Two Wheels

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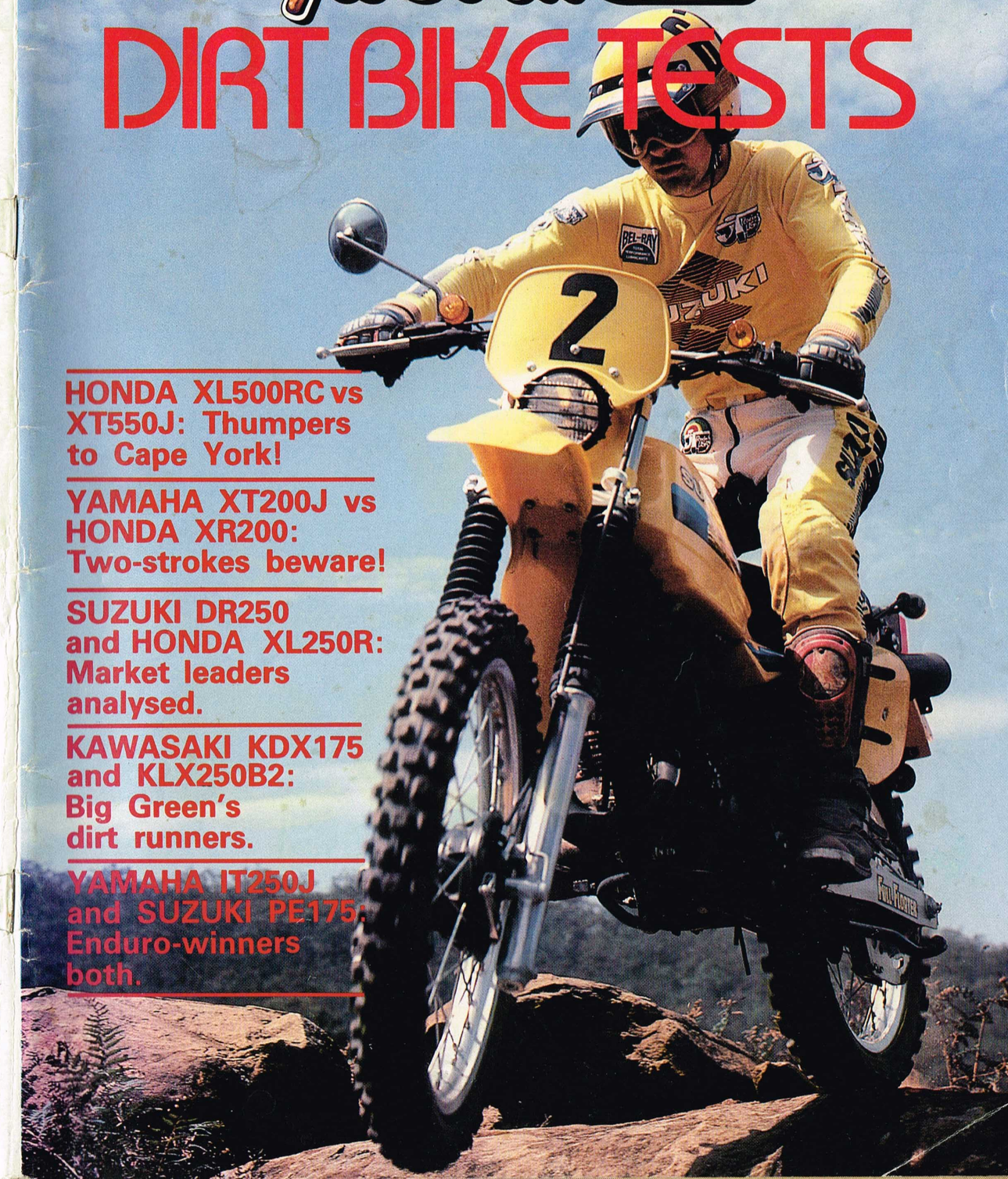
DIRT BIKE TESTS



HONDA XL500RC vs XT550J: Thumpers to Cape York!

YAMAHA XT200J vs HONDA XR200: Two-strokes beware!

SUZUKI DR250 and HONDA XL250R: Market leaders analysed.

KAWASAKI KDX175 and KLX250B2: Big Green's dirt runners.

YAMAHA IT250J and SUZUKI PE175: Enduro-winners both.

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By the editors of
TWO WHEELS Magazine.
ARTIST — John Taylor

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HEAD-TO-HEAD IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS

As the only four-strokes in their capacity bracket, Honda's XR200 and Yamaha's XT200 could be expected to be virtual clones of one another. No way! Perhaps the only thing in common between the two middleweight dirt runners is the excellent way in which each carries out the role it was cast for.

MANY riders consider that the best value-for-money buys in dirt bikes are to be found in the 175-200 cm³ range. Offering considerably more power than a 125 without the weight gain experienced when stepping up to a 250, the in-betweeners are a favourite with buyers trying to balance performance needs against a limited budget.

Two-stroke enthusiasts — particularly the more experienced and aggressive riders who have thoughts of competing in enduros — are well catered for. On the other hand, those whose leaning is towards four-strokes are limited to a choice of two models — Honda's XR200R and Yamaha's XT200J.

On that basis a comparison test between the two would seem to be a good idea. We thought so, anyway. But when we set about doing the test, we were confronted not with a straight-out comparison, but with a look at two machines from the same category which were quite dissimilar in concept and execution.

Honda's XR200 represents a recent change in the company's approach to its dirt-bike range. Since the demise of its two-stroke dual-purpose bikes a few years ago, Honda has concentrated largely on the CR-series two-stroke motocrossers and the XL-series four-stroke trailsters. More recently, the XR range has complemented the XLs as a serious alternative for the enduro brigade.

However, at the time the XR200 was introduced, the XL185 was dropped from the line-up. Because the XR200 can be registered easily in the USA, the company probably didn't see the need for a softer, more dual-purpose version

of the new Pro-Link middleweight. But to gain Australian Design Rule approval — a prerequisite to local road registration — the XR200 has to have a lighting kit worth $160 fitted.

The price-conscious dual-purpose market may have figured that the Honda's competition breeding was worth a price-tag $300 higher than the Yamaha; but when the differential is pushed to over $450 by the lighting kit, it's hard to see many people buying the XR simply for road/trail riding. Those who do will have decided that its classy dirt performance is worth the extra shekels.

The philosophy department

Visually, the XR200R reflects its competition background. It is a machine designed with off-road performance first in mind, and road finesse second. This is the only way to design an enduro bike, which is what Honda claims the model to be. The stickers on the frame which state "For off-road use only" say it all.

Yamaha makes no pretence about the XT200J. It is clearly a dual-purpose machine, yet it possesses better dirt handling than the flashy styling would suggest. The Bridgestone Trail Wing tyres, lights, ground clearance, and cosmetics indicate the XT was designed to clock significantly more miles on the road than the XR, but it also has enough of the necessary ingredients to make it a very competent and enjoyable dirt sled. The light weight, agility, quick steering, responsive motor and stable monoshock suspension make the XT200 the best road/trail combination we have tested. It is very unusual to get so many qualities from both worlds in the one machine.

We were surprised to find only a two kilogram weight difference between the two bikes. And the XR is heavier! The XT weighs in at just over 99 kg naked, and 106 kg with fuel and oil. The XR weighs 101 kg under the sheets and 108 kg wet. If you ride the XR with the optional lighting kit required for registration, add another two kilos.

The difference in construction accounts for the difference in weight. The XR200 has the strongest build you could ever expect of a machine its size. Large diameter steel tubing makes up the frame, with steel used for the swinging arm instead of the extruded aluminium used on the motocross bikes. This makes the XR extremely strong, but heavier than it looks. The factory could have opted for a chrome moly frame and an aluminium swinging arm, but you would have looked at paying a few hundred dollars more for that luxury.

The XT has a frame constructed of smaller steel tubing, and uses an alloy swinging arm similar to those on the earlier YZs. As a result, it doesn't have as rigid a construction as the Honda, but it is lighter.

In road performance, the two machines are worlds apart. In much the same way that a motocross engine is unsuited to road use, so too is the XR's. The lack of flywheel weight results in a very punchy and hard-revving engine which also demonstrates an alarming amount of engine braking when the throttle is shut. There is virtually no run-on at all, and the front end bobs harshly in traffic, where it is necessary to shut off and accelerate frequently. An engine specifically designed for dirt use does not work well on the road.

What Yamaha has done with the XT is to give it a motor with a very healthy mid-range delivery and plenty of flywheel mass. Compared with the Honda, the XT200's motor is less responsive and doesn't accelerate as snappily. However, fuel consumption is better, power delivery is smooth, and the engine braking sensation in quick shut-off situations is less violent. For road use, it is an ideal powerplant.

Starring roles: Road & dirt

The gearing is another thing to hamper the Honda's road performance. But like the engine, this is a sacrifice made in pursuit of better performance on the dirt. The XR's six-speed box is just what the doctor ordered, but the overall gearing is too low. We feel replacing the standard 50-tooth rear sprocket with a 45-tooth unit would benefit the gearing both on and off the dirt.

On the road, you don't go near first gear. Starting is best done in second. From there the gearbox moves positively up to sixth, but comes to the end of the string at less than 100 km/h, which is well below the bike's potential with higher gearing.

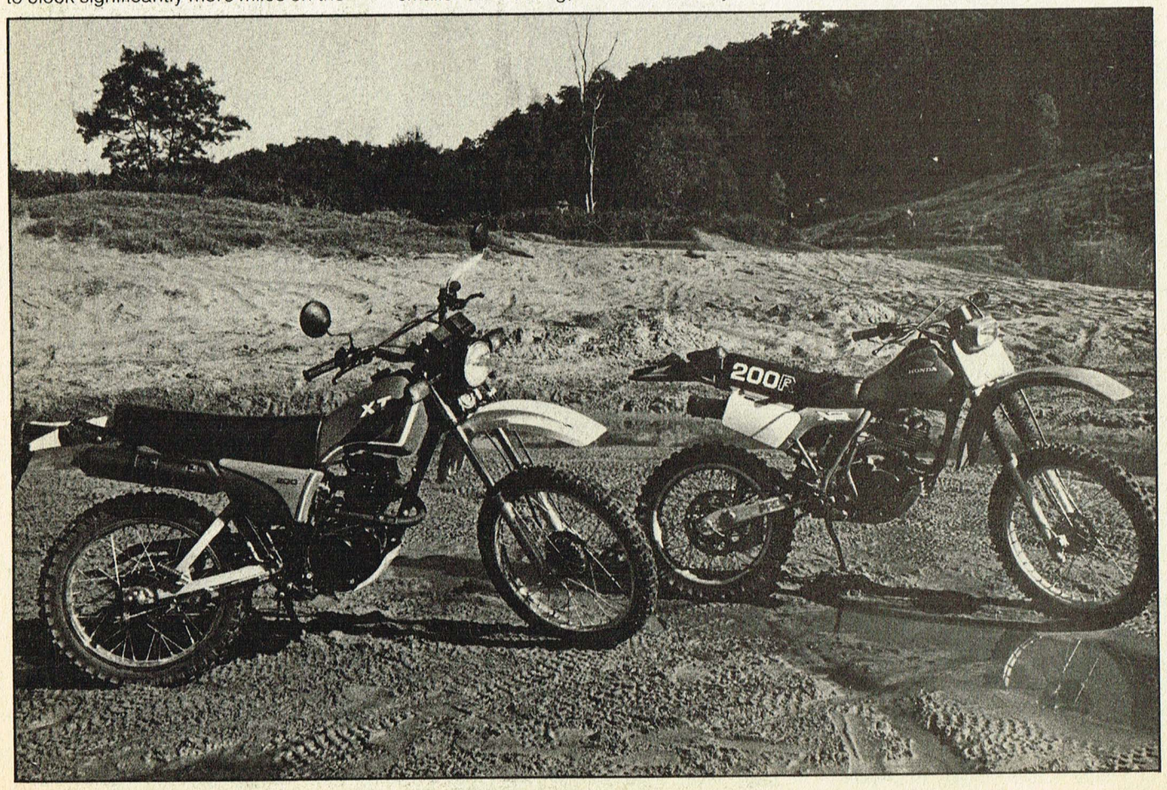
Gearing on the Yamaha could also be improved to offer a better selection for both road and dirt use. At the moment, first cog in the five-speed box proves to be a little too high when negotiating tight, trials-type country. The motor's easy power delivery and good flywheel mass save the revs from dropping too abruptly under these conditions, but lower gearing would provide the rider — particularly a less experienced one — with even more confidence. Retaining the three existing top ratios — and giving the lower end of the box three closer-spaced ratios for slower dirt riding — would lead to an ideal transmission.

With the standard gearing, the XT sits very comfortably at 80-90 km/h. Top speed on level ground is 110 km/h. This is on par with most machines of its capacity which are designed with commuting rather than highway work in mind.

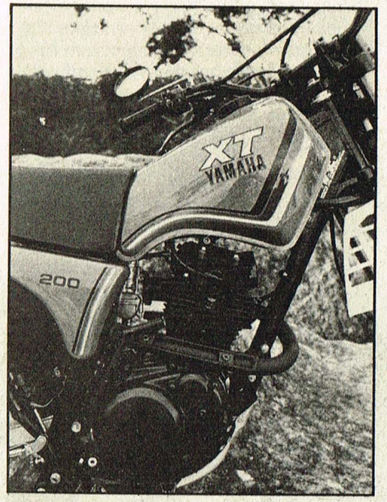
In the dirt the starring roles are reversed, which is no big surprise. The surprise is that the XT fares better in the dirt than the XR makes out on the road. The Yamaha's styling gives the impression that its dirt capabilities are minimal. Riding the model off-road quickly dispels that thought, however.

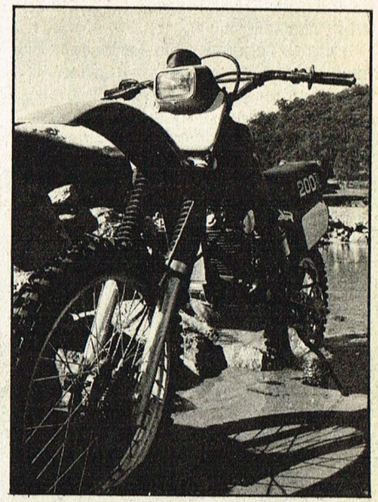
The bike's best points on the dirt are the riding position, both standing and sitting, and its quick steering and overall handling. Its dual-purpose breeding gives it a lower ground clearance than we would like to see, less than ideal gearing, and compromise tyres. But as an overall package, the XT200J is the best handling dual-purpose bike we have tested. If the factories could offer this kind of weight and performance in the 250 and 500 cm³ four-strokes, there would be a big surge of interest in these models.

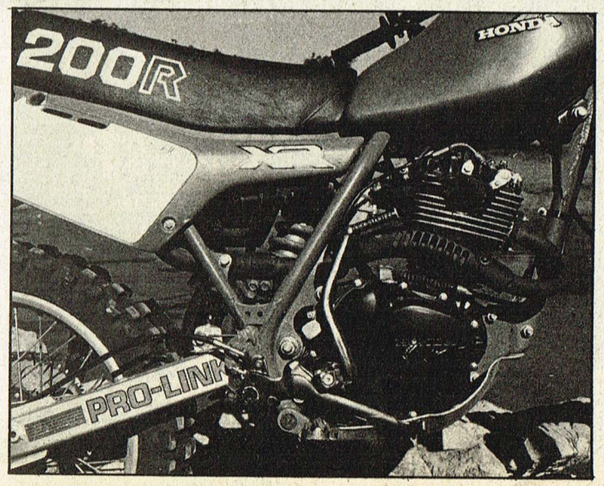
The XT200 is light for a dual-purpose bike, and to improve the handling by keeping the centre of gravity low, Yamaha has mounted weighty items such as the battery low in the frame. The XT feels agile and proves comfortable to ride for long periods of time. With most four strokes, stalling the machine on a



Appearance of the XT200 (left) hints that it might be a bit of a sook on the dirt. However, the pretty looks clothe a very capable dirt runner, while road/commuter manners are excellent. Honda XR200 (below) is quite another kettle of fish, a rough, tough, no-nonsense dirt middleweight with barely civilised road behaviour.







Healthy mid-range, smooth power delivery and economical fuel consumption make the XT's motor ideal for a dual-purpose role (above, left). Honda's king-sized frame tubing, Pro-Link suspension and free-revving, punchy motor add up to top dirt performance. If you're into enduros and the 175 'strokers aren't your bag, this is the bike you want.

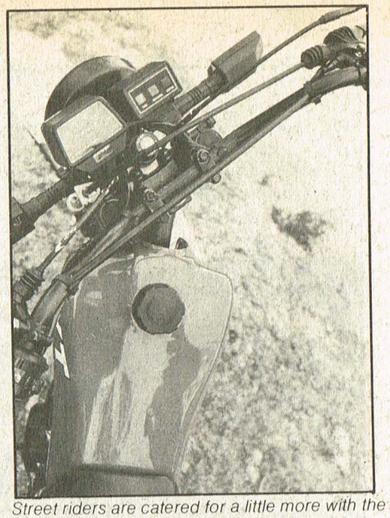
steep rocky slope has you balancing on one toe with what feels like an elephant leaning against you. This is never a problem with the XT200.

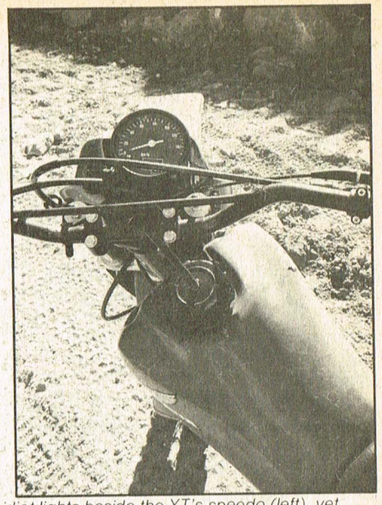
The handling of the rear end was much better than we expected. With most dual-purpose bikes, pushing the pace down fire trails or on an enduro course leads to the back end swapping from side to side with very little predictability. The XT is a refreshing exception, in that the rear end tracks stably and predictably. When the shock heats up the ride becomes a little spongy, but after you get used to it you can have a great time buzzing frustrated enduro bike riders.

The 200 saves the project

The XR is a different kettle of fish, both from the XT and the rest of the XR range. The XR250 and XR500 suffer a chronic weight problem. As serious enduro bikes, they are grossly overweight. This is really disappointing when you think of the work that has been put into giving the XRs serious dirt breeding. Fortunately XR200R saves the project from total failure.

Largely because of its light weight, the bike handles so well for long periods of time over the roughest terrain that it is a proposition for a serious dirt rider who wants to go deep in the woods. It is also a good proposition for competing in enduros.





Street riders are catered for a little more with the idiot lights beside the XT's speedo (left), yet funnily enough the Yamaha's clocks are also better in the dirt than the Honda's, which is too vulnerable.

Designed with a frame very similar to those used on the motocross bikes, the XR offers 40 mm more suspension travel than the XT and has abundant ground clearance. The forks steer very well, but were a little on the stiff side. The Showa shock mounted into Honda's Pro-Link rear suspension can have both damping and spring pre-load adjusted to give an excellent ride. The only problem we encountered was the tendency for the back end to kick up when riding hard over sharp rock edges.

The XR200's motor, capable of delivering a very quick and authoritative punch, and liking to be revved harder than most four-strokes, is one of the model's best features. The only thing which took time getting used to was the marked engine braking, and the rather on/off nature of the power delivery.

With the extremely low gearing, you will never run short of drive. If anything, too much drive is available, and can lead to wheelspin when climbing up steep slopes between trees where the ground is littered with leaves and rocks.

When the trails open up, the XR is in its element. Wind the twist-grip and let the punchy motor do its thing. And if fast fire trails or dirt roads are your favourite haunts, the XR is just the bike. It would make an excellent desert racer.

Water crossings were never a problem with the XR during the test but the XT gave up the ghost the minute it got its feet wet. The XR will easily wade through water tank deep without so much as a flutter. It's a fish. In contrast, the Yamaha exhibited a distinct aversion to water in any form, from rain up.

Top brakers, low maintenance

The brakes on both bikes are excellent, with the XR being a little more effective on or off the dirt. The stoppers on the XT proved to be a little spongy. The only thing you should be careful of here is remembering the XT has only dual-purpose tyres mounted. When it comes to scrubbing a great deal of speed off the XT on the dirt, the Trail Wing tyres skate as if they were on ice. There are some better dual-purpose tyres available which offer both reasonable dirt performance and adequate road safety. If you plan to use an XT on the dirt much, invest in a set.

Maintenance on either bike should be minimal. Chain adjustment and keeping an eye on spoke tension is about the only frequent work required. The XT suffers from too small a chain. The dinky 428 chain is a joke and will stretch like a rubber band. The XR has an O-ring sealed 520 chain which is much better, but the one on the test bike stretched more than we expected, despite regular lubing. Both bikes have snail cam chain adjusters which make chain work a cinch. Both machines have small foam air filter elements which are easily cleaned and replaced.

The XT and XR are supplied with tools, those on the XT being found in a novel and effective compartment moulded into the plastic mudguard behind the seat. Everything necessary is provided except a spoke wrench, which is a serious oversight. Honda offers an excellent multi-purpose tool located in the rear vinyl pouch. It's a good idea to carry a screwdriver as well, though.

For the most part, the 200s are well equipped to handle the rigours of being flung around the scrub without things breaking too easily. The notable exception is the Honda's speedo, which is a little too large and is therefore vulnerable. A previous rider had dropped the test XR, fracturing the headlight/number plate bracket and dinging the speedo. A smaller unit like the Yamaha's could be tucked further out of harm's way.

So there you have the 200 cm³ four-stroke class. It's either Yamaha's dual-purpose all-rounder or Honda's enduro/playbike. The determining factor of which to buy is really the intended use of the machine and the depth of your wallet. On the road, the Yamaha will cost around $1400, the Honda closer to $1850.

Our choice? Simple. If we wanted to buy a first bike for the dirt, or a commuter on which we could also do dirt riding, the XT would be the natural choice. It has styling, performance, and a nice price tag.

But if we wanted a four-stroke to get into enduros, or a serious dirt bike which could be used on very short hauls on the road, then we'd take a breath and go for the XR. The XR is geared more for the rider who has been riding long enough to know he wants more performance, and who appreciates that it doesn't come cheap.

— D.E.

Both bikes show up well in the scrub. The Yam (left) is light, low and nimble, but suffers from compromise gearing and tyres. The Honda (below) loves rough terrain, the rougher the better. It can also handle water much better than the XT (see opening-spread photos).

Yamaha XT200J

ENGINE

Single cylinder air-cooled, four-stroke with single intake and exhaust valves. Single overhead chain driven cam.

Claimed power	13.4 kW at 8000 rpm
Claimed torque	15.7 Nm at 7000 rpm
Bore x stroke	67.0 x 55.7 mm
Displacement	196 cm³
Compression ratio	9.5:1
Carburation	24 mm Teikei
Air filter	Oiled foam
Ignition	Capacitor discharge
Lubrication	Wet sump

TRANSMISSION

Helical primary gear drive through wet multiplate clutch and five-speed gearbox. Final drive by roller chain.*

Ratios (overall:1)

First	33.57
Second	21.20
Third	15.62
Fourth	12.32
Fifth	9.73
Primary reduction:	3.318:1
Secondary reduction:	3.571:1

FRAME AND BRAKES

Welded tubular steel frame of diamond design using engine as stressed member. Single downtube and upper backbone. Box section alloy cantilever swinging arm mounted on needle roller bearings. Front suspension: telescopic forks with leading axle. Oil damped with air assisted coil springs. Rear suspension: Single Kayaba shock with nitrogen/oil damper and coil spring. Variable preload settings available for spring.

Front suspension travel	205 mm
Rear suspension travel	190 mm
Fork rake	27 degrees
Front wheel trail	108 mm
Front brake	single leading/trailing drum
Rear brake	single leading/trailing drum
Front tyre	2.75 x 21 Bridgestone
Rear tyre	4.10 x 18 Bridgestone

DIMENSIONS

Dry weight	99 kg
Seat height (bike unladen)	835 mm
Wheelbase	1335 mm
Ground clearance	265 mm
Fuel capacity (incl. reserve)	7.3 litres (1.3 litres reserve)

EQUIPMENT

Footpegs	Serrated steel
Controls	Dog-leg lever
Kill button	Yes
Guards	Plastic front/rear
Tank	Pressed steel
Toolkit	Yes
Throttle	Single cable semi-side pull type

TEST MACHINE

Manufacturer	Yamaha Motor Co. Ltd., Japan
Test machine	McCulloch of Australia, Seven Hills, NSW.
Price	$1399

SUMMARY

RATINGS	Poor	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Outstanding
ENGINE					
Responsiveness				●	
Smoothness					●
Low rev power				●	
Midrange power				●	
Top end power			●		
Starting			●		
Quietness					●
TRANSMISSION					
Clutch				●	
Gearbox operation			●		
Ratio suitability			●		
SUSPENSION					
Front travel				●	
Rear travel				●	
Front operation				●	
Rear operation				●	
Front/Rear match				●	
RIDING					
Steering — soft ground tracks			●		
Steering — hard ground tracks				●	
Brakes overall			●		
Ability to slide				●	
Stability on jumps			●		
Stability and predictability overall				●	
Slow, tight radius turns				●	
Medium, variable radius turns			●		
Fast, wide radius turns			●		
Ease of riding in mud conditions				●	
In sand conditions			●		
Manoeuvrability overall				●	
Ability to forgive rider error				●	
Hill climbing				●	
Competition suitability		●			
GENERAL					
Riding position					●
Wheel changing			●		
Ride comfort					●
Tyres			●		
Location of controls				●	
Quality of finish					●
Mechanical access			●		
Overall design				●	
VALUE FOR MONEY					●

Best points: Excellent handling on both road and dirt. Excellent attention to detailing and styling. Impressive fuel consumption. Very light for dual-purpose four-stroke.
Worst points: Extremely poor waterproofing. Sometimes questionable starting record. Should have six-speed gearbox to offer better dirt gearing.

Honda XR200R

ENGINE

Single cylinder air-cooled four-stroke with chain driven single overhead cam, single intake and exhaust valves.

Claimed power	14.2 kW at 9000 rpm
Claimed torque	16.7 Nm at 7000 rpm
Bore x stroke	65.5 x 57.8 mm
Displacement	195 cm³
Compression ratio	10.0:1
Carburation	26 mm Slide/needle
Air filter	Oiled foam
Ignition	Capacitor discharge
Lubrication	Wet sump

TRANSMISSION

Helical primary gear drive through wet multi-plate clutch and six-speed gearbox. Final drive by O-ring sealed roller chain.

Ratios (overall:1)

First	35.50
Second	24.88
Third	18.59
Fourth	14.49
Fifth	11.83
Sixth	10.06
Primary reduction:	3.333:1
Secondary reduction:	3.846:1

FRAME AND BRAKES

Tubular welded steel diamond design frame with single downtube. Engine acts as stressed member. Box section steel swinging arm mounted on needle roller bearings. Front suspension: Showa telescopic forks with leading axle, oil damped with air-assisted coil springs. Rear suspension: single Showa shock mounted in Pro-Link system. Coil spring with nitrogen/oil damper. Variable spring preload and rebound damping.

Front suspension travel	249 mm
Rear suspension travel	247 mm
Fork rake	28.3 degrees
Front wheel trail	125 mm
Front brake	Single leading/trailing drum
Rear brake	Single leading/trailing drum
Front tyre	3.00 x 21 IRC
Rear tyre	4.10 x 18 IRC

DIMENSIONS

Dry weight	101 kg
Seat height (bike unladen)	890 mm
Wheelbase	1355 mm
Ground clearance	340 mm
Fuel capacity (incl. reserve)	8 litres (2 litres reserve)

EQUIPMENT

Footpegs	Cleated steel, spring loaded
Controls	Dog-leg alloy levers
Kill button	Yes
Centrestand	No
Owner's Manual	Yes
Toolkit	Single multi-purpose tool
Throttle	Single cable side-pull type

TEST MACHINE

Manufacturer	Honda Motor Co. Ltd., Japan
Test machine	Bennett Honda, Alexandria, NSW
Price	$1849

SUMMARY

RATINGS	Poor	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Outstanding
ENGINE					
Responsiveness					●
Smoothness		●			
Low rev power				●	
Midrange power					●
Top end power					●
Starting					●
Quietness	●				
TRANSMISSION					
Clutch				●	
Gearbox operation				●	
Ratio suitability				●	
SUSPENSION					
Front travel			●		
Rear travel				●	
Front operation			●		
Rear operation				●	
Front/Rear match				●	
RIDING					
Steering — soft ground tracks				●	
Steering — hard ground tracks				●	
Brakes overall					●
Ability to slide					●
Stability on jumps					●
Stability and predictability overall				●	
Slow, tight radius turns				●	
Medium, variable radius turns				●	
Fast, wide radius turns				●	
Ease of riding in mud conditions			●		
In sand conditions					●
Manoeuvrability overall				●	
Ability to forgive rider error				●	
Hill climbing				●	
Competition suitability			●		
GENERAL					
Riding position			●		
Wheel changing				●	
Ride comfort			●		
Tyres			●		
Location of controls				●	
Quality of finish				●	
Mechanical access				●	
Overall design				●	
VALUE FOR MONEY			●		

Best Points: Extremely responsive motor with excellent power. Great waterproofing. Very rigid frame with good suspension. Reliable and durable machine without unnecessary accessories. Starting never required more than one kick.
Worst points: Vulnerable speedo. Very low gearing overall which helps make road performance poor. Price of registered machine — Wow!