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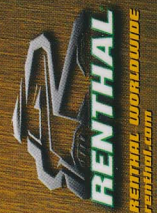
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- David Knight
- The Patman

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TYRE TEST PT 2

TESTING THE TOP SEVEN BRANDS

EASY DOES IT!

SL230 V TTR250 V CRF230 V TE250 V PAMPERA

2007 Hondas Tested • BEC

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Winning Isn't Everything

They say that 'second place is first loser'. It's one of those meaningless slogans dreamt up by a bloke with an arm full of tribal tattoos and a head full of Nike Air. And while it may help flog a few overpriced T-shirts to people whose idea of looking cool is to nail their eyebrows to their forehead, thankfully it's not a code by which anyone with a shred of moral conscience lives their lives.

I mean it must be great being the winner (I'm assuming, 'cos I've never *actually* won anything on a motorcycle), but it's not the be-all-and-end-all. For the majority of people who live their daily lives outside the empty cliches of marketing departments, the world is a much more sanguine place. 'Ya' win some, ya' lose some' might be a more appropriate phrase - though in my case 'ya' lose some, ya' lose some more' is strictly speaking more accurate.

No matter... we bring up our kids to believe that although they strive to win, it's no shame if they don't. It just encourages them to practice more and try harder next time. So it's a shame that importers can't be a bit more like a seven-year-old child - and try again. One of the things I'm most proud of about TBM is that we always attempt to establish some sort of winner in our multi-bike shootouts. It's not a definitive claim that 'this bike's good and that bike sucks', but more of a carefully considered opinion arrived at, after riding various machines back-to-back (usually with a number of different riders), and occasionally having raced them and/or measured their respective outputs on a dyno. After all we're a consumer magazine peddling consumer advice. Consumers deserve to reap the benefit of that advice. And the most persistent question asked of us is... which bike should I buy?

Of course we could fudge the issue and do what BotoX magazine did recently in a three-bike test when they declared by way of startling conclusion:

'Or you could just toss a coin to decide, that's probably easier.'

Putting aside the incongruous nature of such glib comments (you try finding a three-sided coin), the upshot of it is to render the test you've just been trawling through, absolutely meaningless. I mean are you really telling me that there's nothing to choose between different makes of bike in terms of handling, power, weight, performance, ergos, equipment, build quality, spares availability, warranty, price, looks, residual values, ease of maintenance or brand kudos? Because if that's the case, then what's the point of buying the bloody magazine in the first place? And if there *is* a difference, well the reader needs to know about it.

Of course a cynic might say: show me a world without winners and I'll show you a happy Ad Sales Department. Because there's no doubt some people still believe magazine tests are weighted in favour of frequent advertisers. Though of course that argument rings a little hollow with TBM tests given that a Sherco recently won our 450 shootout against a KTM and a Honda - and Sherco just about never advertise their bikes.

No, the trouble with picking winners is that by inference there are 'first and second losers'. And while nobody likes their bike to come second in a test, the fact remains that some bikes perform better than others. And instead of whingeing about it and accusing us of bias, importers could do a lot worse than taking on board the comments and addressing the problems at the factory. Because there's no doubt in my mind that the real winner is the manufacturer who loses a test, listens to its customers and critics, then goes away and makes their bike even better.

Sometimes in life it pays to be 'first loser.'

SI MELBER

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EASY TIGERS...



TBM brings together five secondhand easy riders to determine which is best for the novice trail rider...

You don't have to be a genius to work out that much of the content of consumer magazines - including this one - is what they call aspirational. In other words it's how we'd *like* to be able to live our lives, rather than how we actually do so right now. For instance the people who buy *Country Life* can't all own

1000-acre estates on the Sussex/Hampshire borders can they? And while every petrolhead will have an opinion on the relative merits of a convertible Ferrari, Porsche or Aston Martin on a continental blast from Paris to the Amalfi Coast with a headscarf-wearing pin-up sat in the jump seat; truth is it's unlikely to influence much more

than our choice of next year's garage calendar.

But these tests are not merely the fantasy-made-metal of a few fortunate hacks. Tsk, perish the thought! First of all they provide a service. Because believe it or not there are plenty of people out there who don't have to sell in order to buy. People who are wealthy enough to know that Mustique is not a brand of aftershave sold in Lidl. The sort of people who consider the new BMW M5 just a little too 'middle management' and want something wilder. Secondly, it pays to know and understand the technology appearing on cutting-edge vehicles because it's likely to be

appearing on our own within five years.

And finally because one day - if we win the lottery, inherit from a long-forgotten maiden aunt and flog-off all our childrens' inheritance on eBay, we might *just* be able to afford to pay the kids' university fees *and* stick some kind of secondhand exotica in the corner of the garage. You know... something like a well-used KTM 525EXC for instance.

The truth is that while there are plenty of 525s out there, there's also an enormous number of rather less fashionable 'cooking models' plying the green lanes and backroads of this sceptic Isle. Because when you think about it, turning up at the school gates in a Lamborghini may impress the neighbours, but it won't half feel slow chugging along behind a line of Toyota Rav-4s, Vauxhall Zafiras and Skoda Octavias. And while your high-priced exotica sits there burning fuel and clutches in equal measure, the other more mundane forms of transport simply get on with doing the job in hand, and for far less money...

Five Go Laning

All of which is a roundabout way of introducing this eclectic little line-up. Five secondhand 'trail' bikes. Five relatively 'easy riders'. And five different ways of enjoying your trail riding without breaking the bank - or your neck.

The background to this test was that it was originally conceived to be our annual low-seat-height shootout, but when we started looking into the details of each bike, we figured that actually it's not *just* the height of a bike's seat which matters when you're out on the trail, so much as the easy-going nature and capabilities of the bike itself. So for instance, you might be just getting into green laning and want something easy to learn on, but happen to be six-foot-two. Is a low seat-height bike your best bet then, we wondered?

To find out more, we arranged for a motley collection of misfits of varying elevation to evaluate and assess this bunch of mixed machinery - ranging from TBM's six-foot-plus columnist Mark Williams, right down to the perfectly proportioned Kylie Maebus on loan to us from BMW's Off-Road Skills course. All five-feet-one of her in her BMW hold-ups.

The bikes themselves range in seat height from the diminutive 32in (813mm) Honda SL230, right up to the Husky TE250 at 36in (915mm). And although the Husky's not strictly an 'easy rider' in the normal sense, we elected to include it as one end of the spectrum in order to evaluate whether a secondhand enduro bike can make a sensible green laner.

In between sits the Honda CRF230, Gas Gas

Honda's CRF230 is a genuine low-seater...



EASY,
TIGERS...

Pampera mkIII and the Yamaha TT-R250 - all tried-and-tested trailies with a wealth of supporters.

All the bikes were secondhand and varied in price from about £950 for the P-reg SL230, up to the £3895 you'd need to pay to secure a year-old TE250. And of the bikes we chose, three were Japanese, two were European, but only one was a two-stroke (the Pampera). Furthermore, three of them are now out of production (the Pamp, SL230 and TT-R250 - though you may well find new/old stock is

still available), only two of the five were liquid-cooled (the Pamp and the Husky). And at the point of writing, two of the bikes are grey imports (both Hondas), though Honda are considering importing the CRF as an official model for 2007 - albeit not in registered guise.

'05 Honda CRF230 - seat height: 860mm, value now: £1900

So let's begin with the CRF. The last time TBM tested a CRF230 was when we raced one at a hare 'n' hounds enduro in north Wales. And our conclusion back then was that the CRF was a great trailie but it was no racer. Predictably this led to a rash of correspondence from disgruntled 230F owners all claiming that their bikes would out-drag a WR450F, and still comfortably return over 200mpg! Whatever.

In fact we've tested the CRF230 a number of times in the past and we keep returning to the conclusion that it's a brilliant little mild-mannered low-seat height trailie. Which is why we've included it here...

Our bike came from Haven Trialsport (01469 532600) and is owned by one of the blokes who works there. Naturally enough he's modded it slightly to suit his tastes and ours featured a different set of top yokes which position the new Renthal bars and handguards an inch higher and further forwards than standard. Along with altered gearing (14/48 - up from the stocker's 13/50), a Flatlands Racing bashplate, slightly firmer front springs, a Honda headlamp and a carb kit, it's also got a bigger-bore header pipe and the baffle's been removed. Owner Jez has

dynoed it at 15.5hp and reckons that that's just about right for a sorted one of these, so don't get any delusions of grandeur.

But the beauty of the smallest CRF - like many of the bikes here - is that its sheer size lets you really dominate the bike when the lanes get technical. On the flip-side, smaller bikes tend to catch their footpegs on ruts more, and drop into holes a little easier, and the CRF definitely suffers from that from time to time. That's just karma we reckon.

Built in Brazil, the CRF230 is an odd mix of old and new. The styling is bang up to date - but it's the only thing about the bike which is. Because the simple steel frame, budget suspension, rear drum brake (though disc conversion kits are now available), and in particular that ancient air-cooled, two-valve, OHC engine (albeit fitted with electric-start) all hark back to an earlier age. That said there's nothing actually wrong with the bike's technology which is all tried-and-tested, and the unstressed engine makes light work of all sorts of terrain thanks to relatively short gearing.

In fact although not particularly powerful, the CRF feels reasonably lively and it'll trundle along at a fair clip should you feel the need. And of course being a Honda it has that unmistakable feel of dependability.

Our only real complaints are with the bike's size - which for an average sized male, makes it feel a little cramped at times and the short wheelbase can make for a feeling of instability in really slippery going. But that said, of the bikes here, this is the one we'd arguably choose for mixed trail riding if we were short...

'03 Yamaha TT-R250 - seat height: 908mm, value now: £2000

Yamaha's TT-R has been around for ever it seems, both as an official dealer-sourced bike and before that as a grey import. They're popular little machines - especially here in the UK where there's a whole website and forum devoted to maintaining its significance as a green laner. And it's as a green laner that the TT-R is particularly suited. Although quite a

But Yamaha's TT-R250 is not as 'short' as you might imagine...



Husky TE250... The tallest bike in this test, but easier to ride on the trails than you might imagine...

EASY, TIGERS...



few years older in terms of conception, the TT-R is actually a much more modern machine than the CRF, though it doesn't look it. The styling appears fairly dated now, and the bike's tall seat heat (at 908mm it was the second highest bike on test), makes it seem peculiarly tall for its length. That said it has considerably more suspension travel than the bum-scraping CRF, and you

of a button and can handle virtually anything from trail riding to a modest hare 'n' hounds with relative ease. What's more, experience has proved that TT-Rs rarely go wrong if treated correctly.

But if we have a complaint with the TT-R, it's that its robust construction and considerable weight has the effect of dulling the bike's per-

formance. And this along with the fact that it's a full-size bike in terms of height and weight, but slightly shorter in length than say something like a DR-Z400, means that it offers few advantages for smaller, less experienced riders apart from more controllable power. Because once again (and rather like the CRF) the TT-R has a tendency to feel a little unstable at times because of that shorter wheelbase - and in the TT-R's case, it's tall disposition (though lowering links are available through the aftermarket).

This three year old example is owned by TBM columnist Mark Williams, and features a non-standard exhaust, alloy bars and bashplate, along with some wrap-around handguards and a fender bag.

To ride the TT-R it's a fairly inoffensive experience - it starts at the push

of a button and can handle virtually anything from trail riding to a modest hare 'n' hounds with relative ease. What's more, experience has proved that TT-Rs rarely go wrong if treated correctly.

But if we have a complaint with the TT-R, it's that its robust construction and considerable weight has the effect of dulling the bike's per-

'06 Husqvarna TE250R - seat height: 915mm, value now: £3895

Why include an enduro bike like the Husky TE250 in a line-up of trailies? Quite simply because you've only got to look at how many enduro bikes you see out on the trail, to realise that for some people only a fully-fledged racer will do.

Being an enduro bike (albeit an easy to ride electric-start, 250cc, four-stroke one), the Husky

terrain, but despite this I personally find it physically a bit too small and this particular one was suffering with starting problems, which didn't endear it to me.

Saying that, there's no denying that the responsive leccy-start lump, great agility and tiny dimensions make this a damn good green laner... as long as you're not over five foot six that is.

5th: SL230

For one reason or another I didn't get to spend as much time on the SL as I would've liked, but the air-cooled motor felt quite punchy and the trials-style rearward-slung pegs gave a very natural feet-up position (but only when standing).

Strangely, even though the Pampera felt physically very similar in stature to the Honda, I just didn't gel with the SL and it wasn't nearly as comfortable on the roads, plus its looks were a little on the antiquated side for my taste. That said however, it would still make a cheap, reliable and very competitive bike for regular long distance trials competitions.

Second Opinion: Mel Falconer

1st: Pampera

Mountain goats would be hard pressed to beat this little beauty up slippery, slimy rock-steps - the Pamp didn't put a foot wrong and I loved its trials-based chuggability. I just stuck it in second and let the engine do all the work on the rocky uphill lanes. Definitely the best tool here for technical terrain, although hooking neutral took a bit of mastering (due to the trials-derived running gear). Only real drawback is the limited tank range, but I still want one!

2nd: TE250

This was a pleasant surprise for me as it's the first time I've taken my Husky out on the trails rather than racing it. But it tackled everything with aplomb. I had reservations due to it being the only pure enduro bike (albeit lowered) on the test, but yet again the Husky's glorious twin-cam motor delivered the goods, and that, combined with its quick steering, made the tricky going almost easy.

But unlike the go-steady Pamp, you had to

have a clear, fast run up most of the lanes in order for the TE to utilise its power properly - and I just found it a bit difficult to get going again from standstill in the slippery conditions after coming up quickly behind other riders.

3rd: TTR250

Despite its relative tallness, I found Mark's TTR to be a competent, civilised trailie - apart from when the throttle stuck wide open up a particularly gnarly climb, after someone who shall remain nameless fell off and stuffed the throttle into the ground!

But having ridden a TTR a couple of years ago at my first ever rally event I knew it could cope equally well in nadgery conditions as well as on the open going - and did so on this occasion too.

As with the Husky I preferred the extra oomph of the 250, especially on the tarmac, but also found it easier to handle when allowed to have an uninterrupted run at things.

4th: CRF230

I know that the CRF230 is a great little machine, ideal for negotiating this type of tricky



MISSING!

DirtbikeStore was **Broken into** in the early hours of 9th August 2006. The stolen vehicle used in the break-in was recovered in the **West Midlands** area.

We are the importers of Moose Racing clothing and Extreme Pro-Wear Crash Helmets, a lot of which were stolen along with a quantity of Pit Bikes.

These items are easily recognisable...

The Crash Helmets Union jack on one side and chequered flag the other, will be **missing the Gold ACU sticker**... as these are applied at point of sale.

The Moose Clothing Monarch Pass, Expedition and XCR Jackets and Pants. Also Moose M1 Race Pants and Gloves.

Pit Bikes Alloy and Steel framed 125cc Blackhawks.

We are of the view that, if you are offered any of the above items 'Cheap', **PLEASE**, call us on **01278 424979** with a name/number. If your information leads to the recovery of the goods, we'll give you **£500** worth of goods of your choice.

PLEASE, help us catch the low life scum that threaten to kill our business and your sport.

DirtBikeStore.com



The diminutive Honda SL230 is the smallest of our bikes on test...

EASY, TIGERS...



features the very best suspension, brakes, dials and standard equipment of this particular group - not to mention the most powerful engine. And to me it felt the most natural in terms of riding position and size - not at all cramped for my 5ft 11in frame. On the other hand it's clear that a 'thoroughbred' bike like this requires space in which to 'perform' and for the rather more tight and technical trails which we were riding it can feel, if not exactly a handful, then certainly a little over-exuberant.

One of the other riders remarked that it was

braceless bars and lowered about 1.5in to suit Mel. Other than that, it's standard.

As a trailie there's no doubt that there are easier bikes to ride - albeit the Husky's advantages improve as speeds increase. Physically it feels bigger (though not necessarily heavier) than some of the others, and the power delivery is harsher, more abrupt, but then that makes it more exciting when the trails open up. And if you're used to that then the Husky will make you feel right at home whereas these others will simply feel like wobbling, underpowered

like hanging onto a greyhound - the Husky was all revs and impatience, and obviously the tall seat (despite having been lowered from standard), and full-size dimensions wouldn't perhaps suit most beginners. On the other hand the Husky is an incredibly competent machine and for your considerably greater outlay you're getting a bike with contemporary looks, handling, suspension and brakes. As well as something which is competitive for racing.

This one is TBM's long-term tester which has been fitted with

wrecks. But if you're a newbie looking to tackle some gentle trails then probably the Husky shouldn't be your first choice of bike. We'd recommend the Husky to anyone looking to use the bike for both laning and racing.

'96 Honda SL230 - seat height: 813mm, value now: £950

At the opposite end of the spectrum in almost every way to the high 'n' flighty Husky sits the low but not lowly SL230 which had been loaned to us by a

very trusting reader (thanks Rex).

Originally designed as a stylish home-market Japanese trailie, this particular grey import had been set-up for tackling long distance trials. Fitted with a pair of home-fabricated rear-set (and higher) pegs, lowered gearing and ultra-sticky trials tyres, the SL230 would silently chug its way over the most awkward rock steps and slippery gullies where the Husky revved and spun its way all over them. In fact for me the SL was something of a revelation, its small size, tight turning circle and superb balance worked perfectly when standing - although it felt less good in a seated position on the road due to the rearward pegs.

Notwithstanding the fact that the SL's metal tank, gorgeous retro-styling and slight lack of ground clearance belied its road-biased trailie origins, this particular bike had secured second place in a notoriously difficult long distance trial in the hands of someone far more capable than any of us. So although it was perhaps not the most popular bike on the day, personally, I really liked it. In fact I would even have gone so far as to offer money for it, had I not ridden the Pampera and discovered that no matter how good the SL's 'road trials' abilities - the Pampera will match it for feet-up riding and easily better it in other areas. Interestingly the SL230 featured exactly the same electric-start Honda engine as the CRF - albeit built in Japan - but in this guise it felt much less cobby, a bit smoother, certainly quieter and ultimately less powerful. But one of the SL's great strengths was that from a standing start on wet (uphill) rocks, it could set off without a hint of wheelspin and could tackle any-

Gas Gas Pampera may look a bit odd, but as a low-seat height trailie it's incredibly effective...



thing that the bigger, more powerful bikes could, but with much less fuss. It's not hard to see how it had been used to devastating effect in in LDTs.

You won't find bikes like the SL in Honda dealers up and down the country, but nevertheless they are worth seeking out from the odd grey importer which stocks them - especially if you're a beginner and particularly impoverished of inside leg. Incredibly low, well built and obviously supremely capable, only the less practical nature of the metal tank and slightly wide side-panels let them down. And while the SL isn't fast, it's one of those bikes that goes anywhere thanks to stealth. We'd recommend it for very short beginners...

'02 Gas Gas Pampera - seat height: 851mm, value now: £1700

It's hard to fathom exactly why Gas Gas decided to pull the plug on the successful mkIII Pampera in 2005, but one thing's for sure - in doing so, they made a *big* mistake. Easily the lightest bike here and certainly the most unusual, for those that don't already know the story, the Pampera was a 'bitsa' which arose from an unlikely alliance of Gas Gas's old liquid-cooled, kick-start TXT two-stroke trials engine (in this case in 250cc guise) set in a simple, lightweight trailbike chassis and utilising various components from other models. That it all worked out so well probably came about more by luck than judgement (the previous two incarnations never quite managed the task). But however conceived the Pampera turned into one of those bikes that just perfectly hit the spot.



The gang of five...



EASY, TIGERS....

Our one was owned by one of TBM's best-known Forum-ites, Pete Dunckley, and despite its relative newness had already been completely restored - the work included powder coating the frame, replacing all the bearings and seals, fitting a (Rotax) CCM bashplate, a thinner base gasket, Boyesen reeds, an LED tail light, a functioning trip computer, Renthal bars, Acerbis brush guards, 10w fork oil, and relacquered plastics.

In fairness this work reflects the fact that the Pampera's low purchase price mirrored an equally lowly build quality, and some rather budget detailing, so that it was never going to have the finish to match a bike like the Honda SL, for instance.

This one, by contrast felt 'better than new' following its rebuild, with perfect brakes, rock-steady road-holding and a really nice 'feel' about it which made it universally popular among the testers (if only its owner was so privileged!!). Given the bike's trials heritage, it's not surprising that it's easily the lightest bike here (tipping the scales at just under 100kg fully fuelled), but what is surprising is how well the Pampera works, not just on the lanes, but also on the road. The six-speed gearbox has ideally

spaced ratios and while the Pampera never feels fast, it's got that lively two-stroke buzz about it which means that it'll canter along quite happily at 55mph. On the lanes the combination of the light overall weight, together with its torquey trials lump and a grippy rear trials hoop makes it comfortably the best bike here for the trails we were riding. It'll go anywhere, get up virtually anything, yet never feels so specialised that you ride along looking for greater challenges.

In fact that's really the mkIII Pampera's great strength (and where the earlier versions went wrong), because this bike is a true dual-sport trail bike, it's relatively quiet, relatively comfortable and rarely puts a foot wrong. Indeed it leaves little sign of its passing. Sure there are better suspended bikes out there, and undoubtedly faster ones, but nothing that we can think of which can match the Pampera's blend of easy-going versatility. And while there are niggles (the high-set kick-start and - relatively speaking - high compression engine can make it slightly awkward to start for real shorties), plus of course it's pre-mix only and with only 6.8L of fuel on board you're looking at 40-50 miles between fill-ups.

But all of these pale into insignificance once you ride the thing. It makes all the other bikes (Husky aside) feel agricultural by comparison, and though the SL pips the Pampera (just) for the title of lowest of this bunch, such is the Gas Gas's slender dimensions and light handling that virtually anyone can ride it - tall or short, novice or expert - and enjoy the experience.

If you're new to green laning and want to find yourself a simple, inexpensive bike which will not just help you improve, but also match your improving abilities then the Pampera is the bike for you. That the Pampera wins this test so convincingly is not really any surprise. In fact surely the biggest question mark remaining with the Pampera was why Gas Gas stopped building them...

TBM would like to express its sincere thanks to the following people without whom this test would've descended into the usual chaos. First of all Pete Dunckley for organising and leading a route through the beautiful Wye Valley -

also to Nicola Dunkman for the tea and cakes. Not only did Pete act as trail guide, but he also loaned out his beloved Pampera, arranged the SL230 and subjected himself to endless ridicule for which we're all exceptionally grateful. To Rex Bendal for loaning his Honda SL230 to a complete bunch of strangers from London. To Jez and Vince at Haven Trialsport (01469 532600) for the loan of the CRF230. Haven are recognised as the UK's main CRF230 specialists so talk to them if you're in the market for one - new or secondhand. Mark Williams for the loan of his TT-R250. And finally Kylie Maebus from the BMW Off-Road Skills course in South Wales for being our honorary shortie. For full details of the BMW course visit worldofbmw.com or call 08000 131 282 to request a free brochure.

Thanks one and all...

5ft 1in Kylie says...

The Gas Gas Pampera 250 was my favourite bike on this test. It's small, light and nimble to ride. I thought that the noisy two-stroke would have been a little aggressive, but it had a manageable power delivery and was surprisingly enjoyable and easy to ride over all the terrain that we managed to find. In fact, the TBM staff struggled to get me off this little number.

The Husqvarna TE250 is probably right at the other end of the scale to the Pampera. Initially I hadn't been that keen on riding it, but once on board it was a real eye opener. It's quite tall and slightly aggressive to ride, but the engine and power delivery were just beautiful. I'd probably opt for this bike if I was a bit taller.

The Honda SL230 is just pure fun. I wouldn't consider buying one for any serious off-roading, but as a weekend trail bike it was a real gem. It was the first bike I rode during the test and it kept me smiling from ear-to-ear. It was the tiniest bike on test, with a metal tank and footpegs in a sports-bike position, but it was brilliant to ride.

I have a love-hate relationship with the Honda CRF230. As a previous owner of one, I love the idea of this bike. It's perfect for



smooth fire roads and riding around farmers' fields, although as a trail bike it's not my favourite machine. I've raced a number of hare and hound events on one of these bikes and it was a heavy lug.

At only 5ft, 1in I was the smallest person in this test and it really showed when I climbed aboard the Yamaha TTR250. In fact I only managed to stay on it for about five minutes before I got stuck in a tricky position and had to put my feet down for a quick rescue... well, I landed in the dirt. Nuff said.