FLICKERING SADDLES

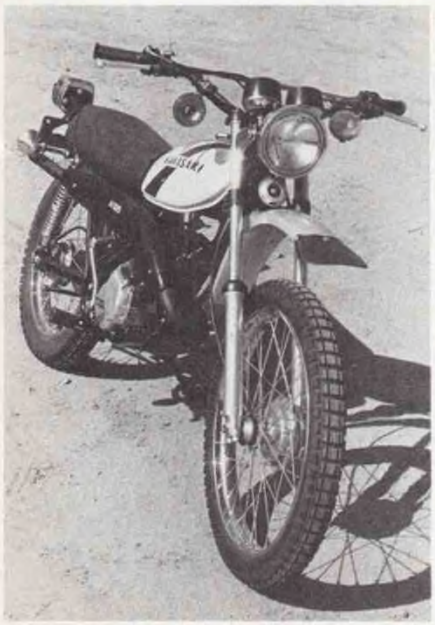
SHOOTOUT: HONDA XL125 vs. KAWASAKI KE125 vs. SUZUKI TS125 vs. YAMAHA DT125. GOT THAT?

by the Staff of DIRT BIKE

Well, it's that time of the year again, time to vent the editorial spleen on every motorcycle junkie's favorite whipping boy: the 125cc foo-foo bike. Or, "dual-purpose motorcycles," "street/trailers" as the industry likes to call them. It's always a fun occasion. Your fingers curled into a penetrating sneer, you hunch before your typewriter, Roget's All New Thesaurus at the ready, eager to decimate the thin line between adjective and invective. *Preposterous.* That's a good one. *Scum bag* — a little anachronistic, but it has flare. "*We'd laugh at these things if we weren't so bruised from falling.*" Nice. It serves the double purpose of putting down the bikes and implying that that's the only reason your staff ever falls.

It happens every year, as predictably as Hubert Humphrey's candidacy for president. And the factories don't even notice, don't even seem to wince at what the press is saying about their machinery. Why should they? They've heard it

"I'm not sure that I really ever rode the thing. But maybe I did. Then again. . . Oh, I remember. Wasn't that the blonde from Pacoima?"



Tucked-in front turn signals on the Kawasaki were a definite plus. The seat was hard, and soon had that sacked-out feeling.

all before. And they're selling a million of them.

Which, perhaps, should give all concerned pause. If dual-purpose motorcycles, foo-foo bikes if you will, are so awful, useless and self-destructive, why are so many people buying them? And what do they do with them? And is it legal?

WE LAUGHED WHEN WE SAT DOWN TO PLAY THE PIANO

Mostly, although we can't help reflecting that Honda's ad campaign bank robbers would have stood a better chance of getting away on the XL125 than they did on that silly street bike. Statistics on street versus trail use aside, apparently most people buy 125cc street/trailers simply to have fun on.

The hills and forests are full of people — young/old, male/female/indeterminate — in Levi's and work boots and God knows whatall,

It looks OK, but the KE's suspension was the most mediocre of the bunch.

The XL's snap-off sidecovers reveal typical Honda neatness and attention to detail. Extra fuses and the owner's manual are secured inside the cover.

If you're going to Pacoima, you'll be glad to know that the DT has a luggage rack.

spinning donuts and popping wheelies and generally carrying on in a manner which defies the moralistic ethic of the serious motorcycle rider — the guy who secretly sees himself atop a ridge at the Austrian round of the ISDT, or banging bars with Roger DeCoster somewhere in darkest Belgium. They don't care that their suspensions don't suspend, the instrument cluster weighs ten pounds and the weight bias is all wrong, any more than a zebra cares that Mr. Blackwell says that stripes are out this year. They're just out there to have a good time, with a minimum of preliminary expense, work, maintenance or worry. And they might want to ride that little mother to school or the corner store during the week. Give them Carl Cranke's ISDT bike and they'd rather stay home.

So here's what it's all about: utility. And fun. The question here is, which of these bikes is the most useful? And the most fun?

WHAT'S THE LEAD CHARACTER'S MOTOR-VATION?

These bikes have a lot in common. For one thing, they all have engines. What they don't have in common is the number of strokes those engines take during each cycle, or the way in which the fuel is introduced into the cylinder so that it can be destroyed.

In alphabetical order, then.

HONDA: Four-stroke, single-cylinder, five-speed. You kick it to start. It has an up-pipe which curls around in rather giddy fashion, but which manages to stay out of the way. It is very quiet. The Keihin carb feeds directly off a well-sealed air box which seems adequate to the XL's needs. The four-stroke combination of low end grunt and pulling power made the Honda the best plonker and hillclimber of the bunch. Though its acceleration seemed a mite pokey, it didn't seem that way when the bike was actually drag raced against the other contestants. And we rode another stocker which was geared down a tooth and performed quite peppily. The XL's wide, unboggable powerband made it the most fun to playride. American Honda has experimented with an XL by adding a B.C.E. electronic ignition — a simple bolt-on and hook-up three wires operation. The modification was a winner.

KAWASAKI: Two-stroke, single-cylinder, rotary valve. Kickstarted. Up-pipe. The best of the two-strokes for riding on tight and twisty trails because of the reasonable amount of low end torque it develops. Can still be bogged. A pretty good hillclimber. Well waterproofed. Six speeds in the transmission to keep your foot busy. The KE shifts easily without the use of the clutch. Like all of the two-strokes, it has oil injection lubrication.

SUZUKI: Two-stroke, single-cylinder, piston port. Kickstarted. Downpipe with adequate rock guard. The TS is a buzzer. Suzuki's four-port scavenging system gives the bike more on top than any of the others, but it's also the most peaky. The motor doesn't really begin to pull until around 6900 rpm. It's probably the best bike for faster riding, but it's difficult to get up a steep, slippery hill. The least fun on

Honda XL125. Twice as many strokes.

The XL's four-banger powerplant made it a plonker's delight. It would go up most anything, with most anyone riding it. Nice pegs, decent suspension and it's not overly heavy, either.

Honda won the fork shootout easily, but rigid-mount turn signals were too vulnerable when crashing.

a twisty trail.

YAMAHA: Two-stroke, single-cylinder, piston port. Kick and electric start. Up-pipe with spark arrestor (ditto the others). Past DTs have impressed us as having the best low end power of any 125 street/trailer. The fact that this one didn't probably just means that the others have gotten better. Nevertheless, the Yamaha's power was quite acceptable within the limits of this category. Spectacular at neither end, it gets the job done. Testers debated the necessity and desirability of the electric start. Conclusion: totally unnecessary, but some riders will no doubt appreciate the effortless starting — at least until they run down the battery. It *is* nice to have when you bog the engine in a tight spot. During our stream bed tests, the Yamaha was the only bike to be drowned out.

YES, WE HAVE SUSPENSION, BUT THE SPECIAL TODAY IS GROUND ROUND

HONDA: While writing about the suspensions of these motorcycles is a lot like writing about Evel Knievel's humility, the Honda's is the best of a decidedly mediocre bunch. That's simply because of its leading axle front forks, which are a cut above the rest. Because of these forks, the XL was more pleasurable and less damaging to ride, whether motocrossing or trials riding — or what passes for those activities on street/trailers. Oddly enough though, the XL was the worst of the bunch in the whoops. But all in all, our testers agreed that the Honda was the most stable and predictable motorcycle of all.

KAWASAKI: The KE's suspension got the consensus nod as all-around most mediocre. This was especially true of the front end, which liked to tuck and dive if the rider wasn't on the gas. And hard application of the front brake led to quick and intimate familiarity with the local terrain.

HONDA XL125

Price . . (approx. retail, West Coast) $796
Engine . . . . . Four-stroke, single-cylinder
Displacement 122cc
Bore & Stroke 56x49.5
Compression Ratio 9.3:1
Carburetion . . . . . Keihin
Standard Jetting . . . . . N/A
Horsepower . . . . . N/A
Clutch . . . . . Wet, multi-disc
Primary Drive . . . . . Gear; 4.055:1
Transmission Ratios:
1) 2.769:1
2) 1.722:1
3) 1.272:1
4) 1.041:1
5) 0.814:1
Final Drive:
Chain, #428
15-tooth countershaft
45-tooth rear sprocket
Air Filtration . . . . . Wet foam
Electrics . . . . . Magneto, 6V
Starting . . . . . Primary kick
Lubrication . . . . . Wet sump
Recommended Fuel . . . . . Premium
Recommended Oil . . . . . Honda
Fuel Tank Capacity . . . 1.7 gallons (6.91.)
Frame:
Mild steel, single downtube, full cradle
Suspension:
Honda forks and shocks; fork travel 145mm (5.7 inches)
Wheels & Spoke . . . . . D.I.D
Tires:
Front: Bridgestone 2.75x21
Rear: Bridgestone 3.50x18
Dimensions:
Wheelbase . . . . . 134cm (52.7 inches)
Swingarm length . . . . 45cm (17.7 inches)
Ground clearance . . . . 27cm (10.5 inches)
Bars, height . . . . . 104cm (41 inches)
Bars, width . . . . . 80cm (31.5 inches)
Pegs, height . . . . . 26cm (10.5 inches)
Pegs, width . . . . . 51cm (20 inches)
Seat height . . . . . 79cm (31 inches)
Fork angle . . . . . 31 degrees
Weight:
229 total with one gallon of gas;
Front: 96 pounds
Rear: 133 pounds
Brakes:
Front: Cable-operated standard drum
Rear: Rod-operated standard drum
Instruments:
Speedometer, turn signals, horn
Lights . . . . . Yes
Silencer . . . . . Yes
Spark Arrestor . . . . Yes, Honda-Krizman
Parts Prices:
Piston $5.96
Rings $5.40
Clutch cable $4.20
Brake pedal $6.20
Turn signal (one-rear) $6.10

KAWASAKI KE125-A3

Price . . (approx. retail, West Coast) $789
Engine:
Two-stroke, single-cylinder, rotary valve
Displacement 124cc
Bore & Stroke 56.0x50.6
Compression Ratio 7.0:1
Carburetion . . . . . Mikuni VM24SS
Horsepower . . . . . 13 at 6500 rpm claimed
Clutch . . . . . Wet, multi-disc
Primary Drive . . . . . Gear, 3.14:1
Transmission Ratios:
1) 2.60:1
2) 1.69:1
3) 1.25:1
4) 1.00:1
5) 0.84:1
6) 0.75:1
Final Drive:
Chain, #428
14-tooth countershaft
50-tooth rear sprocket
Air Filtration . . . . . Wet foam
Electrics . . . . . Battery, 6V
Starting . . . . . Primary kick
Lubrication . . . . . Superlube oil injection
Recommended Fuel . . . . . Premium
Recommended Oil . . . . . Kawasaki
Fuel Tank Capacity . . . 1.8 gallons (6.71.)
Frame:
Mild steel, single downtube, full cradle
Suspension:
Kawasaki forks and shocks; fork travel 140mm (5.5 inches)
Wheels & Spokes . . . Takasago steel rims
Tires:
Front: Nitto 2.75x21
Rear: Nitto 3.50x18
Dimensions:
Wheelbase . . . . . 135cm (53.1 inches)
Swingarm length . . . . . 43cm (17 inches)
Ground clearance . . . . . 25cm (9.8 inches)
Bars, height . . . . . 104cm (41 inches)
Bars, width . . . . . 82.5cm (32.5 inches)
Pegs, height . . . . . 28cm (11 inches)
Pegs, width . . . . . 46cm (18 inches)
Seat height . . . . . 79cm (31 inches)
Fork angle . . . . . 31 degrees
Weight:
224 total with one gallon of gas;
Front: 97 pounds
Rear: 127 pounds
Brakes:
Front: Cable-operated standard drum
Rear: Cable-operated standard drum
Instruments:
Separate speedometer and tachometer; turn signals and horn
Lights . . . . . Yes
Silencer . . . . . Yes
Spark Arrestor . . . . . No
Parts Prices:
Piston $11.40
Rings $7.90
Clutch cable $5.50
Brake pedal $9.60
Turn signal (one-rear) $10.20

But. . . the crucial point is that the KE is really not appreciably worse in the suspension department than the other bikes. Just marginally.

SUZUKI: The Suzuki was the lightest of the bunch, but it didn't feel like it. When asked about their impressions of the suspension, most riders couldn't separate it from the others — with the exception of the Honda front end. Like all of the two-strokes, the TS didn't track very precisely in the sand, and tended to wash out in a tight turn at speed.

Kawasaki KE125. Twice as many rubber footpegs.

YAMAHA: The Yamaha is the heaviest of the group by 12 pounds (247 pounds), and has the greatest rear weight bias. Not surprisingly, it feels quite rear-heavy. The rear shocks are mounted slightly farther forward along the swingarm than are those of the other bikes, but there's no noticeable difference in performance. The forks bottomed out badly in deep whoops, even at slow speeds. And standing on the Yamaha can be uncomfortable — especially for smaller riders — because of the width of the seat.

DARE WE BREAK A TURN SIGNAL?

Accessory and auxiliary items are of more than passing importance on bikes like these. In common are held: spark arrestors, basic tool kits, trials tires (a necessary evil, but these are all unnecessarily mediocre), turn signals (we'll get to that), speedometers (featuring the incredible overkill of calibrations ranging from 80-100 mph) and the most monstrous taillights this side of a Department of Transportation rules-making session.

HONDA: Simple and uncluttered, the Honda instrument and lights package is among the best. It is the only bike to forgo the needless luxury (and additional weight and expense) of a tachometer, and while the rear turn signals and rear light are oversized and vulnerable to crashes, they're no more so than those of the others. However, Honda has chosen to mount the front signals on rigid stanchions running off the headlight bracket, and these are extremely vulnerable. The XL's brakes are only so-so. The rear chatters under hard braking, and the front is marginal. The speedometer has a resettable trip meter. There is a fork lock but no gas cap lock. The front fender is stylish and unbreakable, but too small, allowing mud to coat the engine. The ignition switch is below the tank where it's hard to reach, and the kill button is on the right side of the bars, where it does the least good (the other bikes share this particular bit of non-rider engineering). Pegs, levers and grips are nice items, and the levers have fitted accordion-rubber covers.


Kawasaki's rotary valve engine pulled well. The KE was the only bike with rubber pegs — not exactly a mark of distinction.

KAWASAKI: The KE has both a speedometer and tach, though the chance of over-revving seems relatively slight. Lights and turn signals are standard items, and the under-the-bars mounting of the front signals is a plus factor. But the KE was the only one of our test bikes

Suzuki TS125. Twice as orange.

Suzuki's instrument cluster was neat and easy to read, but signal lights stick out too far for comfort.

The Suzuki was the only bike with a low pipe, but that was well protected by the skid plate. It was also the only bike that came to us equipped with buddy pegs.

to sport — brace yourself — *rubber footpegs.* For shame. The Kawasaki's rear brake is cable-operated, as is the Suzuki's, while the others are rod-actuated. It didn't seem to make much difference. All chattered. The front brake was strong — a bit too strong for the forks. Otherwise: fork lock — yes; lever covers — yes; horn — yes; locking gas cap — no. The plastic front fender has a front mud flap, but is too short to completely protect the engine. There is a window in the left sidecover to allow for checking of the oil level. Rubber pegs. Argggggh.

SUZUKI: Speedometer/tach, the former with a resettable meter. The usual lights and signals in the normal sizes and configurations, but the Suzuki's front signals are also rigid-mounted off the headlight. There is both a fork lock and a locking gas cap. Buddy pegs are provided, and there is a heat shield for your passenger's tender leg. The front fender is the best of the bunch, extending farther to both front and rear. Good pegs and levers (no covers), and the seat is comfortable and fitted with a buddy strap. Oil tank, tools, battery, etc. are reached by unlatching the seat.

YAMAHA: Why, yes, we do have a tachometer, speedometer with resettable trip meter, handlebar-mounted ignition and tucked-in front turn signals. Pegs and levers are pretty decent, and there are lever covers and those same waffle grips that have been munching on tender hands for years. There is a viewing window for checking the oil level. There is a fork lock and a locking gas cap. A lock secures the seat, which swings up to reveal tools, battery, etc. It is the only bike of our four which came with a luggage rack. The DT did not seem to be as well-sealed against water as the other bikes.

SUZUKI TS125

Price . . (approx. retail, West Coast) $795
Engine:
Two-stroke, single-cylinder, piston port
Displacement 123cc
Bore & Stroke 56x50
Compression Ratio 6.8:1
Carburetion . . . . . Mikuni VM24SH
Standard Jetting . . . . . N/A
Horsepower . . . . . N/A
Clutch . . . . . Wet, multi-plate
Primary Drive . . . . . Gear, 3.563:1
Transmission Ratios:
1) 2.951:1
2) 1.900:1
3) 1.214:1
4) 1.000:1
5) 0.805:1
Final Drive:
Chain, #428
16-tooth countershaft
57-tooth rear sprocket
Air Filtration . . . . . Wet foam
Electrics . . . . . Magneto with 6V battery
Starting . . . . . Primary kick
Lubrication . . . . . C.C.I. oil injection
Recommended Fuel . . . . . Premium
Recommended Oil . . . . . C.C.I
Fuel Tank Capacity . . . 1.8 gallons (7.01.)
Frame:
Mild steel, single downtube, full cradle
Suspension:
Suzuki forks and shocks; fork travel 155mm (6.2 inches)
Wheels & Spokes . . . Takasago steel rims
Tires:
Front: Bridgestone 2.75x21
Rear: Bridgestone 3.25x18
Dimensions:
Wheelbase . . . . . 132cm (52 inches)
Swingarm length . . . . . 43cm (17 inches)
Ground clearance . . . . 25.5cm (10 inches)
Bars, height . . . . . 107cm (42 inches)
Bars, width . . . . . 82.5cm (32.5 inches)
Pegs, height . . . . . 30.5cm (12 inches)
Pegs, width . . . . . 47cm (18.5 inches)
Seat height . . . . . 81cm (32 inches)
Fork angle . . . . . 30 degrees
Weight:
220 total with one gallon of gas;
Front: 96 pounds
Rear: 124 pounds
Brakes:
Front: Cable-operated standard drum
Rear: Cable-operated standard drum
Instruments:
Separate speedometer and tachometer; turn signals and horn
Lights . . . . . Yes
Silencer . . . . . Yes
Spark Arrestor . . . . . No
Parts Prices:
Piston $8.63
Rings $5.58
Clutch cable $5.28
Brake pedal $7.64
Turn signal (one-rear) $10.58

The electric start Yamaha was the heavyweight champ at 247 pounds. You pay for your pleasures.

WHO GETS THE BANANA?

If you've been paying attention, it won't come as any surprise to you that the XL125 got our vote as the most pleasurable bike to foo-foo on. There is actually not a great deal of difference between the four bikes, and the Honda wins the prize on the basis of its four-stroke engine and the job it does. It is the most adaptable bike to all kinds of terrain and riding, and takes less effort to ride in difficult terrain — especially hills. It is the most stable and predictable of the four, and its better than average front forks give it a suspension edge. And, to the extent that it sounds at all, it sounds neat.

Tucked-in turn signals and a locking gas cap are part of the Yamaha's generally well-thought-out accessory package.

As George might say, "If it doesn't have four-strokes, why bother?"

Yamaha DT125. Twice as electric.

And so, as the sun sinks slowly in the west, our enthusiastic test crew bids adieu to this fascinating foursome. Thanks guys, it's been fun. Guys? Guys. . .?

YAMAHA DT125C

Price . . (approx. retail, West Coast) $789
Engine:
Two-stroke, single-cylinder, reed valve
Displacement 123cc
Bore & Stroke 56x50
Compression Ratio 7.1:1
Carburetion . . . . . Mikuni VM24SS
Horsepower . . . . . N/A
Clutch . . . . . Wet, multi-disc
Primary Drive . . . . . Gear, 3.894:1
Transmission Ratios:
1) 3.181:1
2) 2.000:1
3) 1.368:1
4) 1.000:1
5) 0.800:1
Final Drive:
Chain, #428
15-tooth countershaft
45-tooth rear sprocket
Air Filtration . . . . . Wet foam
Electrics . Battery, 12V; Hitachi generator
Starting . . . . . Electric, primary kick
Lubrication . . . . . Yamaha Autolube
Recommended Fuel . . . . . Premium
Recommended Oil . . . . . Yamalube
Fuel Tank Capacity . . . 1.8 gallons (7.01.)
Frame:
Mild steel, double downtube, full cradle
Suspension:
Yamaha forks and shocks; fork travel 151mm (6.0 inches)
Wheels & Spokes . . . Takasago steel rims
Tires:
Front: Yokohama 2.75x21
Rear: Yokohama 3.25x18
Dimensions:
Wheelbase . . . . . 132cm (52.2 inches)
Swingarm length . . . . 46cm (18.0 inches)
Ground clearance . . . . . 25cm (9.8 inches)
Bars, height . . . . . 107cm (42 inches)
Bars, width . . . . . 81cm (32 inches)
Pegs, height . . . . . 28cm (11 inches)
Pegs, width . . . . . 52cm (20.5 inches)
Seat height . . . . . 80cm (31.5 inches)
Fork angle . . . . . 32 degrees
Weight:
240 with one gallon of gas;
Front: 105 pounds
Rear: 135 pounds
Brakes:
Front: Cable-operated standard drum
Rear: Rod-operated standard drum
Instruments:
Separate speedometer and tachometer; turn signals and horn
Lights . . . . . Yes
Silencer . . . . . Yes
Spark Arrestor . . . Yes, Yamaha-Krizman
Parts Prices:
Piston $10.20
Rings $6.20
Clutch cable $3.80
Brake pedal $6.46
Turn signal (one-rear) $9.60