

We ride Balestrieri's

FACTORY HONDA

A teensy weensy peek into a works Paris-Dakar machine.

Andrea Balestrieri won the first Incas Rally in Peru this year, using virtually the same works Honda XL600 he used to place 3rd in the 1985 Paris-Dakar Rally. After he'd clinched his Peruvian win he relaxed enough to offer people a ride on his machine.

by Geoff Eldridge

This isn't a test. It isn't even a preview. It's simply initial impressions after a half hour ride in the desert near the finish of the final Special Stage in Peru.

What the hell. Any ride we get on a works bike is so rare that it deserves heaps of publicity.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Of all the machines in Peru, this Honda caused the most interest. Why not? It was the only Japanese factory machine and it sure looked the part. There were other factory specials like the Betas, but they were basically stockers with big tanks. The Honda was a hand built million dollar special from the ground up.

The tank was a hand crafted alloy and had droop sides to keep the weight of the fuel low. I'd only be guessing at the capacity but it looked like around 30 litres. On each side there were fibreglass protection shrouds in case the bike was thrown down the road; at first I thought they were airscoops, but they weren't.

The frame was special, formed around the engine and backbone with huge rectangular section chrome moly steel, while the rear was made of square section alloy. The rear loop was bolted on much like a CR motocross Honda.

Suspension was Pro-Link at the rear, using a special shock, while up front the fork legs were machined from one piece of alloy and the internals were specially matched to the machine's weight and use. Wheel travel both ends wasn't anything spectacular, although it was more like an XR than an XL.

There was even a special release valve attached to both fork caps to bleed off any air pressure buildup. Someone thought it was a pump to add air after refuelling, when the overall weight would be

considerably more than when running near empty, but there was no evidence of a pump. Sounds like a good theory, though.

There were two sidestands to ease the task of changing tyres in the desert, where laying the bike on its side while full of fuel would have presented exhaustion problems in Peru's rarified atmosphere at 4,000 metres. The wheels looked standard, and I was amazed to see that Balestrieri seemed to place no great importance on the quality of his front tyre – at the finish of the event it was just about bald, indicating either he didn't change it once or the Honda was unusually heavy on front tyres. I think the former is more likely.

The seat was a specially formed masterpiece with a leather hide top stitched to the blue Honda vinyl sides. It was wide and had an excellent foam consistency to suit long distance riding.

Up front was a single disc brake, with a normal drum brake at the rear.

There was a dual high output headlight faired into the roadbike-style fixed fairing. The tripmeter looked like a stock XR computer digital model that allows you to add or subtract tenths of a kilometre at each route sheet mark to maintain an accurate reading. The figures were very large, making mileage readouts easy even at speed while you were concentrating. Balestrieri used a conventional route sheet winder that the Europeans seem to be able to get pretty freely, and you wound it on with your left hand.

RIDING IMPRESSIONS

The first thing that surprised me was the sheer size of the Honda. With the fixed fairing stretching out up front, and the huge tank, the bike seemed enormous, reminding me of a Kawasaki Voyager I once rode.

This fixed fairing gave me the ini-



tial impression that the steering would be slow and ponderous, but it wasn't. In fact the bike steered beautifully in the desert where I rode it, lousy front tyre notwithstanding. Maybe Balestrieri never even noticed his poor front rubber because the steering was so good.

The next thing to surprise me was how new and tight the whole thing felt. It was the same bike he'd ridden in the Paris-Dakar and also in the Pharaoh's Rally in Egypt, so it had plenty of miles on it, but the bike felt like new. He had his own full time mechanic who would work on the bike for hours each night, replacing things and solving any problem areas that had cropped up during the day's riding, so no doubt that contributed to the new feel. At one stage an engine problem developed and a whole engine was changed.

Another thing that surprised me was the motor – it didn't feel all that much different to the stock XL600 I had been riding, despite the special (loud) pipe and the idea I had that they must have been using a cam and a compression ratio more like that from an XR than an XL (even though there were big XL stickers all over the tank I didn't believe them for an instant).

The bike felt very stable over the natural wind-formed corrugations of the desert, but it wasn't an instant cornering machine like the XR, mainly because of the huge tank. However, despite this bulk the bike didn't feel particularly heavy unless you wanted to do a bermshot or

change direction in a hurry.

It was easy to get the front wheel up – plenty easier than on my own XL600 – and it didn't feel as if long distances cross country would present too many drains on your energy reserves.

The bottom line is that this is a works bike because it reflects the needs of a particular rider. There are only three such Hondas in the world and they are all similar, but each one is personally tuned for the rider aboard. In this case it is obvious that Balestrieri doesn't see it necessary to have anything with a wildly powerful engine or long travel suspension.

It's a finely crafted hand built machine with an emphasis on going the distance. Most of the trick items are for durability, dependability and convenience during Rally style events and if I expected it to be something spectacular in performance I was disappointed. The handling felt very good for the small ride I had, but again, it wasn't half the weight of my XL, and neither did it have super dooper suspension that turned a 650 km ride into a three minute seat on your favourite armchair.

What it did say to me was that production bikes these days are very good, even though it was still painfully obvious that riding a machine like this would be a tremendous advantage.

And what I'd basically like to say of it is, I sure wish it was me aboard, not Balestrieri. I might have come 9th, not 10th.

