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THE QUALITY MONTHLY

Motorcycle SPORT



APRILIA RS250



GUZZI NEVADA

On Test: **MUZ SKORPION**

Single stinger

APRILIA RS250

What a Cracker!

GUZZI NEVADA

Italian Custom

HONDA XR250

Dirt Devil

Cagiva v Citroen

Counting the costs!

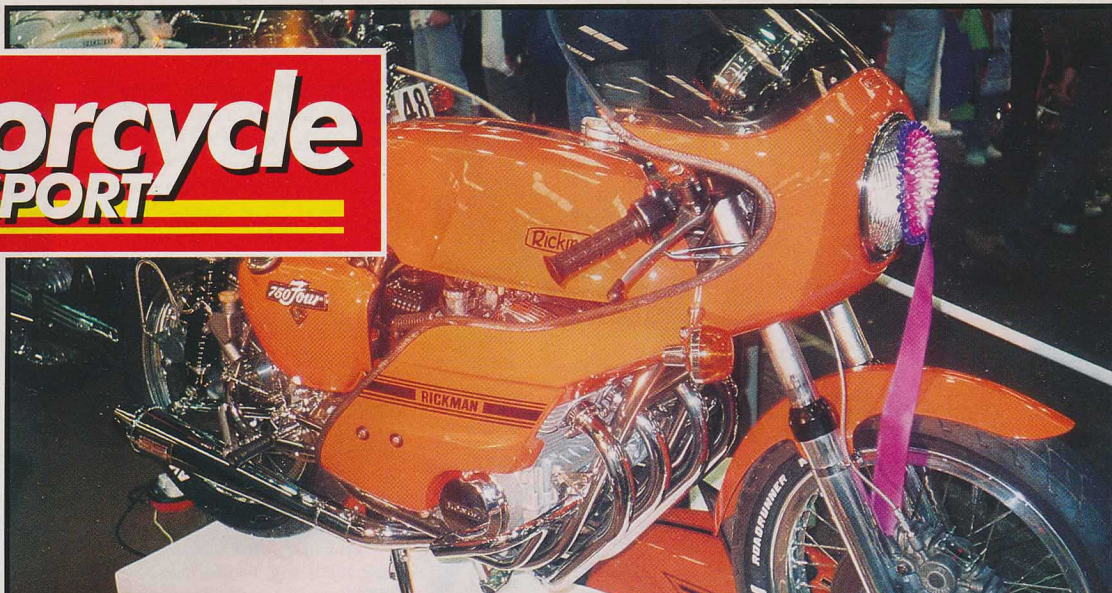
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ISSUE NUMBER: 424

Motorcycle SPORT



Motorcycle shows extend throughout the year these days, culminating of course in the Big One at the NEC in November. Motorcycle Sport is pleased to be associated with several of the 1996 shows, as detailed in the "News" pages in this issue

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Letters

Advocates of new-age "FF" motorcycles, controlled by supine pilots, ignore loss of the motorcyclist's bonus of a lofty riding stance. Mr Hill writes, mildly, that the conventional bike's riding position helps in overtaking in safety; Mr Thompson says the FF-ers are bonkers. Takes all sorts ... especially among MCS correspondents.

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One Track

OT sheds a tear for all the poor folk out there who don't ride a motorcycle: most to be pitied are the faint-hearted ex-bikers seduced at an impressionable stage into Fiats and Rovers and such .

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Books Reviewed

"Jim likes to preach" - Jim being Jim Rogers who has written a book on investment opportunities ... presumably for bikers ... capitalising meantime on other opportunities while riding with a beautiful companion, Tabitha. They're both on BMWs, though that is possibly not significant, and cover many boring miles together. "Investment Biker" (£12.99 to you, guv) is a world away from Bacon's feel-the-width efforts reviewed in this issue.

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What a Cracker!

And it's an Aprilia - the RS250. Mr Kerr rides the road version of "Mad Max" Biaggi's world-championship-winning bike and thinks it's, well, pretty fair. (He quoted somebody else saying it was a cracker and drop-dead gorgeous, and that sort of thing; Mr K keeps a tight rein on his own adjectives.)

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Odd sort of title for an MCS article? Perhaps. The Spy examines the surprising proposition that a company man might not be better off financially in opting for a motorcycle instead of a car over a 15-20,000-mile year. A diesel engine and low-cost servicing make quite a difference

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Titch Allen recalls Ixion, masterly commentator on the world of motorcycling for over half a century.

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XR250

"Bomb-proof-reliable"

"Superbly finished"

"Unrivalled resale value"

Frank, are you trying to hint that this Honda is a pretty good bike?

THERE are very few motorcycles which engender the degree of affection which the Honda XR250 has achieved. The phenomenon is even rarer because the little XR has won hearts in a way which is most unusual for a sporting motorcycle. You don't find its fans raving ecstatically about the bike's handling, its power, or even its looks. In fact, in none of the key performance areas is this motorcycle anything other than quite ordinary when compared with the best dirt bikes on sale. No, what makes the XR quite outstanding is that it fulfils its design brief with a quite astonishing degree of success.

The XR epitomises Japanese manufacturers' greatest strength.

Except for a few notable hiccups, they are very proficient in assessing what the paying customer wants, and then making a good product to fill that need. In the case of the XR,

Melling says the XR is front-end heavy but happily demonstrates that with "thought and effort" the front wheel can be lofted

Honda discovered there was a market for a motorcycle capable of serious off-road use and yet with a road bike's ease of use, reliability, and longevity.

The XR goes back a long time in motorcycling terms. It began life as a more sports orientated version of Honda's XL250S and then went through a series of modifications gaining first single-shock Pro-link rear suspension in 1981 and then, three years later, the radially disposed four-valve RFVC engine which still powers it today.

Sixteen years is a long time for a bike to be around, and although XRs have changed in style and performance they have remained amazingly consistent in terms of character. XR owners know what they want before they buy their bikes, and Honda make sure they get it.

So what is the attraction of an XR? First and foremost is reliability – and I am not talking about the sort of reliability which gets you to work every day or enables a touring holiday to be undertaken without a support crew following in a large van. No, XR reliability

means being able to undertake a couple of days' trail riding in the harshest conditions, or competing in a serious enduro without the slightest concern that the bike might not finish. If an XR lets you down, then you really have neglected the bike – or stuffed it into something very, very solid at excessively high speed!

For this reason, the XR is very popular in countries where long-distance off-road events are somewhat more popular than they are in Britain. XRs are almost standard equipment for serious recreational riders in Australia and America, and whilst they are not up to winning desert races straight out of the crate a plethora of tuning parts has made them very competitive when tweaked.

The final part of the equation is the residual value of XRs in the secondhand market. Dirt bikes are infamous for stunningly severe depreciation but a cast around the classifieds for used XRs will show that they hold their price in a way which defies all received wisdom. Rarely, if ever, will you find a cheap, mint XR250.

I had not ridden an XR250 for some time and so was really looking forward to having a play on the latest manifestation of the beast. Towards the end of my serious racing career





On hard-packed going ...

I campaigned an XR200 for Honda UK, through Cartwrights of Stockport, and I had nothing but fond memories of this bike. I did 2,100 racing miles on it, and total engine maintenance was one adjustment of the tappets. It never threw me over the bars and we finished every event; so I must confess that I approached this test with a degree of bias.

Our test bike came from Jeff Pritchard, head honcho at Colwyn Bay Motorcycles, and my positive feelings were reinforced by his view. "The best recreational off-road bike on the

market". Since Jeff is a good enduro rider, as well as being an accomplished road-bike man, his views are always worthy of consideration.

The baby XR is one of the prettiest little bikes on sale today. Aesthetically, it looks absolutely right with a svelte elegance which produces a tickle in the loins of any dirt-bike rider. Cranking up the XR from cold is simple enough but does require a little thought. Like all modern four-stroke singles, the XR comes with an automatic decompressor. None of your "find tdc, ease over, long swing with follow through" – and then a trip to your favourite casualty

department if there was a shade too much advance on the Lucas Wading mag! No, the XR requires merely a firm prod, full choke and the tiniest amount of throttle. However, a little too much throttle and the motor will flood from cold. This technique requires a little learning but is more of a mild irritation than a fault.

Once started, the XR produces a symphonious noise, from the exhaust and motor playing in concord. Although not loud, it is harsh and non-XR enthusiasts compare it unfavourably with a giant cricket on steroids. XR fans flee down the standard excuse route of the guilty and claim that it has "character". Whilst it is extremely muted by comp. bike standards, the XR is just beginning to become noisy for trail riding in these days of four-strokes purring around like muted lawn mowers.

Like all competition based Hondas, the XR is cold-blooded. We had the bike on a hot day and even so there was no point in trying to pull away until the bike had been running for a couple of minutes. With the choke on, one could just ease across the 20m start line in an enduro within the one-minute allowance, but as for riding the bike in any practical sense, forget the notion!

The key problem is that, despite its off-road orientation making the bike look full-sized, there is only a 249cc engine lurking underneath the tank, and to get the thing to go requires lots of throttle. To get on the move on rough

It's super-stable through cambers. ▼





"The baby XR is one of the prettiest off-riders on sale today"

going demands the motor be wound up to 4 or 5 thou and the clutch fed in gently. This is no big-bore trailie capable of being ridden on a whiff of throttle from a standstill.

Before I am pilloried by XR owners, let me add that, once on the move, this is the best off-road 250 four-stroke Honda have ever produced and, unlike earlier models, it will plonk along at zero revs quite sedately. It might not be Eddie Lejeune's TLR trials bike but one can ride it very sensibly and sensitively – and these characteristics are now essential for responsible trail riding in our crowded island.

However, 1,200rpm pottering is not the bike's strong point. Let fly with the XR and the results are very pleasing indeed. In fact, they are so pleasing that one can easily forget to keep the bike in perspective. Given the XR in the 1970s, when I was riding internationals, I would have been in with a serious chance of major awards. The problem is that the two-strokes have made equally great strides, so once one has overcome the first flood of admiration for the XR's speed, brakes and handling it has to be remembered that the two-stroke opposition is still as far away as ever. Not perhaps for specialist four-stroke thoroughbreds produced by KTM and Husqvarna but certainly for the XR.

So what is wrong with the bike? The answer is absolutely and utterly *nothing* ... except that it doesn't do anything as well as its pure racing opponents.

Let's start with the motor. As I have already noted, the 250 XR needs to be revved for best effect. With a claimed power output of 30ps from the four-valve short-stroke motor, there is ample urge to deal with even the toughest

enduro going. Our test track contained a long, smooth 1 in 3 hill which should have really knocked the edge off the XR – but didn't. Given an aggressive style of attacking, we flew up the climb quite effortlessly and rather than coming down the gear box to keep the motor on the boil, I was able to change up, accelerating hard whilst climbing.

Equally impressive was the fact that I could knock the power right off, simulating dealing with an obstacle on a climb, like a fallen tree, a rock section, or a dead clubman lying next to his bike, and then open up the XR to pull away again; really quite impressive for a small-bore four-stroke.

To help the pilot keep the motor on the boil, the XR comes with a six-speed gearbox which gives a range of ratios capable of anything from 3mph trickling to 80 something miles per hour flat out on a forestry road. The gearbox is slightly notchy but this is a characteristic of four-stroke off-road singles, and XRs in particular. It's not that one misses gears – rather that there is a feeling that you might. Again, XR owners will condemn the critic by saying that if the gears engage, then what's the problem? And they are right, probably.

For the record, the pinions do pop in effortlessly, with or without the clutch, and no-one to my knowledge has ever broken an XR gear box except through extreme abuse.

Aiding the gearbox is a feather-light and abuse-proof clutch. A little explanation is needed for the sake of



road riders. On a racing dirt bike, the clutch has a range of duties outside its normal function. You need it to bite fiercely to lift the front wheel over logs or out of streams. Equally, it should be free from sulking when slipped heavily and repeatedly to get the motor back in the optimum power-band – for example, when the rider is chasing tenths of a second on a special test. Finally, the action should be light enough for the lever to be used all day and so protect the gearbox from the rider stomping in ratios clutchless as he becomes increasingly knackered.

Handling is archetypal XR. These bikes have a sort of hipperty-hopperty-playful-rabbit style of covering the ground which at first is not so much disconcerting as uninspiring in terms of generating rider confidence. However, the fact is that one can tie an XR in knots through rider error and whilst it will shake its head in despair it won't throw you off. At 1,425mm (56in), the wheel base is long enough to give stability whilst the 62°

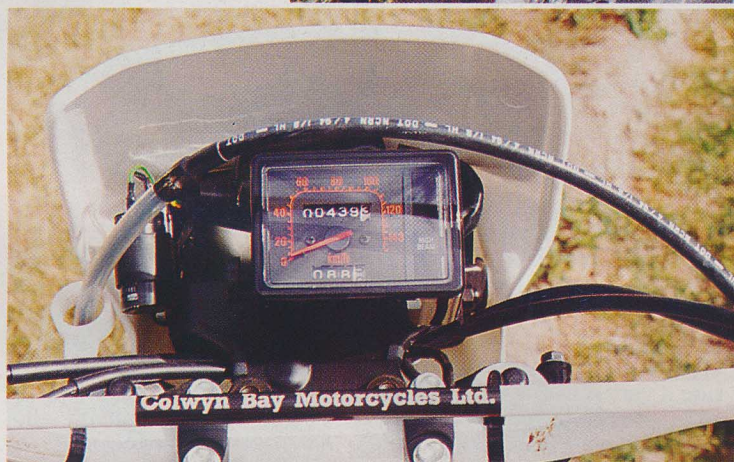
head angle leads to quick steering in and out of the trees. Overall, it's an excellent compromise.

The bike's greatest fault is that it is front-end-heavy and has an unhappy propensity to plough into obstacles. The front wheel can be lofted but it

takes thought and effort from the rider where, by comparison, a modern two-stroke makes the job effortless. This desire for the front wheel to stay glued to terra firma is a nuisance on flatish going and a real drawback downhill where the rider has to get well back over the rear wheel to stop it lifting.

The key to an off-road bike's performance is suspension, and there are two ways of looking at that provided on the XR. In basic terms, it is excellent. Showa cartridge forks – conventional units, not USD – and a fully adjustable Showa rear damper mean that the bike is equipped for serious, full-blown off-road use. What the suspension lacks is that effortless, suppleness which comes only with house-remortgaging-price racing units. Yes, the XR's suspension is excellent – but if only Honda had raided the parts bins which feed their XR motocross range

The front brake is first-class with plenty of feel and ample power for stopping what is quite a heavy bike. The rear is merely adequate, requiring rather more pressure than is ideal for a serious



Melling's idea of a full instrumentation package

off-road bike. By way of justification, if one were trickling down a really slimy off-cambered bank the rear brake would be largely unnecessary on the XR, blessed as it is with engine braking.

The ancillary bits on the XR are absolutely first-class. The ergonomics of the tank and saddle are superb. A wafer-thin tank holding just under two gallons of petrol and giving about a 75-mile range and a long, firm saddle mean that this is a bike which can be ridden all day in hard going without crippling the rider.

The instrumentation is my idea of perfection – a speedometer, easily re-set odometer, and that's all! None of your big girlie LED displays here. What the XR does come with is a first-class side-stand, with a hyper-strong return spring so that it doesn't flap about in rough going, and an excellent tool bag big enough to take everything needed for maintenance on the trail – plus a couple of bars of nut choc, the standard food for ravenous off-rovers.

The XR could be criticised for a lack of power when compared with two-strokes, or of second-rate suspension if put up against the best racing four-strokes. But such criticisms are flawed. The XR does its job well – whether the job be trail riding, racing or nipping down to the shops. It is bomb-proof-reliable, superbly finished and has an unrivalled re-sale value. In summary, Honda have hit the target dead centre.

This year, there's to be a new, faster, dry-sump XR with better suspension. If it has the previous model's reliability and build quality, then the legend can only grow.

FRANK MELLING



Rear disc is ok – but no more than that. Note snail-cam adjusters ... very useful on the trail