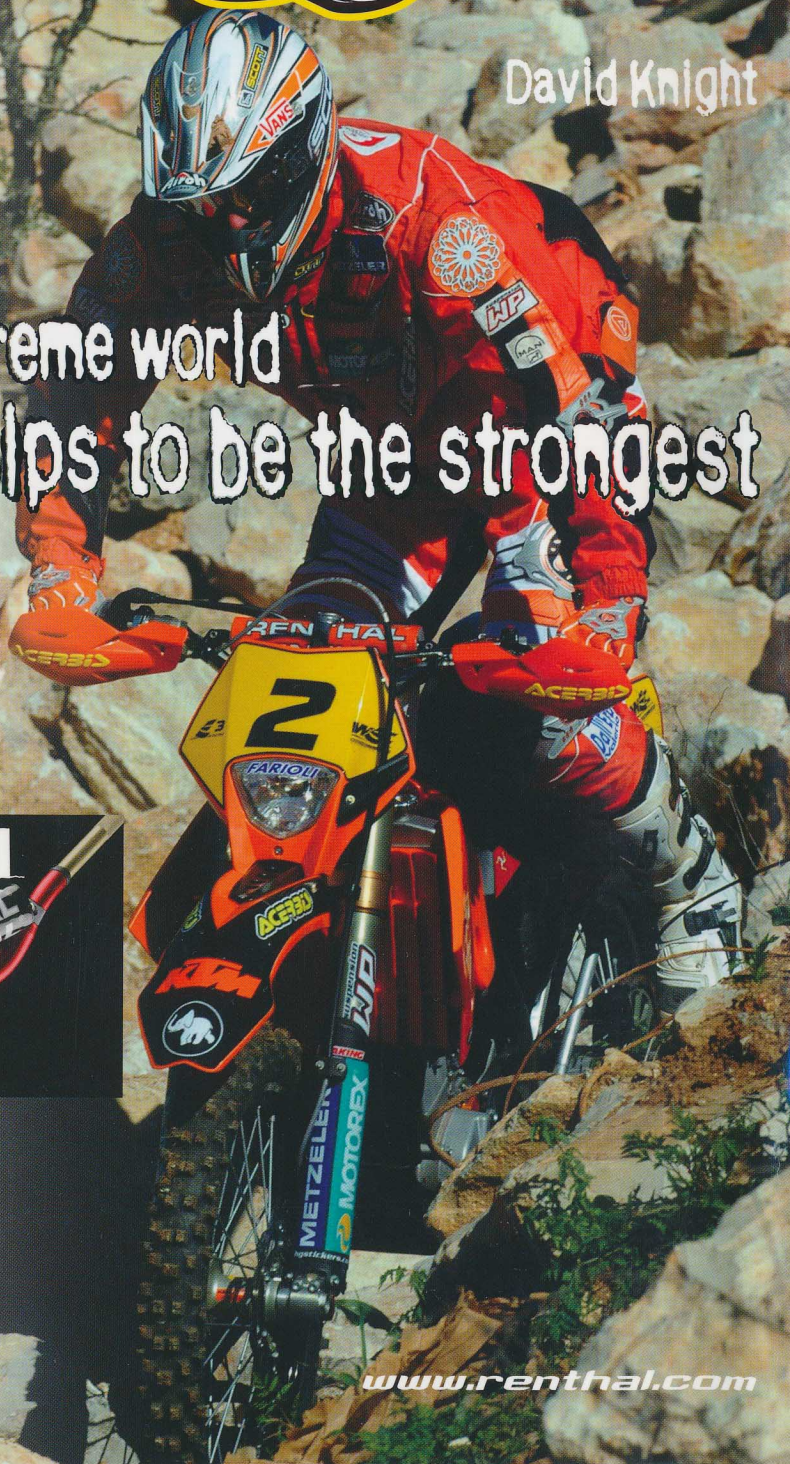
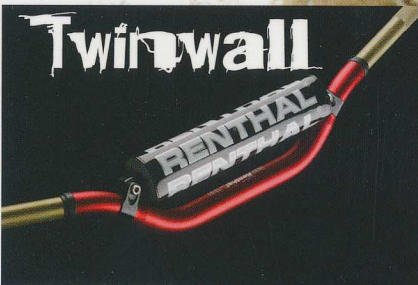


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07



Can you ride an enduro on a pair of small-bore
four-stroke trailies designed for the novice rider?
And would you really want to...?

SIZE MATTERS



Ah this takes me back to the early days of TBM... we were always up for a pointless challenge', I remarked to Mel on our way up to round three of the Wirral Off Road GB Hare Scrambles. The task in this case being to enter a pair of low-powered, low-capacity, low seat-height trailies in the UK's foremost three hour hare 'n' hounds series to see whether modest trail bikes could hack it in a three-hour enduro.

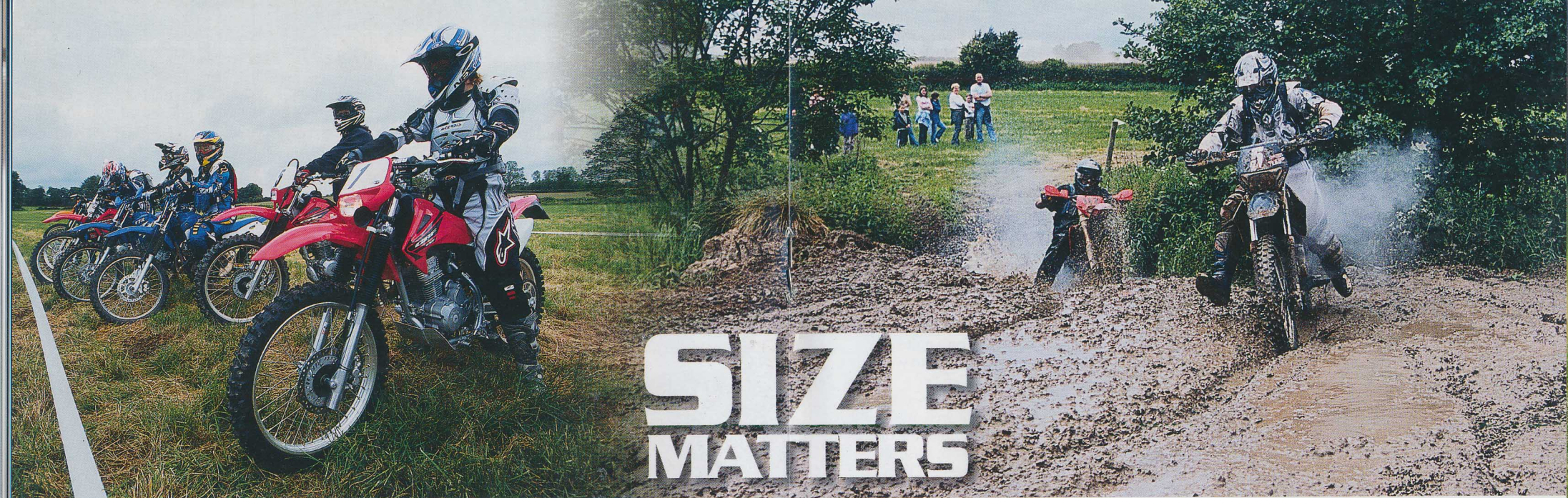
Of course you can race anything - there's nothing to stop you entering your sideboard if you feel so inclined - but if you happen to own a small capacity trailie and fancy a go at riding a competitive event like a hare 'n' hounds, just how disadvantaged are you going to feel? We were about to find out.

Fast 'n' Furious

Arriving at the Derbyshire track we were greeted by the amiable Steve Ireland who owns and runs the WOR club and whose events have attracted the likes of David Knight to come along and ride. 'You're going to love it today Si', he said in that soft Scouse accent of his, 'it's really fast going... What are you riding, a 450 or something....?' At that point I opened the back of the van to reveal our humble 200cc four-stroke trailies. 'Oh' said Steve, barely managing to stifle a giggle. 'Well good luck mate...'

Despite Steve's scepticism, I remained mildly optimistic that our choice of bikes might make for an afternoon's dirty fun, so what had we brought along to play with?





Honda's CRF230 is the grey-import trailie we first trail tested in TBM back in May 2004. It's got a rugged and energetic little air-chilled, SOHC, two-valve, 223cc electric-start lump providing the forward motion, while a compact steel frame (wrapped in up-to the minute plastics) ensures a commendably low 860mm (33.9in) seat height, and surprisingly good looks. Consequently the CRF has already become a firm favourite amongst newcomers to off-roading, together with a certain number of girlies, and those so short in the leg they don't need to bend down in order to tie their shoelaces.

Designed as a budget US play-bike, the 230F sports non-adjustable suspension (bar preload on the rear), a front disc/rear drum setup and horrible steel bars (which we swapped before the ride). What it doesn't have as standard is instrumentation or any form of lighting - however the bikes' various importers (Conquest Motorcycles in the case of our test bike) fit them with head and tail lights and then register them for the road, all within the retail price of £2995. Good value indeed.

By no co-incidence, the same outlay would secure you an AJP 200PR4: a Portuguese designed and assembled trailie which utilises a Taiwanese copy of the same electric-start, air-cooled motor as used in the CRF - albeit displacing just 198cc and lacking the Honda's sixth gear. When we trail tested the AJP200 this time last year we

discovered that you do get quite a lot more for your money compared with equivalent bikes like the Honda. Fewer ccs yes, but a (more-or less) full-sized chassis with a 910mm (35.9in) seat height, splendid 41mm Paioli front forks, a gorgeous polished alloy swing-arm, alloy bars and a front and rear disc combination. You also get an under-seat (clear) fuel-tank, alloy silencer and a basic (but perfectly adequate) array of dials/warning lamps. It may not be quite as dashing as the Honda, but it has the look of something a little more serious - which in this sector, marks it out as unusual.

Two's Company

The idea was that Mel would ride the 1.5hr ladies race in the morning - swapping bikes halfway through her race - and then I'd ride them both again in the 3hr afternoon race. That way we'd get the benefit of two sets of opinions on both bikes - sportsman and clubman.

Lining up alongside two other CRFs, Mel got a great start - off the line in fourth place - until she hooked neutral, and very nearly disappeared over the bars. Ah well, she'd have to make it up over the course of her lap. Here's what she had to say about the two bikes...

Mel: Is small really beautiful?

Be it clubbing in Ibiza, Big Mac meals or a glass of Pinot Grigio I've always liked 'havin' it large',

so how was I going to get on with racing the pint-sized Honda CRF230 and AJP200 in a pukka hare scramble? I was intrigued to find out as these sorts of low capacity trailies are aimed at people like me (ie off-road newbies looking for an intro into dirt riding, or as I prefer to think of myself: a 'lite' version of the average rider).

Electing to start my one-and-a-half hour ladies race on the CRF, I had to keep looking down to check I was actually on a bike as it felt incredibly quiet, light and, well... tiny. The air-cooled motor was responsive enough but as soon as I hit the first of many long straights the 230's lack of ponies became pretty obvious. The pitiful under-gearing didn't help matters as with the throttle fully open I was forced to stomp rapidly up the box to wring every last ounce of oomph out of the motor.

Into the woods and the Honda started to win back some much-needed brownie points. Tight nadergy going is what this bike excels at, and the quick steering combined with its willingness to go exactly where it was pointed made tree-dodging a doddle.

But the woods also revealed another downside in that the CRF has pretty basic, soft suspension which, when pitched into a hidden dip, made for some uncomfortable fork crashing. I also lost precious time (and my temper) when the engine decided to cut out round a corner whilst in third gear. After selecting neutral (it wouldn't start in

gear), it took at least ten manic prods of the leccy-start button before the engine spluttered into life again - not good. Looks-wise, I can't fault the CRF230, with its modern angular styling, flat seat and race-look white side panels, but it reminded me of a soufflé - beautiful to look at but a bit light and fluffy underneath. After three laps I pitted and hopped onto the Portuguese-built AJP trailie.

Straightaway I wished I had swapped earlier on. Now, I have definitely been spoilt here at TBM by the number of 'proper' dirt bikes I've ridden so far, but this little thumper immediately felt like one of them.

The much higher seat height, larger physique and slightly torquier motor all made for a superior ride. I really like the subtle low-end power a small four-stroke delivers and this one was no exception, especially after the rev-happy CRF which wanted to spin-up at every occasion. Flat-out on the open going and a sixth gear would've been nice, but gearbox wise I had no real complaints as the spacing between ratios seemed pretty sorted compared with the Honda.

Si commented afterwards he thought that the PR4 had a heavy throttle, but I've got to say I didn't notice this at all. Taking it into the woods was a mixed blessing as the Paioli suspension soaked up the bumps in true enduro fashion, but the very limited steering lock made it a bit harder work through the tight trees. Also slightly disconcerting was the standard pipe's almost



decent enough start I was surprised at how quickly the bulk of the field shot past me. The start-line led through a gate and onto a flat-out blast across a field for what must've been at least 500m - well I went across that field absolutely tapped in every gear until the AJP would go no faster, but I still went backwards as if Mr Sulu had leaned on the wrong button.

Then at the end of the straight there was the most enormous sort of rolling bump which I hit just as I'd backed off the throttle. The next thing I saw were the heels of my boots as they appeared over my shoulders and I performed the classic 'flying-W' shape. Note to self: trailbike suspension isn't quite as forgiving, must remember to watch out for that one next lap.

Into the woods and I remember thinking to myself 'ah well at least I'll have half a chance through the trees, because the big bikes can't use all their power advantage'. But then I'd reckoned without all the extra weight a trailbike carries over and above a lightweight racing machine - items like a thick-walled heavy steel frame and chunky subframe, significantly add to

silent burble, though it did afford me the element of surprise when I managed to catch up some other riders. The moody black and silver paintscheme suited the 200 and the AJP certainly stood out amongst the usual assortment of Pamperas, TTRs and CRFs.

All too soon the race was over, but for me the AJP wins this contest hands down as it can easily double up as a dual-purpose trail/enduro tool, providing you aren't out to win any prizes. That said, the CRF is by no means an also-ran, thanks to its sweet motor, nimbleness and low perch - it's a perfect beginner's green laner providing you're no taller than about five feet six. But as much as both of these small-bore machines are perfectly capable of going racing, as far as I'm concerned, make mine a large one... **MF**

Good Afternoon

Mel had advised me to start on the CRF so as to make the switch to the larger AJP seem more agreeable, but I was determined to get as good a start as possible so elected to ride the (more or less) full-size PR4 first of all.

Now I've lined up against bigger and faster machinery plenty of times before so I wasn't too worried about the missing power, but perhaps I should've been. Because even though I made a

the all-up weight and made me feel like I was riding a 400. Only without the power.

'Blimey' I thought to myself, 'Mel reckons this one's much better than the CRF... What's *that* going to feel like?' In fact the AJP wasn't too bad through the trees, it turned reasonably quickly (though it could've done with more steering lock) and the suspension was reasonably competent at soaking up the ruts and bumps which had already emerged after the first race. In fact the forks felt particularly good, though I couldn't help thinking that the rear end felt a little lifeless.

But the heavy throttle, that was another matter. I had to take two handfuls to wind it from closed to open and within an hour my wrist was killing. Albeit that was the least of my worries because a few minutes after emerging from one of the many stream crossings on the course the left handgrip slipped off. Or at least it would've slipped right off had there not been a pair of (aftermarket) wraparound handguards keeping it in place. As it was, it merely rolled up at the end of the bar like a schoolboy's football sock.

Master Blaster

The seven mile course consisted of a series of four or five sections of nadgery woodland (perfect two-stroke territory) where the skill

SIZE MATTERS



came in keeping on top of the bumps and out of the trees, these were interspersed with a number of flat-out blasts (big four-stroke territory). I kept looking out for *low-capacity trailbike territory*, but sadly never found it. And every time I emerged blinking from the trees into the sunlight, the sky would suddenly darken as squadrons of 450 KTMs ripped past on full afterburn, blanking my horizon with a painful flak of stony roost. This was no fun - I was getting filled in more times than an immigration form at Dover docks.

Just occasionally, and I do mean *very* occasionally, I'd manage to sneak up on a rider who'd got a puncture, or had run out of fuel and was pushing back to the pits. I'm not saying the AJP was slow but Stephen Hawking could've given me a run for my money.

At least the AJP was capable of making use of every one of its estimated 16hp; it actually handles quite nicely for a budget trailie thanks to some sensible geometry and half-competent suspension, though it does have a tendency to back its way into (and out of) very slippery corners thanks to the underseat fuel-tank having a pendulum effect. Nevertheless the splendidly narrow tank and shrouds (no radiators) and the long flat seat mean that you can get well forward on the PR4 which helps enormously in getting

the bike turned. In the dry it's reassuringly stable and can be thrown round with abandon as you make a futile attempt to catch up much faster bikes which simply out-drag you every time the track straightens up.

In fact I confess I did actually overtake about seven or eight bikes during the course of the three hour race - their owners either too tired or too apathetic to bother putting up much of a fight. Meantime I was learning more about the AJP and was actually beginning to enjoy myself a little. Despite its weight (approx 119kg fully fuelled), one of the best things about riding small, unthreatening bikes like this is that you can go as fast on your final lap as you did on the opening lap - which is to say not very fast at all.

That's because bikes like this don't tire you out. Sure they drop into a few holes (there's not enough punch to lift the front wheel in an emergency) but you don't use up any energy holding onto them. The acceleration is glacial, the braking ponderous and the transition from power-on to power-off is about the same as you get on the dodgems at a funfair. If you think I'm painting a gloomy picture of the AJP, don't worry, I haven't even started on the Honda yet.

Remember this is racing. And when you're racing you want to go as fast as you possibly can,



And despite a much freer-revving (and seemingly more powerful) lump, the Honda didn't appear to go a whole lot faster than the AJP due to extremely short gearing - albeit it got to its top speed in about half the time.

For sure it was more manoeuvrable in the woods - thanks in part to it carrying less all-up weight (118kg). Mind you it ought to weigh less it's only about half the size of the AJP, and built a bit skinnier too.

Trouble was unlike with the AJP, on the Honda I could barely stand up for more than a few seconds because the riding position was so cramped it put all my weight in the wrong place. Now I'm only five feet eleven, so anybody even remotely tall might do well to stop reading now.

This meant that I had to permanently sit down on the Honda which would've been fine had the CRF's suspension done a better job of keeping the whole plot in order. As it was the bike crashed and banged its way through things and the suspension seemed to be permanently on the bumpstops.

Still at least I had a bit of acceleration to play with now, so when I raced up to

the first of the sloppy water crossings I pointed the bike at the far bank and gassed it for all it was worth. Wrong! Thanks to some deepening ruts and a decided lack of ground clearance the little Honda merely succeeded in wedging itself into a deep rut and stuck fast, the rear wheel spinning aimlessly.

It took all of five minutes and a considerable amount of help from a muddy marshal to extricate the bike and set me on my way again and I gassed the CRF hard to try and make up for lost time. Then as I began braking for the next turn (sharp left through a gate) I had a horrible feeling that all was not well in the braking department. The back brake had disappeared altogether. Not faded or weak but entirely absent and I only had the Honda's excellent front stopper to rely on. Naturally I didn't make the left turn - going down in a heap as the front tyre locked up on the bumpy loam and tucked under.

As I picked myself up off the floor I took a look at the rear brake to see what had gone wrong. Surely the nut must've come off the end of the braking rod, or the linkage between the lever and brake had snapped? Nope. It all seemed to be there and in working order. I stood up and down on the pedal a few times, and sure enough it seemed to operate the rear brake, but I could still

otherwise what's the point? If you're just out for a bumble then it wouldn't matter, but if you want to race then it's all about speed. In fairness all the AJP really lacks is a bit more poke. The importers were keen to point out that some of the missing power can be restored by the simple expedient of slipping the baffle out of the exhaust. Fair enough but as this adds significantly to the volume I was keen to ignore this particular piece of advice.

With an hour and 40 mins gone I dived into the pits where Mel and the warmed up CRF were waiting for the changeover. Onto the Honda and... wow what a revelation. The AJP's languid lump was replaced by a whizzing little revver (with a thankfully light throttle) which had so much more in the way of go. It may seem unusual to talk about a 230 four-stroke as having stomp, but having just got off the torpid Portuguese tortoise the lively little Honda seemed almost hare-like by comparison. Though it should be said that these things are all relative.

And boy was it ever small. If I stood astride it (with my feet on the ground) the seat barely reached up to my b... er... breeches. Trouble was when I stood up on the footpegs my hands and feet seemed so close together I felt like I could step on my own fingers - worse still, I thought I may topple over at any moment.

SIZE MATTERS



push the bike along - even with the pedal hard down. Ah... the joys of drum brakes.

So now I had plenty of engine but only half my brakes, very little suspension and no room to operate in. What more could go wrong? Then just after I rounded the lap scorer's van for the eighth time I opened up the CRF on the straight stony track and had the strange sensation that the back-end of the bike was travelling that little bit faster than the front. Yep sure enough, on a straight stretch of (albeit quite slippery) road, the bike virtually spun full circle. This I can only put down to the CRF's short wheelbase destabilising the whole machine. And certainly I've come across this on bikes with overly short wheelbases in the past: if you're my size and you don't sit right at the front of the seat you find yourself swapping ends more frequently than the local football team.

The other effect of a short wheelbase of course is that you tend to drop into all of the holes and dips in the woods and this was particularly true of the Honda which seemed to be magnetically attracted towards all of the large hollows.

At the end of three hours and 20-odd minutes I was glad when they finally hung out the flag to say that the race was over. I'd managed ten laps in the time that the winner (Ryan Voase) had

achieved 13. On the other hand he doesn't have to ride a pair of underpowered trailies in order to make his living.

Wahddyou Expect

Okay, there are those who'll dismiss this test as a bit pointless - trail bikes aren't meant for racing. No they're not, but if you happen to own one of these machines, aren't you just a teeny bit curious as to what they can or can't get up to? They are both off-roaders after all, and both have (in the right circumstances) proved themselves ideal at what they were designed to do.

The Honda is a great little green laner, a good starter bike or even a neat little machine for Long Distance Trials. It's got a lovely motor, good manoeuvrability and (when they are working), excellent brakes. But it's not really much of a racer - even for someone as small and light as Mel, let alone anyone bigger.

The AJP on the other hand - that's a different thing altogether. It's much easier to get on and race, even if the engine is crying out for a bit more power. The full-size chassis means that it feels much more like a normal sized bike and the suspension and braking package are far better specced than the more basic Honda.

If this test proved anything it's that you should



**SIZE
MATTERS**

think carefully what sort of riding you're intending to do before considering a purchase. If I was particularly short and looking for a bike to get started on, then the lightness of the Honda together with its better looks, extra poke (and that Honda badge) would swing it for me. And I'd investigate ways of getting a disc rear-end.

But if on the other hand I was taller than about five feet six say, and wanted a bike which could take me racing occasionally as well as up and down the local lanes, well the AJP wins that battle. It may be higher but it's also more stable (thanks to a lengthier wheelbase) and has better ground clearance.

Of course you know what the ideal answer is - stick the Honda motor in the AJP chassis with the Honda's front brake and the AJP's disc rear.

A free TBM subscription to the first reader who builds one and lets us take it for a ride. One thing though... Just don't expect me to do another 3hr event on it. I'm still getting over the last one...

Thanks to: Howard at Conquest Motorcycles (01202 820009) for the loan of the Honda. Conquest have a 230 demonstrator if you want to try out the little Honda for yourself. Also to Steve at Adly Moto (01889 577552) for the AJP. Adly too have a demo bike available. And thanks to Steve Ireland at Wirral Off Road (wirraloffroad.co.uk) for allowing two mobile chicanes on his excellent enduro course..!

AJP PR4 200

Price:
Engine:

Bore/stroke:
Susp F/R:
(travel)
Brakes F/R
Seat height:
Ground clear:
Wheelbase:
Fuel capacity:
Weight:

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electric-start, 5-speed
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41mm Paioli (260mm) Linkage
Paioli (260mm)
255/210mm, AJP calipers
910mm (claimed)
N/A
1410mm
8L
125kg (approx)

HONDA CRF230F

Price:
Engine:

Bore/stroke:
Susp F/R:
(travel)
Brakes F/R
Seat height:
Ground clear:
Wheelbase:
Fuel capacity:
Weight:

£2995 OTR
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electric-start, 6-speed
65.5 x 66.2mm
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Showa (230mm)
240mm, Nissin caliper, drum rear
860mm (tested)
300mm
1375mm
Approx 8L
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