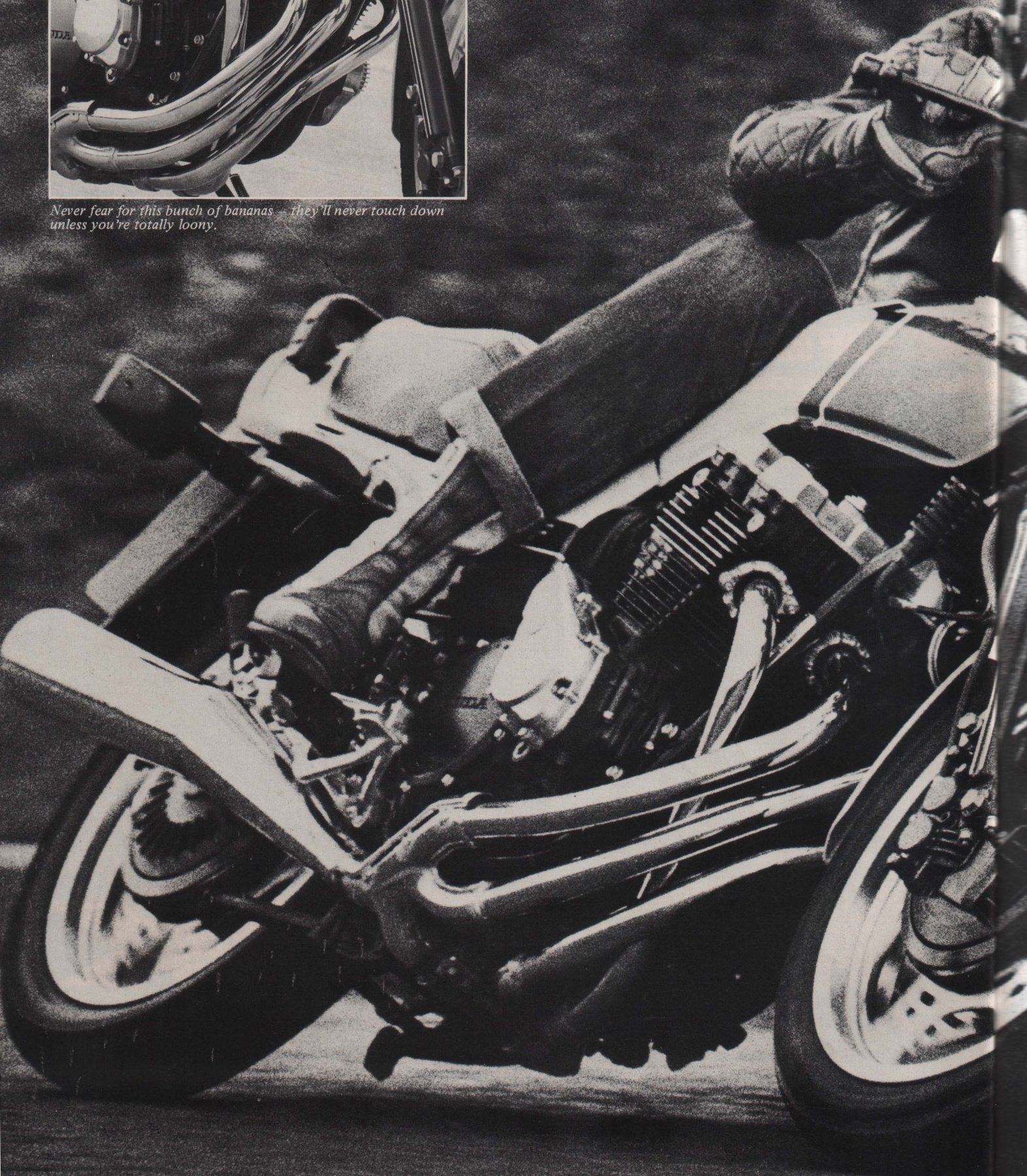
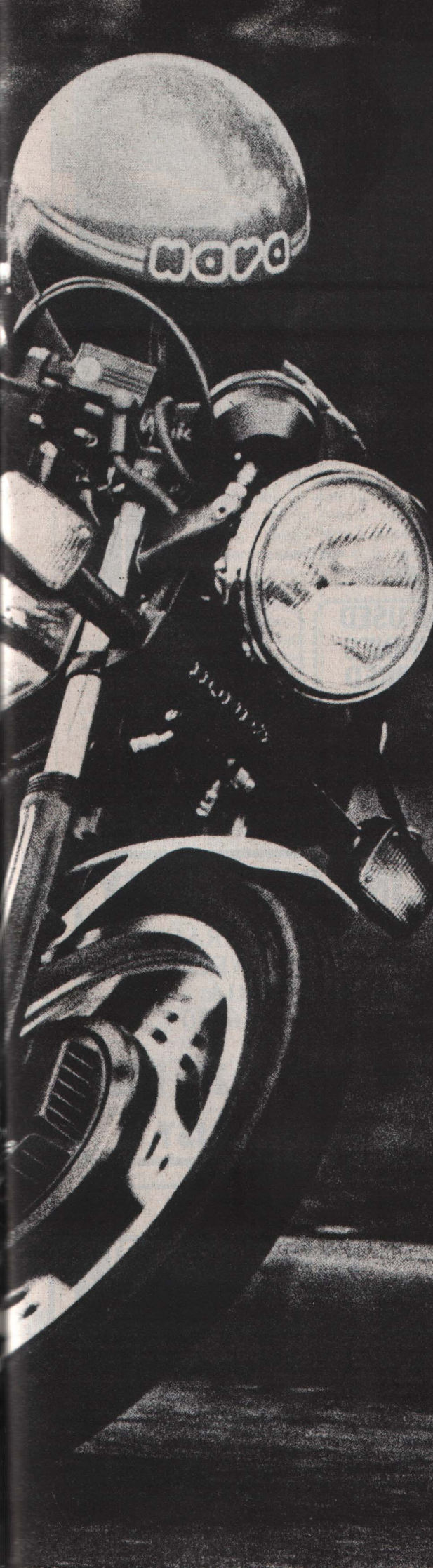


*Never fear for this bunch of bananas — they'll never touch down unless you're totally loony.*







# FAB FOUR

**As a reincarnation of the old 400 four, Honda's CBX550F is a real challenge to the 350 Yam**

Suffering the bike hack's equivalent of sod's law is always a hazard on a magazine like *Which Bike?* Hardly had the ink dried on April's issue which trumpeted (in strident tones so loud even *Motor Cycle Screws*, Myles behind of course, noticed it) the virtues of Kawasaki's GPz550 than we have a pretender ready to topple the King from his throne.

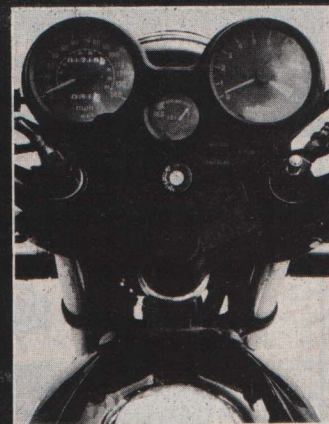
This really is the year of the 550. Any suspicions you might have had about the shift of attention from the heavyweights to the smaller bikes will surely now have been squashed. For here we have Honda's CBX550F, a four-cylinder machine that is only about 50 pounds heavier than a 250 Super Dream, makes as much power as the original CB750 Honda four and can accelerate so hard it almost takes your breath away.

The parallels with the GPz550 are too many to pass over without comment. Top speed (according to our two-way tests) of both bikes is within a gnat's whisker of 123mph. The quarter-mile times are both in the twelve-second bracket with terminal speeds well over 100mph. Both weigh well under 450 pounds with a full tank of fuel. Both cost around £1750 at full RRP. And I could go on. Both have six-speed gearboxes with nigh-on the same overall gearing. Both have 10,000rpm redlines. It's as if each factory knew what the other was up to and tried to produce something slightly better.

Fast and furious both these bikes are, but that's

not to say that they're not dissimilar. While the Kawasaki is an elegant and refined solution to the problem of boxing superbike performance in a small package, the Honda comes across as a twitchy little hot-rod, ready to snap into action at the twist of a wrist.

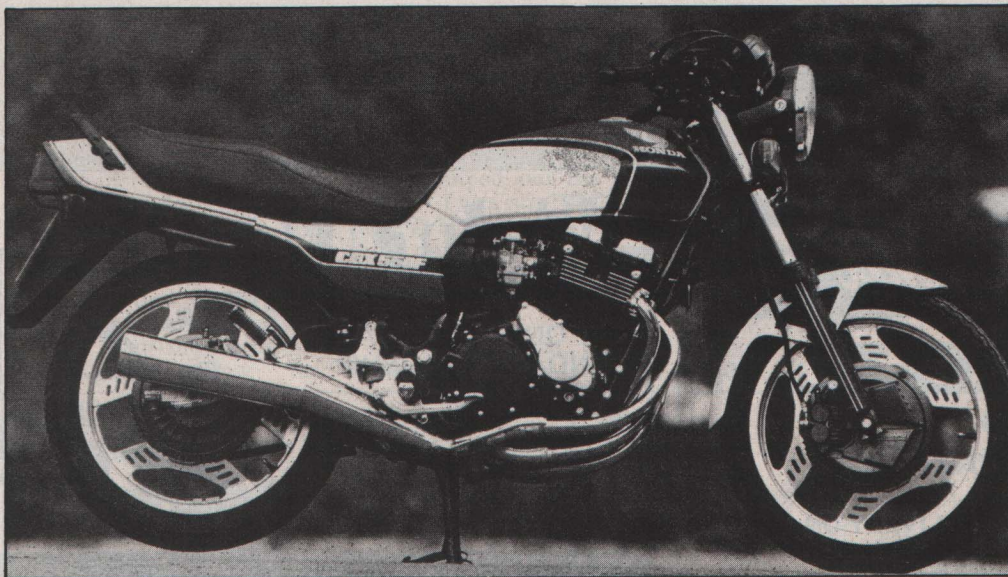
Reason why this should be so is immediately clear when both bikes are sat side by side. The CBX550F is short



and squat: the wheelbase is nearly three inches shorter than the GPz at 54.3 inches, and the handlebar gives almost a racer's crouch. If anyone is still moaning over the demise of the old CB400F, they need cry no more: the old fab four is back with a bang in a new incarnation. But this time it comes slightly longer (only an inch) but with 65 eager ponies to replace the 400's 38.

But how can Honda offer a bike that packs such a punch? After all, 12.7 seconds in the quarter with a terminal speed of 103mph used to be the preserve of



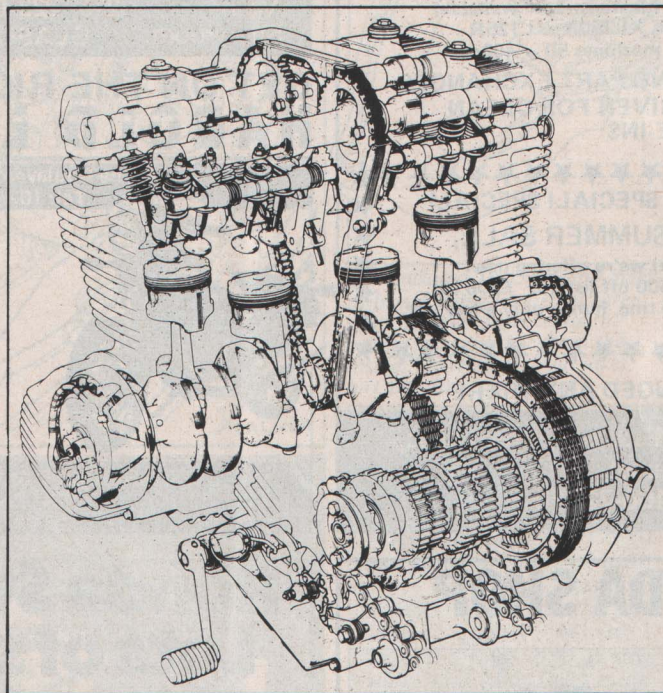


bikes like the Z900 Kawasaki (even the XJ750 Yamaha in last month's issue only managed 12.88 seconds). Basically it comes from putting a very-highly tuned motor in a small bike. But, remarkably, the CBX550F doesn't feel highly strung.

The 573cc (59.2x52mm) motor is a bored and stroked version of the Japanese market's CBX400F. It uses four valves per cylinder, arranged in the latest fashion with a narrow included angle so that a high 9.5:1 compression ratio can be used while still running on low-octane fuel. Like the recent Suzukis, valve clearance is adjusted on small rockers with screws, so time-consuming shim replacement isn't necessary during servicing. Primary drive is by a single Hy-vo type chain direct from the crank between the third and fourth pots to the clutch. Carburation is by four 25mm constant-velocity units. There's no suggestion that this four should be anything but a peaky sewing machine.

Yet it pulls like a train from 2,000rpm in top, keeps it up except for a slight lull in the proceedings at around 5,000 and then snorts all the way to the top of the 11,200rpm red line. The torque it develops is so strong that it can pull incredibly high gearing with only 5,700rpm at 70mph and just over 8,000rpm at 100mph. The only indication that you're on a four is the typically buzzy feel of the motor at higher revs and its turbine-like tractability.

The strong acceleration is due to this spread of power and six ratios that are perfectly matched for sprinting. Bottom gear is good for 40mph, yet cracking the throttle open from a standing start is enough to keep the front wheel hovering on the tarmac beyond the change up to second.



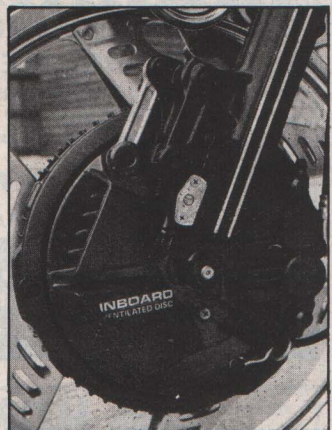
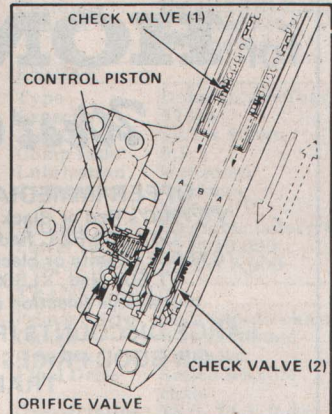
This sort of use isn't a recipe for good fuel consumption, however, despite the high gearing in sixth. And the darn thing is so engaging you can't help but squirt it everywhere. Everything works so well — gears, clutch and controls are filched right off the original CBX six — that any rider with red blood in his veins will be seduced into adopting a race face, will turn off the motor-way and look for the nearest piece of twisty tarmac. Result is consumption in the low forties and a range of only 140 miles if you're lucky, or very timid.

There are many good reasons why the chassis matches the engine well. The bike feels taut but can just as easily be flung with precision into corners. The suspension is supple, though it verges on the harsh side of comfort if you take it for long cruises — but that's the price of a short wheelbase. If you want, the front fork air pressure, set on one valve for

convenience, can be adjusted between 11 and 17psi to give a soft ride at the bottom of the range or more precise cornering at the top. As might be expected, the rear suspension is by Pro-link with a cast-alloy swing arm transmitting the suspension loads to the single air shock by a linkage. The top pressure for the shock is 57psi but even at the upper end of the range it wasn't hard or well damped enough to prevent a wallow or two. On the other hand, the bike could be run so hard that it's likely that any other system would have been tied in knots. If you like to fiddle with the pressures you'll dislike the inaccessibility of the valve.

The tyres and wheels are low-profile covers and wide rims. The front is a 360H18 Dunlop on an MT2.15 Comstar wheel while the back is a 410H18 with an 80 percent aspect ratio. This gives great stability but we found that so much power could be fed through it that you had to be

# FAB FOUR



Top: Unashamed sports bike though the CBX550 is, it's got useful grab rails and room for luggage cases. Above: The inboard discs and anti-dive gear make wheel removal tricky.

careful not to slide the rear end.

And so on to the brakes. The new trick-looking Inboard Ventilated Discs did work exceptionally well. The power of the twin front units was stunning, even though they're nominally of only 9½ inches diameter. Likewise the rear. But many who noticed them didn't like their fussy appearance, even though from an engineering point of view the idea of using calipers that grip the disc from the inside with the disc being located at its edge (for less flexing) and completely protected from the rain is difficult to argue against. Using the TRAC anti-dive system on one side only doesn't seem bright, though an advantage is that to maintain some semblance of composure under braking there's a fork brace between the legs that during quick steering manoeuvres grants better



precision to the navigation. The one black mark for the brakes, particularly the front, is that it takes ages to get the wheel in and out; this won't go down well with the practical mob who worry about punctures in the dead of night miles from nowhere. To them we can only say: tubeless tyres.

Sharp though the steering is, we did find one area of criticism. At low speeds it wobbles. Shut the throttle at 45mph and allow the

machine to slow through 38mph hands off, and a steering wobble starts that with the recommended front tyre pressure of 32psi just gets worse and worse. Dropping the pressure to 28psi damped out the problem but I was surprised it was there at all. Normally it won't show up but will be aggravated by passengers (who liked the roominess of the bike) or heavy luggage.

Detailing is great. Like the CBX again. There are alloy

foot controls and cable adjusters, replaceable ends to the footrests and an exhaust system that can be an endless source of entertainment (to look at) or a total pain (to clean). Remarkably, the CBX550F comes at a price that's less than the GPz550 and the XZ550 Yamaha.

In overall feel, performance and image the CBX is the closest anyone has got to Yamaha's RD350LC. Welcome back, son of the 400F. *John Nutting*

# FAB FOUR

<b>MODEL</b>	Honda CBX550F
<b>Price inc tax</b>	£1,720
<b>Warranty</b>	12 mnths/ unlitd
<b>Customer Contact</b>	Honda (UK) Ltd, 4, Power Road, London W4

<b>ENGINE</b>	
Type	Dohc 16-valve four
Capacity	573cc
Bore/stroke	59.2 x 52mm
Comp ratio	9.5:1
Lubrication	Wet sump
Carburetion	4x25mm Keihin CV
Ignition	Electronic inductive
Power (bhp)	65 @ 10,000
Torque (lb-ft)	36.2 @ 8,000

<b>TRANSMISSION</b>	
Primary drive	Invrtd-tooth chain
Clutch	Wet multiplate
Gearbox	Six speed
Final Drive	Sealed RK50M chain
Overall ratios	18.0, 12.3, 9.61, 7.75, 6.72&5.92:1

<b>ELECTRICS</b>	
Power source	AC generator
Battery	12V 12Ah
Headlamp	60/55W quartz H4

<b>CHASSIS</b>	
Frame	Tubular semi-cradle
Front susp	Telescopic air fork with TRAC anti-dive
Rear susp	Alloy swing arm with single air shk
Front brake	Twin 9in(230mm) enclosed discs
Rear brake	Single 9in(230mm) enclosed disc
Front tyre	Dunlop 360H18 F11 tubeless
Rear tyre	Dunlop 410H18 K527 tubeless

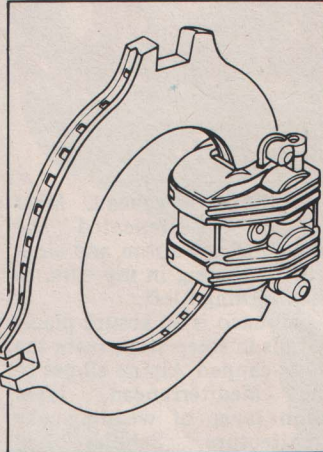
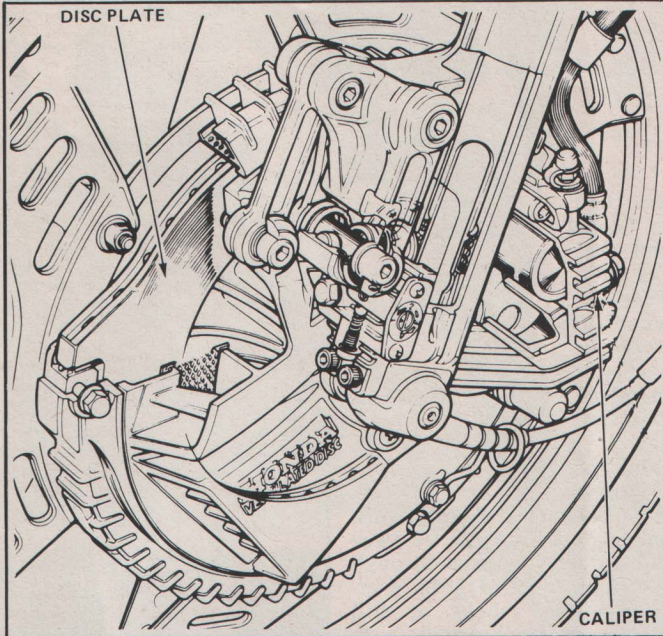
<b>CAPACITIES</b>	
Fuel tank	3.7gal (17 litre) inc 0.6gal res
Oil	3.0 litre

<b>DIMENSIONS</b>	
Wheelbase	54.3in (1380mm)
Seat height	31.1in (790mm)
H'bar width	26.4in (670mm)
Grnd clrnce	5.9in (150mm)
Rake/trail	64deg/3.8in (97mm)
Dry weight	406 lb (184kg)

<b>EQUIPMENT</b>	
Elec start, mirrors, turn sig, fuel speedo, rev meter, sidestnd, h'dlamp flasher, str lock, seat lock, fuel cap lock, trip meter, security chain, air gauge, tools.	

<b>PERFORMANCE</b>	
Top speed	123.4mph prone (mean)
St ¼-mile time	12.7 @ 103.9mph
Speedo	30 (27.5)mph Indicated/ 50 (46.0)mph (actual)
Speeds in gears	40, 59, 76 @ max power
Test weight	94, 108, 123 mph (full tank)
Rpm @ 70mph	448 lb
in top	5700
Fuel consump	average 44.2mpg
worst	39.1mpg
best	54.8mpg
Tank range	to reserve 165 miles

Speed figures obtained on the MIRA timing straight and are two-way averages.

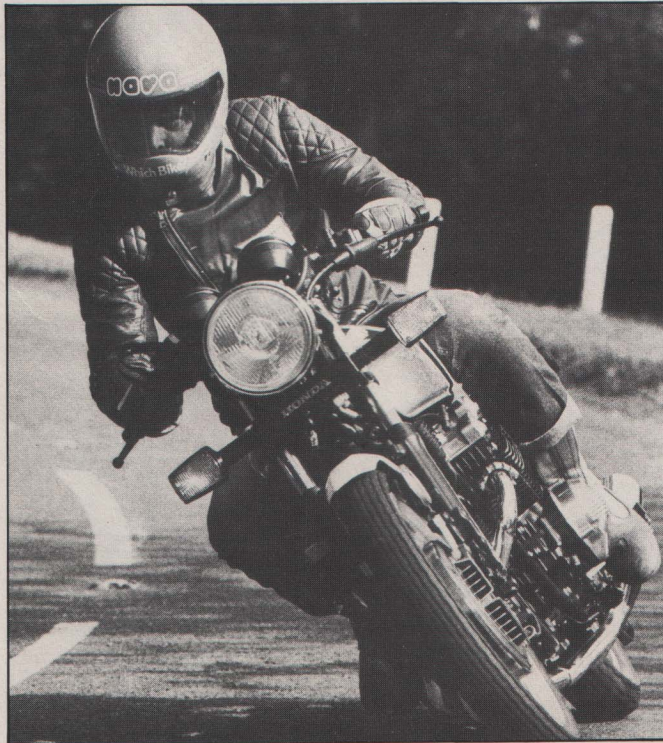


The enclosed Discs operate 'back-to-front', being located at three spots on their edges while the caliper grips the disc from the inside. There's two front discs but anti-dive is one-sided.

## SECOND OPINION

I should have known. When Schnapps Schiller and I told the Honda lads what Kawasaki's GPz550 had done at MIRA (mean of 123mph, standing quarter 12.98) they just smiled quietly. When I rode the CBX 550, I saw why. The bike feels more substantial than the old CB400F, but is only marginally bigger, offering a lovely riding position, though curiously not a very comfortable seat. But the motor is exceptional, with almost twice the power of the smaller four. It is infinitely flexible - top runs from 10-120mph - with phenomenal power in every gear through the range. Perfect urban manners on the one hand combine with hair-raising acceleration on the other to make a formidable package. The steering is quick and precise, the handling completely predictable, the brakes as good as anything on the road. It's an ideal bike for blasting through twisty roads, and, with a truly easy cruising speed of 90-100mph and excellent pillion comfort, it's hard to see the need for a bigger bike.

*Mark Revelle*



550cc Comparison				
	Top speed mph	St. ¼-mile secs/mph	Fuel mpg	Kerb wt lbs
Honda CBX550F	123.4	12.70s/103.9	44.2	448
Kawasaki GPz550	122.7	12.98s/102.7	54.0	434
Yamaha XZ550	117.5	13.33s/98.0	46.0	469
Suzuki GS550M	109.0	14.55s/92.5	59.3	522