

DUAL TEST



There's a kind of brotherly sameness between the Honda XL250 and the XL500. They each share many of the same characteristics, many of the same components, and even a lot of similar dimensions and specifications. The only major difference between the two is that everything is magnified on the XL500, with its awesome horsepower, which is the most potent of any Open class four-stroke, dual-purpose machine. Also, a healthy amount of extra weight is carried by the 500. So we thought it would be only fair to test the two side-by-side, and determine each one's good and bad points, and see how they stack up.

Honda XL500S

Before we say anything further, let's get all of the cards out on the table, right where everyone can see them. Without a doubt, the Honda XL500S is the best big, four-stroke, dual-purpose motorcycle built today. It was last year's pick in the Great Gala Four-Stroke Hog Iron Shootout, and it's the same story this year, too. Neither the Suzuki SP400 nor the Yama XT500 can match up to the XL. It out-handles the others, has much better suspension, a stronger motor, and the best performance both on and off the pavement.

What makes the Honda XL500 the cream of the 500cc crop is not just the

fact that the others aren't up to it power and suspension-wise, but the fact that Honda has incorporated so much new technology in the bike.

The biggest advantage of the Honda XL500 is its superior suspension and handling. The forks are telescopic oil/spring legs, which offer an even eight inches of travel, while the rear end is set up with a swingarm and a pair of gas/spring shocks, laid down and inverted in the old style of motocrossers, measuring in at seven inches of travel. With that, the bike can take on medium-rough terrain in a reasonable fashion. Surely better than any other Open dualer of the past or present. This gives the rider a versatility that is one of the best in the whole range of street/trail bikes, regardless of displacement.

Despite the fact that the suspension is the best in its field, it does have its shortcomings. The forks, for instance, are rather harsh in the rough. And the rear end is the same way. It has a bad hopping tendency when covering trails.

If you would like to correct these ailments, there are two simple, inexpensive steps to have a more stable, confident set of suspenders. Up front, go for a Terry fork kit. This offers a smoother stroke without the harshness, for around fifty bucks. On

back, we suggest a set of Works Performance shocks, the inexpensive original oilers. That will tame the rear end down in the wild, and even up the travel at the rear end. With these two modifications, you'll also extend the limits of the XL to that of an XR in the handling department. With the improved suspension, you can go over rougher ground a whole lot safer than before.

For hillclimbing, the 497cc churner will bull its way right to the top of most any slope. All the rider has to do is stick it in gear, and keep the revs down low to use all of the torque put out.

One of the main problems with the bike is its weight. The whole unit tips the scales just shy of the 300-pound mark. And the motor itself is a bulky 100 pounder.

Here's where you can get into trouble while out on the trail. A lot of the weight is up high, which makes for a tall center of gravity and an eerie feeling in turns until you get used to the bike. If you get a little out of control in the rough, with all of the weight, compounded by all of the power put out at the rear wheel, you can quickly find yourself careening down a trail out of control. But, under control, once you've gotten used to it, the XL is a fine machine.



HONDA XL250/500

Brotherly Love

By the Editors of Dirt Bike

XL250/500

Honda XL250S

Of all of the XLs, probably the funnest bike to thrash around off road is the Honda XL250S. It's a pleasant bike that has decent power, reasonable torque and good handling. In some ways, it is better than the all-new Yamaha XT250.

The main shortcoming of the XL250, when compared to the XT250, is in the suspension department. While the forks and shocks of the XL deliver about the same travel, they are much harsher and just don't have the plushness of the XTs. In order to improve them, the two modifications mentioned earlier for the XL500 are advisable. The Terry Kit in the forks will smooth them out and make them a lot nicer to ride with, while the Works shocks will get the rear end under control.

In stock form, the Honda XL can take all types of off-road abuse. We thrashed our tester around Texas Canyon all day, and ran it everywhere we took the PE250 test bike we were in the process of evaluating. It handled everything quite satisfactorily, and proved to be a good cowtrailer. We had to take it over the rougher sections a lot slower than the PE but other than the limitations set by the suspension, it was right at home anywhere we went.

The motor of the XL250 is more sophisticated and technologically advanced than the XT250 powerplant. Our engine was definitely stronger in the XL, with more low end torque, midrange, and a more comfortable top end. On the street, the XL was more at home than the XT, but it was the other way around on the trails, due to the suspension and handling superiorities of the XT. Engine-wise, the XL is the best in the class, with its Pentproof combustion chamber design that features four valves, and two exhaust ports for a more efficient flow.

Dry weight of the XL250 is at 260 on the scales. While this is a little heavy for a 250, it does not make itself known as with the XL500. The center of gravity is lower and the topheavy faults of the XL500 in the turns do not exist in the 250.

Two for the Road

In comparing the similarities of the two bikes, there are a few interesting tidbits. The seat heights of the two motorcycles are just about equal, with

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HONDA XL250S Specifications

NAME AND MODEL	Honda XL250S	GROUND CLEARANCE	10.2 inches
ENGINE TYPE	Four-stroke, single	STEERING HEAD ANGLE	28 1/2 degrees
BORE AND STROKE	74mm x 57.8mm	WEIGHT (CLAIMED)	262.4 pounds (dry)
DISPLACEMENT	249cc	INTENDED USE	Street legal, dual purpose
HORSEPOWER	24	PRICE	\$1448
CARBURETION	28mm Keihin	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	Japan
FUEL TANK CAPACITY	2.5 gallons		
GAS/OIL RATIO	N/A	DISTRIBUTOR	American Honda
TRANSMISSION	Five-speed		100 W. Alondra Blvd.
GEARING, FRONT/REAR	14-53		Gardena, CA 90247
IGNITION	CDI		
WHEELBASE	54.7 inches		



HONDA XL500S Specifications

NAME AND MODEL	Honda XL500S	GROUND CLEARANCE	10.2 inches
ENGINE TYPE	Four-stroke, single	STEERING HEAD ANGLE	28 1/2 degrees
BORE AND STROKE	89x80mm	WEIGHT (CLAIMED)	288.9 dry
DISPLACEMENT	499cc	INTENDED USE	Streetlegal, dual purpose
HORSEPOWER	34.5	PRICE	\$1875
CARBURETION	32mm Keihin	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	Japan
FUEL TANK CAPACITY	2.6 gallons		
GAS/OIL RATIO	N/A	DISTRIBUTOR	American Honda
TRANSMISSION	Five-speed		100 W. Alondra Blvd.
GEARING, FRONT/REAR	14-41		Gardena, CA 90247
IGNITION	CDI		
WHEELBASE	55.1 inches		



Strong feature of the XL-500: a super engine with lots of power throughout the whole rpm range.



XL-250 engine is a smallish, short unit with reasonable power. It'll rev out comfortably without valve float.



Dash board on both bikes is compact; space age. Turn signals bump into knees on sharp turns.



Shocks on both XL's leave a lot to be desired at anything over a casual pace.



Weak point of both bikes is a set of spindly forks. Claw action tires are a decent compromise, but wear fast.

XL250 & 500

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the 500 standing about a half an inch taller at 33.9 inches. As for the ground clearance, each bike sports 10.2 inches of air between the ground and the skid plate.

The travel is the same on the two models, both front and rear, and both bikes feature a 23-inch front wheel, with Bridgestone claw-action tires.

While the 23-inch tire is an advantage on the road, in the dirt they become a handicap. The larger rim slows down the turning action, and tends to wash out while negotiating tight trails. As for the Bridgestones, they are the best tires offered on any dual-purpose bike, but they, like the suspension, have a definite limitation. For what they were designed to do, the Honda claw-actions are far better than the trials-patterned tire found on other street/trail bikes.

The only problem you'll run into with the claw-actions, is when climbing loose hills. If you use the motor's torque to pull you up, rather than blast up, the rear end of each bike will snake from side to side all the way up.

Going downhill is pure terror with the claw-actions. In Texas Canyon, we were confronted with an extremely steep downhill, complete with huge, wheel-grabbing rain ruts. The rear end slid to one side and it refused to bite after that point. When the dust cleared and we picked the bike out of the weeds, we definitely knew that these tires had certain limitations.

The Big Picture

Over the years, Honda has incorporated some neat ideas into their line of dual-purpose four-strokes, and their technology is noticeably farther advanced than that of the other manufacturers. The XL500 is way ahead of its competition, and unless the other companies come up with something radical next year, the XL will still be far better, even if Honda left it untouched. But, knowing their record, they won't. They'll try to make it even better than the last one.

As for the 250, there is a big feud going on right now to see who can come up with the best model for 1981. Honda has the motor, but Yamaha has the suspension and handling.

It will be interesting to see what Honda does to try and regain the top spot of the dual-purpose four-strokes in every class next year. You can bet that they won't leave it alone. □



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