

LONGTERM REPORT HONDA CX500



After 13,000 miles, the CX500 still cleans up nicely. Visible here are the Jardine mufflers, Krauser fairing and the trimmed and recovered seat.

Completely in keeping with its reputation as an intriguingly different motorcycle, Honda's CX500 has set three records during its term of service as a longterm workhorse. 1) It's attracted more letters from interested owners, 2) suffered the only authentic breakdown in the history of the program, and 3) rolled up more miles than any other longterm machine we've had.

An interesting machine. Perhaps even the basis for a cult. When Honda introduced the CX500 in 1978, it was immediately known for looking, uh, different. Homely, some said, while others, usually either people who'd just bought one or people who didn't own motorcycles and thus don't know how they are supposed to look, commented that the humpbacked tank, the bat-eared nacelle around the

headlight and the compressor-like cylinders jutting at odd angles, well, grow on you. The pushrods in a day of double overhead cams, the 80° Vee, the skewed cylinder heads, etc., made the water cooling and shaft drive almost routine. The CX500 is big for a 500, and it's fast for a 500, and the ride showed what Honda could do—and has done, witness the GL1100—with touring suspension if somebody at Honda felt it was worth doing.

And then came the flap over the timing chain tensioner bolt, the one that felt tight when it wasn't. The factory put through a fix early on but even after the announcements, readers wanted to know is the thing fixed, will it stay fixed, and is all that wonderful overdone engineering worth the bother? (The answers are yes, maybe and it all depends, as we'll see in due course.)

The controversy, and the fact that several of the staff liked the bike a lot, persuaded us to borrow an early 1979, a Standard, the one with funny headlight cover, big tank and 18-in. rear wheel, so we could run the machine for a full year, treated as we'd treat our bikes, and see what fell off.

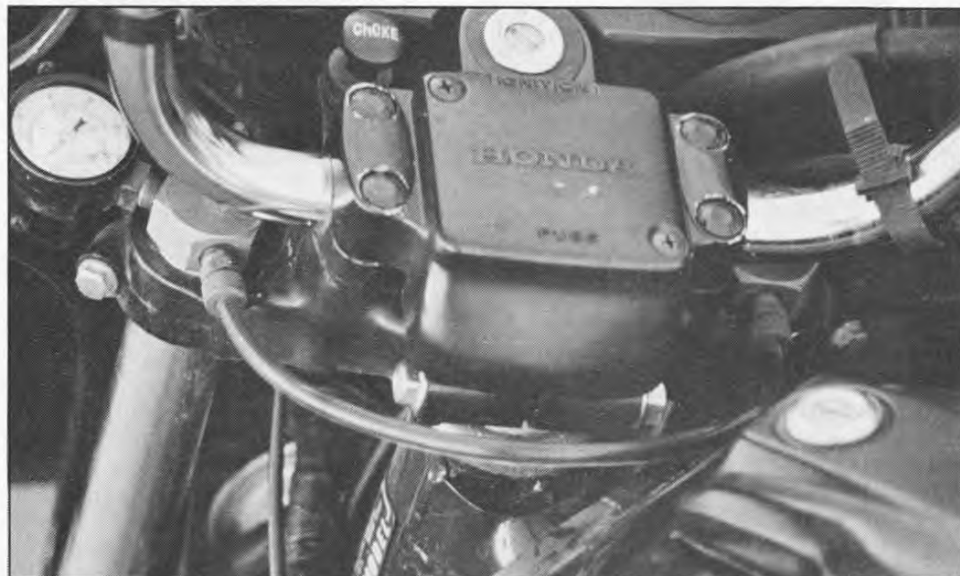
The Log

The bike arrived and because there was some confusion over whether or not this example, a 1979 model made in 1978, had been built before or after the new tensioner bolt was introduced, the CX went to the local dealership for a tear-down. Yes, it turned out, the new bolt was there, and it was tight. While that was being looked at, the shop changed the oil, and the filter, and installed two new sparkplugs, for a total of

After 13,000 Miles and One Year, Our Opinion of the CX500 Hasn't Changed.



Slipper for the timing chain tensioner broke just below its pivot. Lots of noise, no damage and an expensive repair.



Air caps for the forks help firm up the front under braking. The kit works well and the pressure showing on the gauge hasn't dropped one psi in months.

\$47.27. Soon as the engine was broken in, we ran a miles-per-gallon check on the road test loop and got 51 mpg; baseline, we figured, for the CX in good running condition.

The log is blank for 3700 miles, showing only that the CX was treated to gasoline at a rate of 50 to 52 mpg, just what we expected, and got an oil change and battery top-up at 2500 miles; insurance, so to speak and also because with the shaft drive, only two carbs and electronic ignition, there wasn't much else to do.

At 3700 miles we had heard from CX owners who wondered how the valve train on our example was doing. Theirs, they said, were noisy. We also heard from ours, in the form of some clatter. Clearances were increasing at a rate of 0.001-in. every 1000 miles. The outboard cylinder heads,

the rocker arms and the reusable rubber gaskets for the rocker covers made the actual job, setting the clearances, easy. And, to get out of sequence some, the rate of clearance increase goes down as the miles build up. One owner, who had 16,000 miles on his, reports he needed to adjust the clearances every 1000 miles during the first 8000 mi., and then needed only 3000-mile checks during the next. Something about the material of the pushrods, rockers and valve stems, we guess.

No big problem. But, Notes from the first adjustment reflect some dismay. You can turn the engine, which must be done to get the valves closed for adjustment, with a nut on the end of the crankshaft. Except that the nut is covered by a cap and access to the cap is blocked by the radiator shroud and removing the shroud means four

screws, one of which, on the right, is blocked by the exhaust pipe. So we removed the sparkplugs and bumped the engine over, in top gear, rear wheel in the air. Okay, the CX500 is more complicated than average, and perhaps there was no better way to arrange all the bits and pieces. Does make home maintenance discouraging, though.

Further, the shop that did the inspection tightened the plugs. Tight. And there was no breaker bar in the tool kit, which meant using the screwdriver. The pot-metal spark plug wrench wasn't up to the job. It skipped flats on the plug. Because the CX was in the CW shop, a proper socket and handle was as close as the tool box. On the road, it would have been a bad lesson to learn.

Then came spring. With spring came good weather and an excuse to take a trip, a 1000-mile jaunt.

On that jaunt, Trouble.

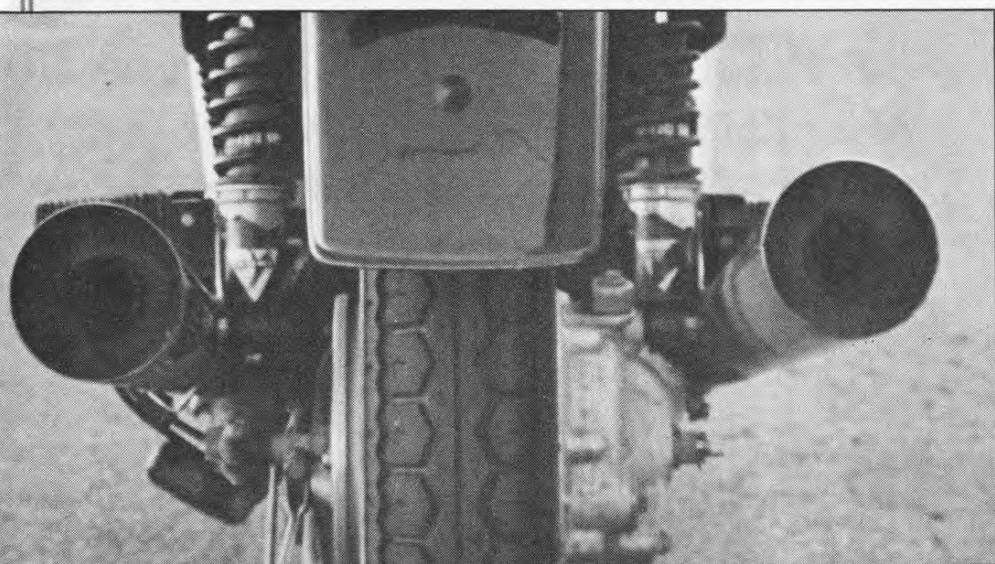
During a lunch stop in Arizona, odo reading 5600 miles, the valves sounded loose. They weren't. Perhaps the timing chain? No. Thinking of the earlier weak point within the chain tensioner, we checked with an Arizona dealer. Not for days, they said.

Someone suggested loading the CX into a truck and hauling it home. The man to whom the CX had been assigned took offense. I'll ride it, he said, and I might even push it, but I'll push it from Tucson to Los Angeles before I let any deleted truck haul any motorcycle of mine.

Faith did it. The CX made the 500 miles, noisy but intact. A teardown showed that although the tensioner bolt was intact the slipper itself had broken at the pivot. The slipper and the timing chain—the latter as a precaution—were replaced. The bill was \$120 for labor, \$74.75 for parts.

Quite a hit. And rare. We've been running a couple of longterm bikes each year for three years now and this is the first major breakdown any of the machines has suffered. Doesn't make the CX500 look good, but it does say something about the modern motorcycle. (Honda reps tell us the broken slipper is something only our example has suffered, far as they know.)

Then came another 3000 miles with nothing but gas and wax. One morning, reading 8900, our man noticed dribbles of coolant below the left side of the engine. The joint between the pipe from the thermostat housing and the left barrel was weeping. The joint uses a rubber o-ring, so the pipe was removed. Both surfaces were daubed with blue silicone seal, the pipe >



Mufflers mount off the brackets that also hold the passenger pegs. There are slots and tabs and for some reason, when the slots were opened up to take the pegs and pipes, the right muffler was higher than the left.

was replaced and the connection has been tight ever since.

At 10,900 miles, the rear tire was down to the wear bars. Another lesson in modern motorcycles here, as the tubeless Bridgestone and ComStar with rim to retain the tubeless tire were a perfect match. Our tire irons, mallets, bars and semi-pro tools couldn't break the bead loose. The wheel went to the dealership, where they have the hydraulic gadgets needed. Okay, the tubeless tire worked fine and gave adequate life. We can't prove a negative, that is, we don't know that it didn't have flats better than a tube-style tire would have not had flats.

But we hate to think about trying to dismount and repair that system at the side of the road, in the rain, 100 miles from the next service, at night.

The tire was replaced by a Michelin M45 with tube. No firm data on it, except that it shows no wear 2000 miles later, works fine in the wet and because it's a bit more peaked in cross-section, walks about some on the dreaded rain grooves.

The log is blank from the tire change on, except for a random failure. Came out of the hamburger joint and the CX was stone dead. No flicker, no nothing. The main fuse looked good, so did the other fuses. We push-started it and rode back to the shop, where the circuit tester showed the main fuse was broken inside the cap. No reason for that to have happened and if we'd been thinking right, the spare fuse would have had the bike under way in two minutes.

In-Service Tests

Longterm machines are themselves under daily evaluation. At the same time, each bike on the program is used for testing whatever accessories or modifications suggest themselves.

One of the first done on the CX was a set

of air caps for the front forks. They're like the air caps first used in motocross and since then air pressure as another way to tune front suspension has become almost routine on the new road bikes, as in Honda CB900, Yamaha XS850 and XS11, Suzuki GS1100, etc.

On the CX, the caps worked well, but not as well as hoped. Air pressure is an accessory spring, with progressive rate. Our hope was to keep the CX's comfy ride while firming the front end under heavy braking. The pressure did some good, using 12 psi, but with higher pressure the ride suffered and with 12 psi or less, the front still dips.

The caps, fittings, hoses and gauges, though, are still in top shape. Haven't leaked or lost pressure in 10 months. From Helmet House, 2115 Colorado Blvd, Santa Monica, Calif. 90404.

We had even less luck with a custom seat. As the photos show, the CX seat has lost much of its step and the flashy covering and sculpture. A local shop did the work, trimming down the rear portion and recovering the seat for \$50 cheaper than a store-bought custom.

Flaw here was simply that our man didn't make himself clear. He wanted a flat, level seat, front to back. He got a not quite flat seat that is level *on the workbench*. What he forgot to tell the shop was that the seatpan mounts with a slope toward the front. The principle, that of having a good shop re-do your machine's seat to fit your seat, works. The execution in this case wasn't as good as the principle.

Jardine slip-on mufflers went on at about 5000 miles. They reduced the quarter-mile time by several tenths of a second, sound lovely and haven't gotten louder or rusted or anything. After the first report, though, we noticed that one muffler is markedly higher than the other. Why, we don't know. Doesn't bother us much, although other riders have asked why the

pipes point at different angles. Highly recommended mufflers, even so.

The Krauser fairing is much the same, as we adapted it and the hardware from a kit designed to go on another model Honda. The fairing has been worn with four sets of bars—one of the staff has this thing about The Perfect Bars—and it has held up well. Some of us like it, some don't. So far, nobody has said it ruins the looks of the CX. From Bob Beach, 2803 W. River, Grand Island, N.Y. 14072.

A Bates fairing was used on the CX during the summer. It was designed for the CX500, it went into place without any problem. It's higher and less styled than the Krauser and probably is better suited for the touring rider.

The CX isn't a terribly sporting motorcycle. Fun, yes, trustworthy, no question. The suspension, though, has been designed for a good ride and the weight of the bike also helps to keep the CX out of victory circle.

After a few thousand miles the rear shocks felt tired and the back began hitting bottom on dips. As a cure we installed a set of Koni shocks, #76 F-1282 SP40, with springs rated at 112 lb./in.

Rear suspension was immediately returned to better than new. The Konis have adjustable damping, done with the shock off the bike, but ours came at full soft and they've been left as they came. Unladen ride on smooth roads is as good as ever, and at full compression the Konis keep the back wheel in better control.

What they also did, by comparison, was prove that the CX's reluctance to hold the fast line on a sweeping turn is caused by flex in the front end. The stanchion tubes, axle mounting and triple clamps are not built for racing. They flex, not badly, not enough to notice under most situations, but one fast run on a CB750F will show who's good and who's much better.

We didn't plan on racing the CX anyway and it runs through the canyons quick enough to keep your eyes open, so the Konis were the sum total of our high performance program. They still feel firm as ever and if they get tired, one can dial another click of firmness. At this rate, they'll last forever. Check the catalog at your Koni dealer.

Results

Overall, the CX500 has been a success. The engineering and the styling and the sheer differentness of the CX, with oddball engine, pushrods and all the rest, make the model an easy one to like. Or dislike. It's been low in maintenance on the basis of time, and high on the basis of money. The CX has to have more parts than any other motorcycle on the market. And at the end of 13,000 miles in 12 months, those of us who liked it when it first came out still would rather ride it home than any of the bigger, faster, more conventional machines that have come on the scene since. ■