

CLASSIC DIRT TEST

HONDA XL250 MOTOSPORT

By John Nick.

31 December 1969: the world was waving goodbye to the swinging sixties and looking forward with relish to the seventies, a decade that was to promise, and deliver, unprecedented prosperity. With that prosperity came a massive lift in youth income and freedom of choice. Motorcycling and dirt bike riding readily embodied the sense of liberation of the times.

The sixties had been good years for the fledgling dirt bike industry - manufacturers like Bultaco, Montesa and Ossa had increased production supported by smaller European producers like Husqvarna and Zundap. They had by then become the dominant players, having eclipsed the slow to react British manufacturers with their innovative lightweight two strokes. However, the Spanish industry too was faltering with development, hobbled in large part by the Franco regime's crippling socialist policies and militant unions.

What the Spanish industry had shown to the world however, was just how much fun riding a lightweight, off road bike could be, and what the possibilities were for a dirt biking boom.

The increasingly powerful Japanese motorcycle industry was looking for fresh markets. First to sense the possibilities were Yamaha who introduced the stunning two stroke DT1 250, rolled out in large numbers in 1968 to rapturous acclaim. Suzuki followed suit with the less inspiring, but none the less timely, TS250 in 1970. By this time Honda dealers across the USA were howling for an effective reply from the world's largest manufacturer. It was already apparent to Honda and their US dealers that their CL/SL 250 and 350 dual purpose twins (based on the CB road bikes) could not be developed into competitive dirt bikes. That solution would, in all probability, require a single cylinder engine.

Honda was then, as now, heavily committed to four stroke engines and their answer could not therefore to be a two stroke. Instead they opted for a complete re-think of the age-old four stroke single. Their engine drew nothing from the previous age of British long-stroke, pushrod, four stroke engines. Instead it would be a high revving, short stroke single, with overhead camshaft, wet clutch and four valve cylinder head.

Prosaic as it might appear to youthful eyes, the XL250 bristled styling and technical innovations. The 1972 XL 250 Motosport was, at the time, a revolutionary design: the first practical, mass production, four valve, overhead cam dirt bike, a design that would pave the way for the highly competitive four strokes we ride today.

The XL 250 design was a stunning combination of styling and mechanical integration. Slickly shaped plastic mudguards and slim, stylish fuel tank were combined with alloy rims, large (for the times) 36 mm forks, purpose built Keihin carb, magnesium alloy outer engine covers, and that ground-breaking four valve cylinder head. Not only did the XL250 turn heads with its appearance and excite enthusiasts with its specification, but the entire machine, from mechanical detailing to styling and finish was built to an almost unbelievable level of specification.

Like most dirt bikes of its generation the XL250 was road legal and designed equally for on and off road use. The seventies saw an upsurge in incomes, although not to the extent that we enjoy today. A typical young XL 250 buyer might afford a new dirt bike, but a car and trailer were still beyond almost all budgets.

The XL250 Motosport was an instant world-wide success. Although not a fast bike, even in its day, the XL250 had a wide spread of reliable power, reasonable suspension and smooth, comfortable on-road performance. In NZ the XL250 soon took on cult status as being the ultimate dual-purpose bike for serious trail riders who would also ride their bikes to and from work and even take long roads trips.

Like all classic bikes the XL250 must be judged by the standards of its time. The engine, to modern riders, might be a shock. It has a huge amount of flywheel effect, much like a modern trials bike. The XL will happily run one-handed circles in first gear on the idle alone, no need to even hold onto the throttle. Acceleration is slow by modern standards, though the engine will rev as happily as it will chuff along at idle revs. Across open, easy terrain the XL's power is now certainly underwhelming.

It is only when you get to slippery and challenging terrain that you gain an insight into the XL 250's hidden talents. The combination of heavy flywheel effect and flat power spread make for amazing traction in slippery going - the XL is almost unstoppable in a nasty situation. One almost incredible attribute of an XL250 is the ability to pull away from a dead stop on a slippery clay hill. Even if the bike is stationary and the wheel spinning, all the rider has to do is slowly reduce rpm to almost idle. Just before you would expect the engine to die the XL250 will slowly pull away up the hill. That heavy flywheel also makes the XL a stunning bike for balance wheelies. So long as the clutch is

good and the rider gives a massive heave on the bars to achieve an almost vertical attitude, the XL can be punted an amazing distance on the back wheel.

In terms of handling the XL250 was a child of its time. Short travel suspension made for a lively ride on rough ground and the rider needed a good sense of judgement in order to match speed with the terrain ahead. One simply could not count on the seven-inch travel forks or four-inch travel shocks to soak up anything that comes along. The XL250 Motosport came with relatively quick-steering front end geometry, almost trials-like in its response. Later models would gain an inch of wheelbase and another degree or two of steering rake that would make the bike more stable at speed.

We would now consider the XL's ergonomics less than ideal. The riding position is relatively feet first, making standing for long periods of time quite tiring, especially going uphill. You will also find that the high level exhaust intrudes somewhat into your right calf, giving you a slightly bow legged, John Wayne stance.

The XL250 Motosport charmed Kiwi riders through the early seventies, attracting trail riders and ride-to-workers alike by their thousands. Trail riding in those days was mostly DIY stuff, while most forests and open ground were not yet locked away. So popular were dual purpose trail bikes in the early 70s that a dedicated class was often run for the road legal bikes at Motocross races or scrambles, as they were then called. Often the trail bike fields were the largest, and with useful paying spectator crowds, several wins in the trail class could bag a top rider as much as a week's earnings!

However the XL250 really found its purpose when enduro racing got underway in NZ in 1974. The XL's ability to find traction in difficult conditions made it a good choice for the gnarly events of the day. Though the XL produced only modest power, what power it did have proved to be virtually constant, even in extreme situations, when air cooled two strokes of the era tended to lose significant urge.

The XL250 proved mechanically rugged and reliable given regular oil and filter changes. Poor oil could lead to premature cam, rocker and cylinder head wear and many engines were repaired with roller bearing conversions by Auckland engineer Tjebbe Bruin. Cylinder heads could also crack in the area around the spark plug thread. Perhaps the weakest link was the electrics, especially the ignition. Dodgy coils and timing proved troublesome almost from new, especially when the engine became really hot. The rear sprocket cush drive was also prone to wear.

In 1976 Honda replaced the silver-tanked Motosport model. The successor, the XL250 K3, featured a longer frame and new cylinder head with a central inlet port. The carburettor and air filter were mounted centrally, away from the rider's calf and the exhaust was tucked inside the frame. The later model XL250 was slightly better handling bike, though slightly heavier, no faster, and was certainly never as nice looking. By this time however the competition was hotting up from new specialist two stroke enduro models like Yamaha's IT 175 and the Suzuki PE 250, and it was obvious that the XL250's day was done. Honda's four stroke answer, the all new XR, was in the wings however, but that is another story.

Specifications: 1972 Honda XL250 Motosport

Engine:	4-stroke, OHC single cylinder 248cc
Bore & Stroke:	74X57.8
Compression:	9.1:1
BHP/rpm:	20 @ 8000 rpm
Transmission:	5 Speed, constant mesh
Tyre Size:	front 2.75-21, rear 4.00-18
Tank Capacity:	11.6 litres
Dry Weight:	115 kg
Wheelbase:	1362mm