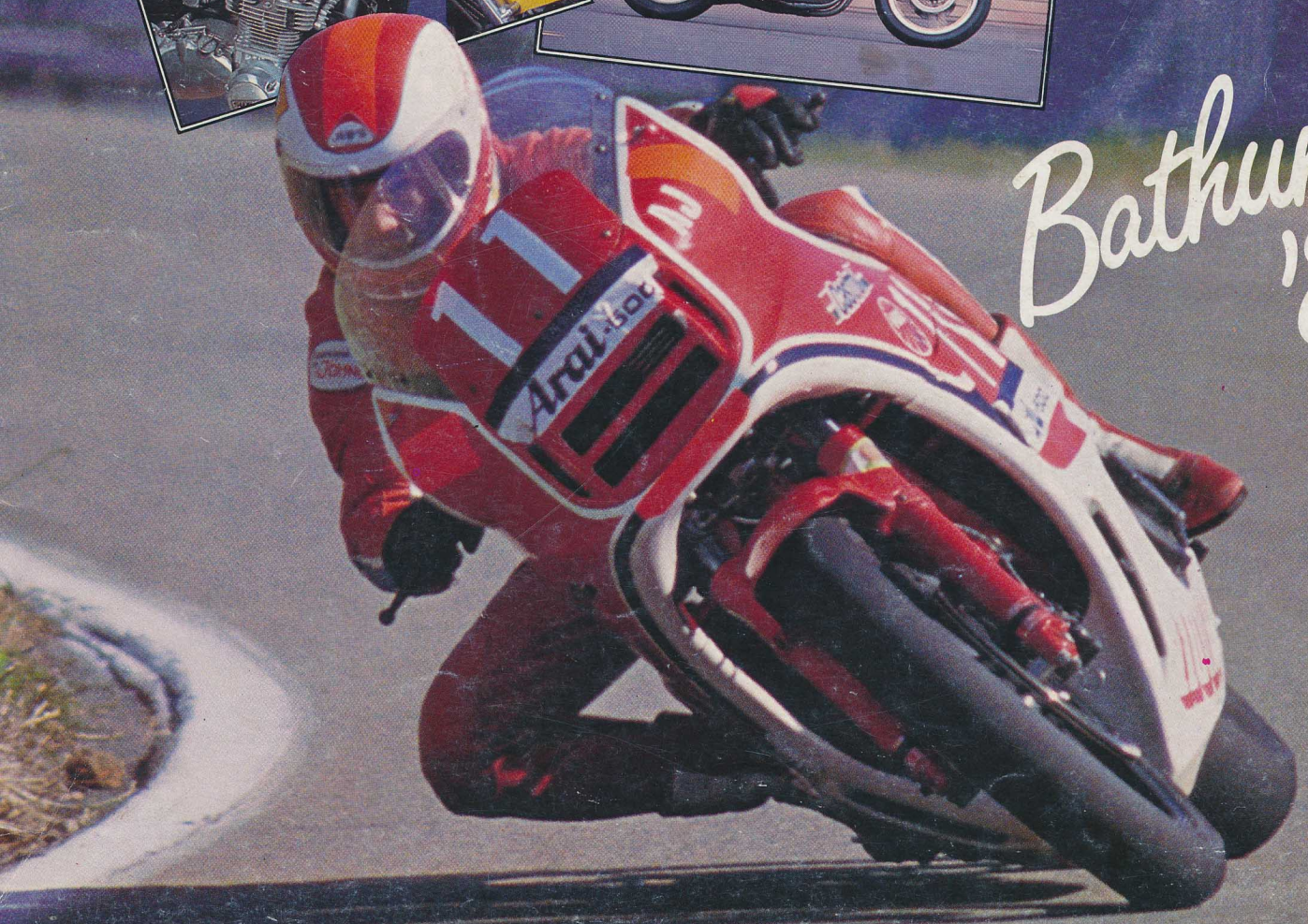
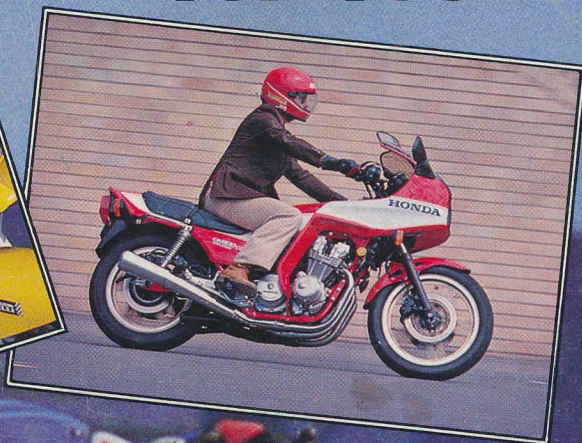
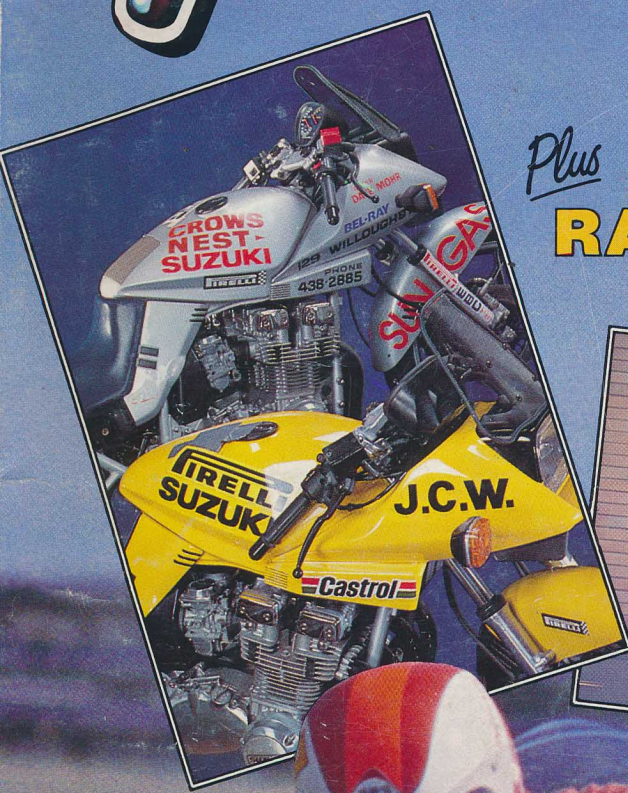
HONDA CB900F2

YAMAHA IT250J

Plus

RACE BIKES ON THE ROAD

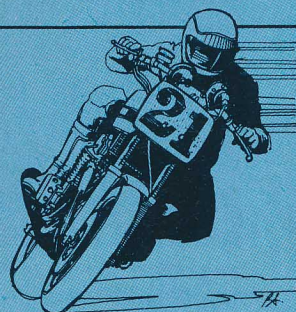
TOP TOURER CHOSEN



Bathurst '82

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June 1982



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HORSES FOR COURSES



The increased specialisation of road bike models is nowhere more evident than in production racing, which is rapidly becoming the preserve of almost purpose-built bikes. So what does it take to set up a successful proddy racer, and how does it feel on the road?

ROAD motorcycles are poised at a fork in the road. Already they are split into two groups, which seem destined to move further apart as their separate paths diverge. On the one side are bikes which (a) are successful in stock production racing or (b) have been designed with that aim in mind. Increasingly, category (a) is

becoming the preserve of bikes from category (b). Bikes which haven't been designed with racing as one of their functions are winning less and less, are being raced less and less, and are beginning to embody different features from the production racers. Yet both groups are bought by average motorcyclists to do duty as average road

motorcycles, which means everything from a squirt to the corner shop for fags through commuting to work and Sunday-morning peg-scraping to 20,000 km overland trips.

Just how much divergence between the two groups there has been already was brought home to us in the months after the Yamaha 750 race, when we were given the opportunity to ride two of the competing machines. Both Suzuki Katana 750s, they were the winning JCW Motorcycles bike ridden by Rod Cox and Neil Chivas, and the eleventh-placed Crows Nest Suzuki mount of Dave Mohr and Duncan Read. As well as offering an insight to the steps needed to prepare a long-distance production racer (and differences in approach between the two teams), riding the bikes revealed just how natural a habitat the track was for some bikes, and how they're becoming proportionately unsuited to life on the everyday road.

A demented insect

From some angles, the Katana looks like a demented insect humping away at its prey. On the move, the lines of the bike integrate well with the crouched rider, giving a pleasing result. It looked outrageous last year, but familiarity makes it merely remarkable this year.

Of all the bikes on the market, the Katana would be the one to take in a time machine visiting the past. No other bike would offend the mid-fifties Poms like a Katana could! No other bike would shake the moral fibre of pre-War Brooklands more thoroughly than the Silver Samurai. The Katana is not the state-of-the-art motorcycle (the throne is vacant) but it tries to look the part.

Apart from looking futuristic, the Katana carries with its looks a certain amount of exclusivity and prestige. This exclusivity is waning, however, with the sheer numbers of the model on the road. When only a few of them were around, people would do strange things just to see them. Crowds would gather at roadside stops to ask questions, to which the answers were, \$23,000 and 260 miles per hour, respectively.

Racetrack success

Katanas also sell well because of their speed, handling, racetrack success and quality. The Yamaha 750 race saw the first major Australian race success for the 750 Katana. Rod Cox and Neil Chivas piloted their Suzuki around 287 laps of Sydney's Oran Park circuit to win the event from Len Willing and Rod Browne's Yamaha XJ750.

The race was run on a hot day, and featured a high rate of attrition, especially for some makes. Tyres played



their usual central role in this long distance event with the Willing team's Yamaha being forced to change its rear Metzeler half way through the race. While the new tyre helped their hard charging towards the end of the race, the 71 seconds required for the change failed to help their cause at all. They finished second, only 20 seconds behind. Pirelli had a triumphant introduction for the new SP Plus 1, with many riders choosing either them, or the Dunlop Elites. The new Pirelli is a special long distance big bike tyre, and while looking very similar to the familiar MT28 pattern, is a new tyre.

The Crows Nest bike

The first of the two bikes ridden by TWO WHEELS was the Katana 750 owned and ridden by Dave Mohr, of Crows Nest Suzuki. Partnering Dave in the race was A-grader Duncan Read. The bike finished 11th outright, a creditable result. Our purpose in riding the bike was to look at it from all angles, but with special attention to how a bike set up for production racing works on the road.

Crows Nest Suzuki is a nice place to pick up a bike. The shop is on the site of a former wine bar, and feels a bit homelier than most bike shops. It has a separate front room for bike sales, and another room for spares and accessories. Out the back of the shop, the wine bar image remains, with a concreted area shaded by an overhead trellis covered with grape vines. A round table and bench remains, where serious matters, like wine, women and bikes, may be discussed.

Parked under the grapes was the Katana, untouched since the race, with the racing numbers and assorted decals still attached. Large orange "Crows

Nest" lettering blended in with the Katana's "Suzuki" script on the tank. A couple of Pirelli stickers graced the tank and flanks, while Bel-Ray, EBC brake pads and Sun Gas each received a mention in despatches.

The bike didn't look too bad, considering it had just completed a 750 km race on a hot day. The tyres were very balled up in the centre and side tread areas, though there was a surprising amount of meat left. Whilst very grimy, the bike showed no signs of oil leaks anywhere. With the return of the mirrors, indicators and the headlight, it began to look a tad more Bruce Wayne, and a bit less Batman.

The set up

It is a natural penchant of motorcyclists to change things on their bikes. Leaving bikes standard is unthinkable to most enthusiasts. At the minimum, they change the tyres, while at the maximum, only the crankcases remain the same. Production racing bikes are only changed in a few minor ways, such as tyres, brake pads and lubricants, in accordance with the purist philosophy of Australian proddy racing. The major development energy for production racing goes into setting up the motor and cycle parts for maximum performance and efficiency. It is unlikely that the average road bike will receive such meticulous attention, though I imagine the average road bike could be set up very well, because there aren't any scrutineers around to keep you within the rules.

Dave's bike is still a youngster, with about 4500 km on the clock. After a careful running in around town, the bike was taken on a decent trip of 1500 km, then given a thorough going over at the 3000 km mark. From this point on, its life

HORSES FOR COURSES

is to be one of a racing bike.

The way the bike is set up is quite straightforward, really. There is only so much you can do with a production racer, while bearing in mind that paying attention to every little detail is necessary in that ultra-competitive form of competition. A case in point is tyres. Racers know, but road riders often don't, that the choice of *which* tyre isn't as critical as fitting and balancing it accurately on a well-balanced wheel, and using correct air pressure. The front brake pads were non standard, the boys running EBC pads. The rear brakes on this bike were not up to the usual Katana standard, even though the standard pads were used.

The suspension was set up very firmly, indeed. Suzuki Katanas have an unfortunate habit of nuzzling their alternator covers into the bitumen under racing conditions, resulting in oil spillages for other racers, and unscheduled pit stops for the Katana rider. Jacking the suspension up to the stiffest settings is one way of gaining a little more clearance. The alternator cover on Dave's bike had a reasonable chamfer worn across the cover, just to prove the point. The right hand side exhaust pipe had a long scrape down its underside, indicating the clearance limits on that side.

The front suspension was set up on the hardest preload setting, using the recommended amount of 20-grade oil in the forks. The rear suspension was set to the middle spring preload, with the hardest of the three damping settings used. The rest of the setting up of the bike consists of a lot of little things, such as making sure all those 16 valves work properly and that everything is bolted together properly, getting things comfortable, and checking it all again.

On the road

When I asked Dave what things he felt the Katana was better at than a normal GSX Suzuki, he answered, "Ground clearance, top end, speed and seating position." This was, of course, in the context of production racing. Notably, these departments are not critical to a road bike's needs, and riding the bike on the open road for a couple of weeks showed fairly clearly the limitations, and benefits, of owning a Suzuki Katana.

After about a hundred metres down the road, the first and most notable aspect of the production racing set-up came to my sensors. A bump. Not a huge bump, but it was enough to cause real discomfort. The way the suspension is set up for the track is way too firm on

the road, even in city conditions. Even though I initially softened just the rear suspension, it was only after one ride that both front and rear suspensions were on the softest preload. Even when set at this soft level, the suspension was too firm for long distance comfort.

Even though the tyres were half worn, their profiles were great, helping the already fine steering characteristics of the bike. The grip of the tyres was also impressive, with an ability to lay down power nice and early on the highway. The brakes, unfortunately, were below normal Katana standards, particularly the rear stopper. It would lock up over bumpy sections of road fairly easily, and was insensitive over smoother roads. The poor braking over bumpy roads is probably as much a suspension problem as it is a brake problem, though the smooth road performance of the brakes was poor in itself.

The long lever travel for the front brake, and the unfamiliar sensations that the anti-dive produces, also take some getting used to. The anti-dive gives you the impression you are not braking as hard as you could, simply because there is a real, but subtle, change in the performance of the front end in such situations. It doesn't dive as unceremoniously as the front ends of many other bikes, making you feel as though the braking isn't quite strong enough. This is an illusion to which you eventually become accustomed.

The Katana's motor showed some signs of the hard race. It idled fast when hot, and displayed a continuous off-idle hesitation in city riding. On the open road, it developed quite a cough and backfire racket whenever one shut off fast, such as after overtaking a line of cars and having to pull in quickly. The cause of this is very likely the cam chain (which made more than the usual amount of noise) upsetting the valve timing slightly.

The nice things about the bike were immediately noticeable, once on the open road. The motor has a healthy, crisp response, and will willingly rev on demand. While we didn't try any extended top-end running, it easily ran to 200 km/h, and had breath left for more.

The neutral, precise steering of the Katana produced some magical moments on the open road. It is exemplary, even to the point that I found the bike reasonable on the dirt roads, primarily because it steered so precisely I could avoid bumps and other obstacles without much fuss.

When the open road is smooth, and

twisty, the Katana makes you feel a much better rider than normal, responding very accurately to your inputs, and encouraging you to perform at its level of excellence. In these circumstances, it is very easy to understand anyone who is a one-eyed Katana freak. They became that way on these smooth, fast roads. The high speed stability of the bike was excellent. The Katana could be accurately described as fast. It has a marvellously whippy motor combined with the steering and braking of a thoroughbred.

It could be also described as hard. On the open road, the suspension becomes a tiring feature of the bike. The Katana made uncomfortable work of a number of one-day rides which are usually traversed without any discomfort at all. The seat was uncomfortable in the way it dug into your thighs on a trip. This wasn't noticeable on the bike, only when you stepped off at the end of the run. The footpegs felt ominously high for rider comfort, though I managed to avoid the dreaded cramps. The handlebars produced a lot of tiredness in the wrists around town, where the wrists support a lot of the rider's weight. On the highway, the wind picks up a lot of that weight, and the pain subsides somewhat.

You would need to do a lot of the "She'll be right" thinking to argue a Katana into a regular open road role. As it is currently set up, the model is way too firmly sprung to handle the bumpy roads Australian touring riders have to suffer. I would doubt whether the Katana would be able to post point-to-point times for, say Melbourne to Brisbane, as quick as a number of other bikes could manage (GSX, GPz, R100RS). Even if a determined enough rider could do this, he would have to be very durable to do so.

The Katana does have its good points for long distance work. It has a large fuel tank (22 litres) and gives good gas economy (17 km/l brisk touring) hinting at a fuel range in the 400 km bracket.

If it had softer springing and a rider prepared to endure, then it might just work on the open road.

City bike!

Moving back from the highways, where it flashes like a blade, to the city, where it shines like an office worker's bum, the Katana leads a different life.

In the city, your wrists might ache, but you'll get used to that. You will own a spectacular silver bike, with great performance, Star Wars looks, fine brakes, excellent steering and an ability to get from A to B quickly. Even though it does attract too much attention from the bureaucrats in blue, I found the Katana great fun around town, with the

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*Ladeez An' Gennulmun...
Da Winnah!*

IT'S yellow, it sings and it flies. What is it? A JCW Katana, of course. Its credentials are impeccable, with a win at the hands of Rod Cox and Neil Chivas in the Yamaha 750 race. After the win, Neil Chivas, who also prepared the bike, was quoted as saying it "went like clockwork", which is impressive when you consider 287 hectic laps of the rough, slippery Oran Park track.

There is no mistaking the machine, with its bright yellow paint job and the mysterious looking "JCW" initials on the side. There is someone out there who thinks the bike belongs to Jerome Chatsworth Witherspoon, after what he was told at one set of lights. If more racing machines were presented as strikingly, motorcycle racing would certainly be a greater spectacle, which certainly helps draw in the crowds.

On the road, the bike is a Katana, first and foremost. For the first twenty minutes of any ride (and many trips are this brief) it feels great. The precise steering, light controls, low seat height and zappy performance combine to produce a bike surprisingly amenable to some city work. In tight situations, you might wish for more steering lock, but never better steering for a bike of this type. After twenty or so minutes, however, your wrists start to pay the penalty of bearing all that weight, and the aches set in.

Differences more apparent

Out on the highway, the differences in the setting up of the Crows Nest and JCW machines became more apparent, with the JCW bike shining in a number of areas. The only area in which it didn't shape up as well was in the business of starting up on cold mornings. The yellow Katana's motor never liked idling much, but once away it tended to run more sweetly than the other. It certainly never showed any of the crankiness off idle that the Crows Nest bike displayed, and

pulled more strongly in the top end. Without going through a full road test procedure, you could never definitely say which bike was the quicker, but the race winner seemed marginally better. Its motor is the same age as the other bike, but runs a lighter grade of oil, Synthetic R Castrol. Whatever the cause of the noticeable difference in health between the two motors, the JCW bike felt as smooth and as happy as any street machine. It was quite at home on highway running, and while all the usual four cylinder tingles came and went with the passing of the revs, the smoothness and willingness to rev was impressive.

The brakes on this bike operated in exemplary fashion, and again in this area the differences between the two bikes can be traced to the setting up carried out by Neil Chivas. While the brakes used standard pads, the brake fluid was different, giving a slightly spongy feel initially, but, according to Chivas, giving the brakes the capacity to work consistently throughout the rigours of a long race. The brakes certainly did have a little extra sponginess, but no less performance.

The rear brake in particular, worked much better than on other Katanas, with no tendency to early lock-up when you least require it. Katana brakes have characteristics which some people will not like at all, whilst others would want them to be made compulsory. There is no doubt they take some getting used to, especially with the anti-dive giving the illusion that you're not stopping as hard as you should, because the nose isn't diving dramatically enough. If you have ridden a Katana only once or twice, and hated the brakes, be a bit more patient and you may rethink the issue.

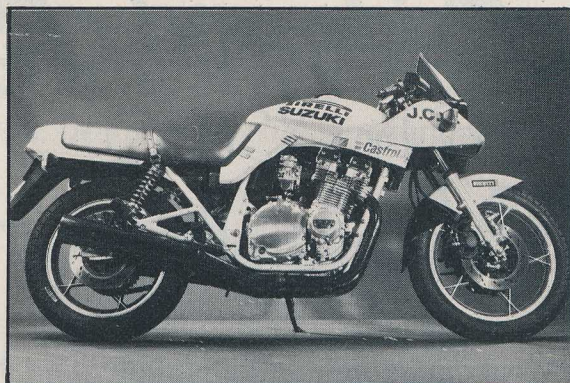
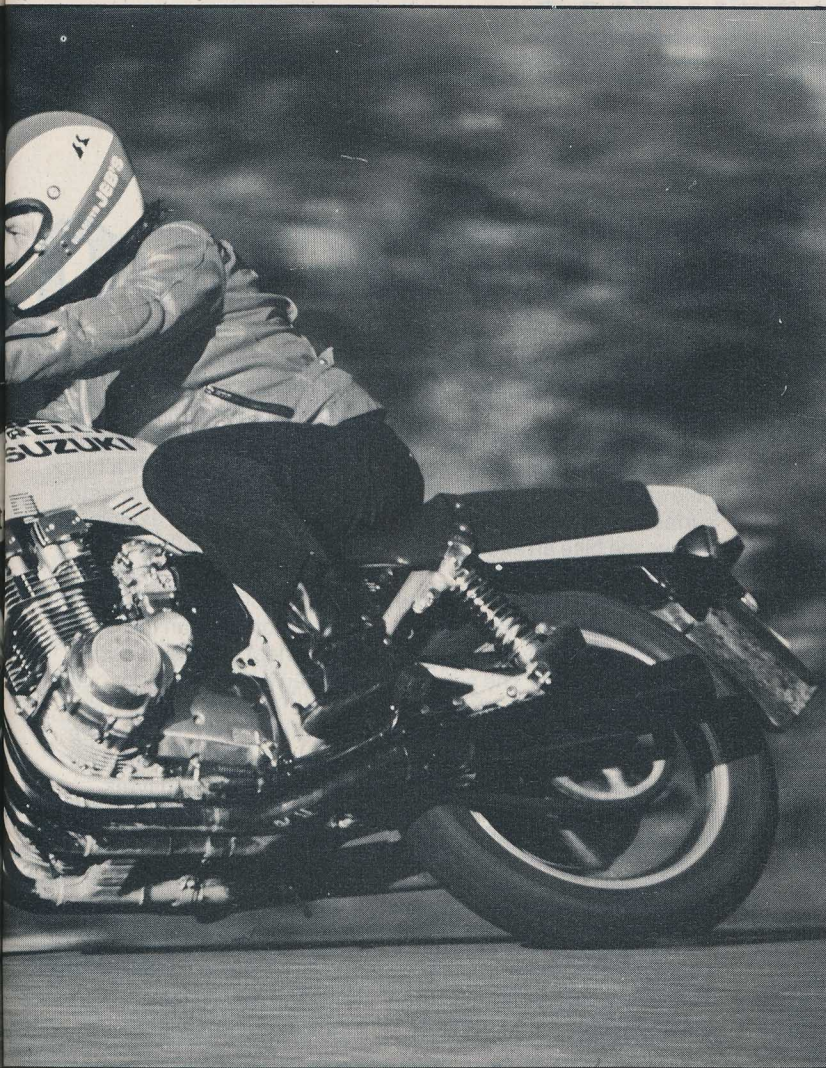
In the suspension department, the JCW bike again showed differences in setting up which yielded good rewards. The front suspension was on the softest preload, using 15-weight oil, while the rear springs were at second hardest



preload and used the No. 2 damping setting. This gave a reasonably compliant, firm ride both in the country and around town. Around the relatively bumpy Oran Park circuit it would probably have been far more pleasant than on the other bike. Of course, both the right hand muffler and the alternator covers wore the scars of much scraping. But even this relatively compliant set-up was too stiff for country riding, and we changed the rear springs to their softest preload.

Subtle difference

While we felt there was a noticeable, but subtle difference between the two mounts it would be silly to draw the conclusion that at the end of a trip, for instance, you would jump off refreshed from the JCW bike, and exhausted from the other. The unfortunate fact of the matter is that both bikes proved to be quite uncomfortable on any sort of long haul. Stepping off any Katana 750 at the end of several hundred kilometres makes you walk like John Wayne, and



talk like Gene Autrey. It's just a case of the sore bum/sore legs/sore wrists blues, that's all!

Those Katana riders to whom we have spoken don't mind the comfort problems, which reinforces the argument applied to a lot of seemingly uncompromising sports bikes (like some Italian items), that if you are prepared to forgive a few faults, then the rewards will make up for it all.

The Katana fits into this bracket. The rewards are high. The more we rode the bike, the more we appreciated that fine low and medium speed steering. The high speed steering is very good, but not as outstanding as the precision at medium and low speed. The rewards of a Katana come at a high speed, however, and legal problems may arise for some. The model looks about as conservative as Devo, so some sense in using it will be required.

As on the Crows Nest bike, the Quick Canary was fitted with the new Pirelli SP Plus 1 tyres. The race winning tyres were still fitted and had a reasonable

amount of rubber left on them after we returned the bike. The tyres offered excellent grip and stability, so that gassing it while cranked over, or pressing on on the expressway presented no worries. The bike can be made to run untidily, such as when backing off into some sweepers, hitting a sufficiently well placed and sized bump, or simply misjudging some aspect of a corner, but at least it has the composure to keep its wheels in contact with the ground, and to keep pointing in the desired direction.

Between winning and placing

Many elements separate a racewinner from a placegetter. Luck deserves a big mention, but on top of that, experience, preparation and skill must rank supreme. The JCW bike is a well sorted, well prepared one, not surprising considering that Neil Chivas is in the business of setting up motorcycles, especially ones like Katanas, through his outfit, Chivo's. Judging by the example which we rode, he does his work very well indeed.

Certainly, a highly skilled preparer of bikes can always pull a few rabbits out of the hat, and this can sometimes be the winning edge when all other factors are equal.

The world of the open road, however, sees the Katana a winner for some, but for many others it is a good placegetter. Despite the good touring range and ability to cover ground quickly, it would not be a top-class long distance bike, with its poor carrying capacity, stiff suspension and Stoics-only ergonomics. Some people will swear black and blue that Katanas work beaut on the open road, while others may just feel black and blue. Motorcycling has more than its fair share of Stoics, so the problems with comfort are essentially a personal thing.

For most riders, however, the world of the open road is a world apart from that of production racing, where the fine edges in performance matter less, and the simple fact of bumpy roads and long hauls make the Katana a Sunday morning blast specialist, rather than an open road King.

*