

This will be our first actual comparison test of two motorcycles. We haven't had comparison tests before because we haven't felt we've had the equipment, the manpower or the know-how to offer you a valid assessment of side-by-side bikes. But since we haven't increased the size of our staff any or acquired additional equipment, we probably still don't have what we need except for two years of experience watching motocross bikes develop and testing them. So what the hey, we've got to start somewhere.

* * *

The RM125 Suzuki is essentially a new bike and the CR125 Honda is essentially an old bike. Honda's immensely popular Elsinore has changed little since its introduction in 1973. The one you can buy now is a refined model of the one we tested two years ago, but those refinements make the Elsie a vastly improved motorcycle. New cylinder porting and pipe give it much more top end and redesigned air filter, sprocket bolts and shock absorbers make it more reliable. The forks have been changed too, but for the most part to make them simpler and cheaper to build.

The Suzuki RM125, on the other hand, is a hybrid, a combination of the old TM125 and the limited production RA125 factory race bike. The frame and engine are holdovers from the TM, while the cylinder porting, head, pipe and most importantly the suspension are copies of the RA. Together they come very close to making a superb racing bike, but it still lacks the sophistication and harmony of a conjointly conceived and designed package.

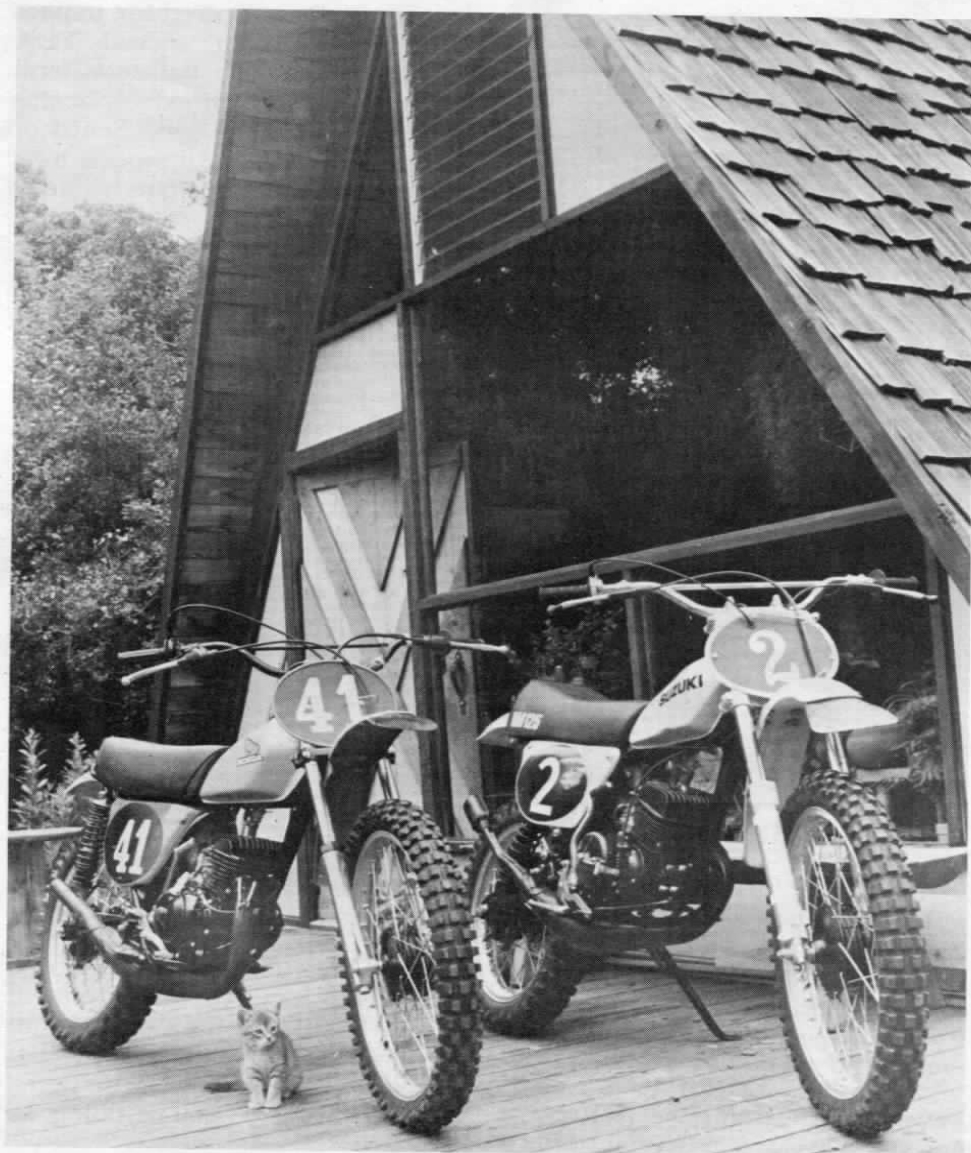
Both bikes have much to offer to the prospective buyer and both fall a little short of the mark in a few departments. What amplifies the comparison is that what one has, the other doesn't and where one hits the design mark on target, the other misses entirely. Racing them requires two different styles and owning them demands two different philosophies.

Sitting back in the clubhouse with a few racing buddies, passing around a communal Snickers and filling our internal tanks with Dr. Pepper, we scoped out the bikes as being basically similar in appearance. Arnold thinks all Japanese bikes look

RACE TEST/COMPARISON **HONDA CR125M** **VS.** **SUZUKI RM125**

Both bikes offer much to the prospective buyer but what one has, the other doesn't and vice versa

Photos by Paul Boudreau and Marcia Holley





Baz puts the Suzuki suspension to work making a pass on a gnarly downhill.
(Photo by Marcia Holley)

the same anyway, but then what Husqvarna freak doesn't? Both bikes show heavy indication that their designs passed through powerful marketing departments on their way to the production lines. Those guys really know what teen-agers like to save their money for. Sleek, lean, with smooth lines and bright colors, they appeal to the young racer while still holding up to the scrutiny of image-minded parents.

The Suzuki comes on as being a little more exotic, however. It sits much higher and, of course, its trick rear suspension looks really radical. The long stinger and factory-type silencer add to the image. But the Honda has a much more "come hither" look to the novice racer because it's lower, looks much easier to ride and has the familiar profile of a consistent winner in the 125 class. But looks only work till the starter starts running for cover.

The major difference between the two engines is that the Honda is a six-speed and the Suzuki is a five-speed. Overall gearing is about the same, since the Honda has a

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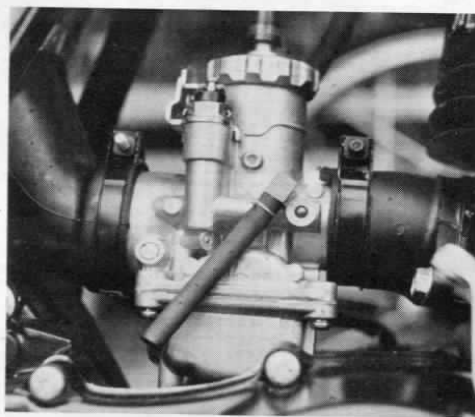
lower primary ratio and the Suzuki has a lower final ratio. The Suzuki's progression starts off a little higher and ends a little lower with the spacing between gears a little wider. This puts the Suzuki at a bit of a disadvantage because it's a little heavier than the Honda and has to jump the wider gear spaces. The Honda can get away quicker because it carries less weight and benefits from the torque multiples of the close ratio box. Within the framework of the race, however, a broad powerband metered through a wide ratio gearbox can have its advantages. You don't have to shift as much to make the RM go fast, but the Honda six-speed can contain a more radical powerband. How much more or whether it would make any difference is hard to say, since there are two philosophies involved. A real speedy, berserker-type rider with quick reactions and a hot hand would probably prefer the Honda, while a smoother, long-distance type could really get into the Suzuki.

Putting the power to the ground is a different story. Here, because of its superior rear suspension, the Suzuki way outshines the Honda. The Honda's 4½-inch rear suspension travel pops the wheel on just about every bump, leaving the knobs to look for traction in air. The Suzuki's 7½-inch rear suspension, on the other hand, gets traction from both sides of a bump. On a smooth uphill the Honda uses its gearing advantage to pull away from the Suzuki, but when the hill gets rough the Suzuki will pull the Honda because the RM puts what power it has to the ground.

Coming out of a turn on the Suzuki you have to be very mindful of what gear you're in because it gets such good traction that if you're not careful you can bog it. If you bog the Honda, a quick tap on the clutch will get the rear wheel spinning and hopping off the ground enough to keep the motor zoned, but clutching the RM will only get you a hot clutch. The contact between motor and ground is so good you must go for a lower gear to cancel the bog. (Better still is to take the turn faster so you won't bog or need to downshift.)

The only complaint we had about the shifting is the same we've had for all the Japanese-designed bikes. The throw is a little too short to impart

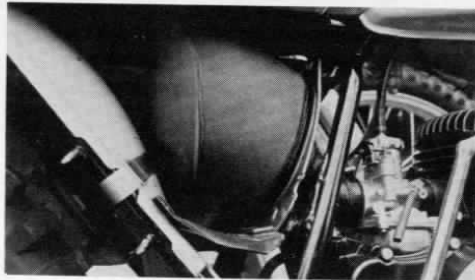
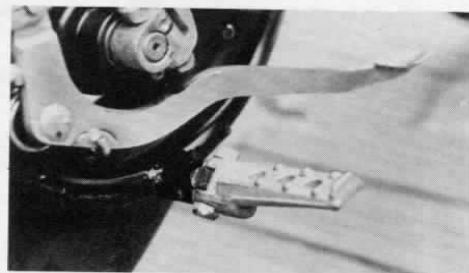
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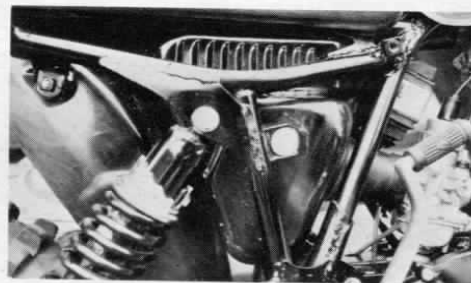
Keihin carb on the Honda (left) and Mikuni on the Suzuki (right) were both 28mm. Most hot tuners are going to 30 or 32 Mikunis.



Toothy steel footpegs and alloy brake pedal were trick on the Honda (left), but steel pedal and unsprung pegs were burnt on the Suzuki.



Honda air box was nowhere (left), but the Suzie had a good one although it was made of steel. Both carry foam elements. Check out the top shock mount on the Suzuki. It's solid.



Forks on the Honda worked fair, gave out a few jolts and flexed quite a bit. Suzuki forks were bigger, stronger, smoother and traveled more.



SPECIFICATIONS

Make HONDA
Model CR125M
Country of Manufacture Japan
Retail Price N/A

ENGINE

Type Two-stroke, piston port
Bore & Stroke 56mm x 50mm
Displacement 123cc
Compression Ratio 7.6:1
Cylinder Six-port, iron sleeve
Carburetion 29mm Keihin
Ignition CDI electronic
Lubrication Pre-mix
Air Filter Foam

TRANSMISSION

Type Six-speed
Ratios:
2.133, 1.611, 1.300,
1.090, 0.958, 0.880
Primary Gear, wet clutch
Ratio 4.000
Drive Chain D.I.D 428G

SUSPENSION

Front Hydraulic slider
Rear:
Hydraulic shock, standard mount
Travel, front 6.3 inches
Travel, rear 4.5 inches

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase 53.7 inches
Ground Clearance 7.7 inches
Seat Height 31.5 inches
Track Weight 185 pounds
Weight Bias 46/54

CAPACITIES

Fuel 1.6 gallons
Transmission 850cc
Forks 160cc

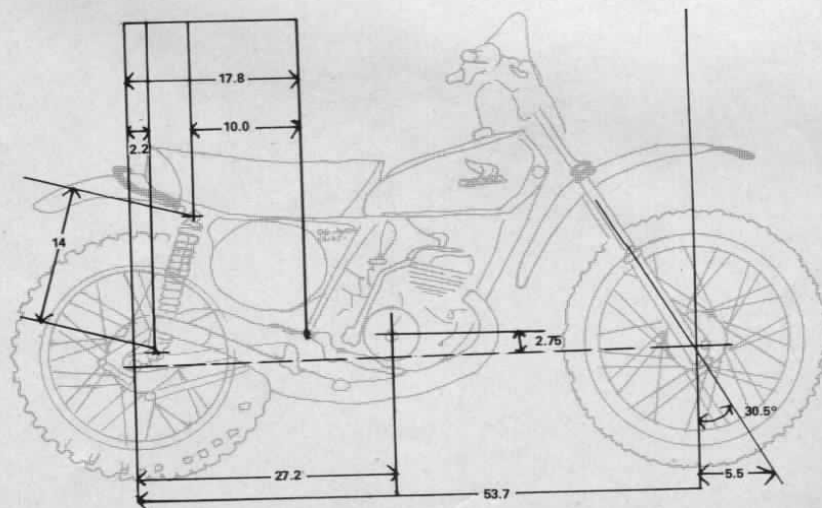
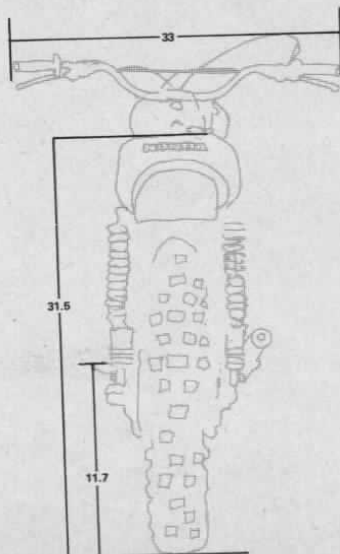
any feel to the rider about what's going on inside the gearbox. The Honda is an extreme opposite from the CZ in the shift throw category. We'd like to see something in the middle.

Handling on 125s is almost a built-in trait of the breed. Their short sectioned frames, light weight and low horsepower make them fairly unaffected by chassis flex. But if a division were to be made between our test subjects, we'd have to say the Suzuki worked better on the straights and the Honda could really jam the turns. Sitting way up on top of the Suzuki is kinda like perching on a pile of cigar boxes:

You're a little reluctant to let it tilt too far. Even if you get by the initial fears of leaning it over into a turn, you still have to contend with a tall bike's nature to shift too much weight off the wheels, allowing them to break loose early. On the RM, you invariably have to go for the berm to burn the turn.

The Honda, built three inches lower to the ground, can cut inside the Suzuki. It's easy. All you have to do is run with the guy on the Suzuki into the turn, tie up the brakes, tuck the handlebar behind your knee and punch it early. If you're good at it you can just cut his line as he's coming off the berm. But if the next

HONDA CR125M



straight is long enough and he makes the right move, he can get you back because while you're shifting, he's jammin'. The reason the Honda does a tighter turn is because it's ten pounds lighter and therefore easier to change direction, has a lower center of gravity and therefore finds more traction in a leaning posture, and the six-speed gets it away a little quicker. Turning the Suzuki requires you to address the gas cap with your crotch in order to shift enough weight forward to make a turn happen after a few light prods on a set of brakes that feel a little too grabby. You must whip the gas on early because you have to wait a bit

longer for the RM engine to come on and cut the turn. The best the Suzuki can do against the Honda on the inside is a stalemate.

On the berms the Suzuki can blaze the Honda. Hold the RM WFO in a tall gear and rail the berm for all it's worth. The Suzook out-berms the Honda for two reasons. First, the high CG works to an advantage, in this case, because the bike tips over easier and berms offer automatic traction. Second, the forks on the RM are heavy-duty models with thicker tubes so they hold a better line because they wiggle less under side loads. The spindly Honda forks tend to make the front end hunt a bit

Continued

SUZUKI RM125



SPECIFICATIONS

MakeSUZUKI
ModelRM125
Country of ManufactureJapan
Retail PriceN/A

ENGINE

TypeTwo-stroke, piston port
Bore & Stroke56mm x 50mm
Displacement123cc
Compression Ratio7.4:1
CylinderSeven-port, iron sleeve
Carburetion28mm Mikuni
IgnitionPEI electronic
LubricationPre-mix
Air FilterFoam

TRANSMISSION

TypeFive-speed
Ratios:
2.143, 1.588, 1.250, 1.045, 0.913
PrimaryGear, wet clutch
Ratio3.389
Drive ChainD.I.D 428TM

SUSPENSION

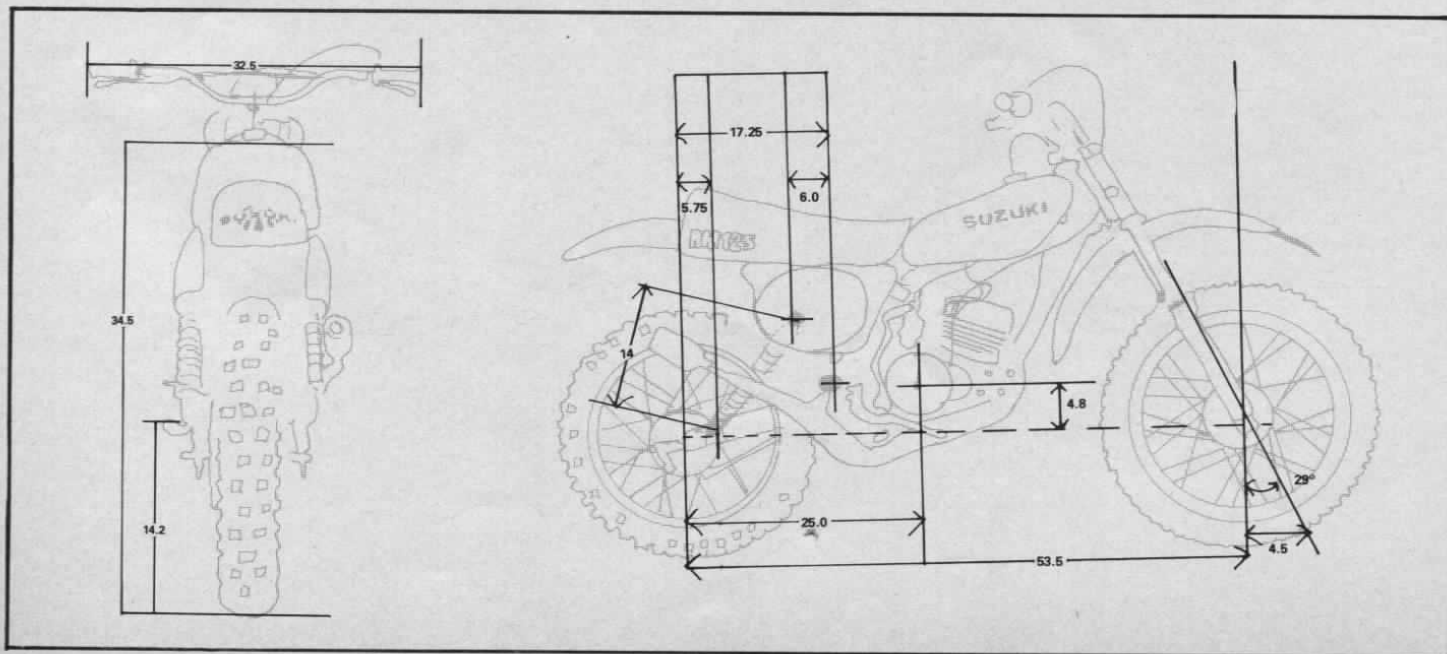
FrontHydraulic slider
Rear ..Gas/oil shock, forward mount
Travel, front7 inches
Travel, rear7.5 inches

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase53.5 inches
Ground Clearance9.7 inches
Seat Height34.5 inches
Track Weight195 pounds
Weight Bias47/53

CAPACITIES

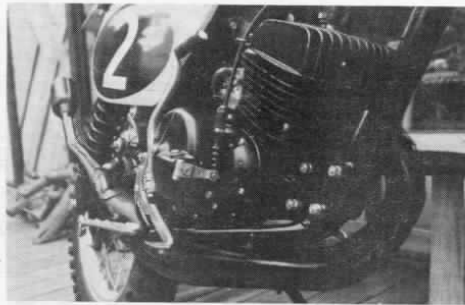
Fuel1.4 gallons
Transmission550cc
Forks210cc







Motors came out about the same. Six-speed Honda pulled stronger, five-speed Suzuki pulled longer.



Paulette gassed the Honda to a second in a women's race. (Photo by Marcia Holley)

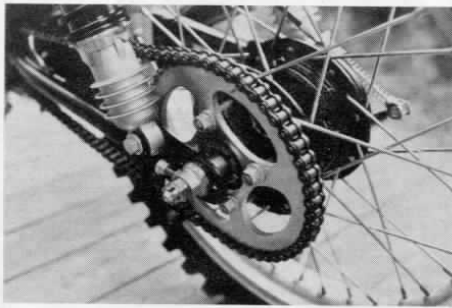


and give a little of that "where am I going" feeling when you bounce off a wall.

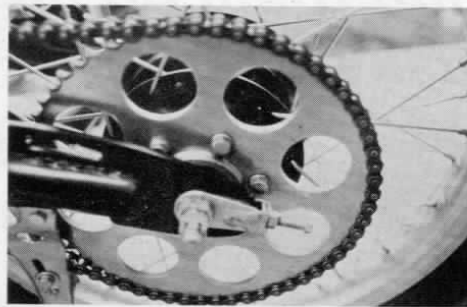
The Suzuki's lofty proportions, a property that will drive people with short legs to elevate their Full Bores, are due to the retention of the TM frame in the RM design. It wouldn't be too off-base to assume that the cost of designing a whole new frame for the RM was not within the project's budget, so the major portion of the TM frame was retained in production to keep the RM's retail in competition with Honda CRs. Hang seven-inch suspension on a frame that was originally designed for the TS enduro bike and you've got a racer that should come standard with a mounting stool.

That seven-inch suspension is what really puts the Suzuki a notch above the Honda. Riding the RM is

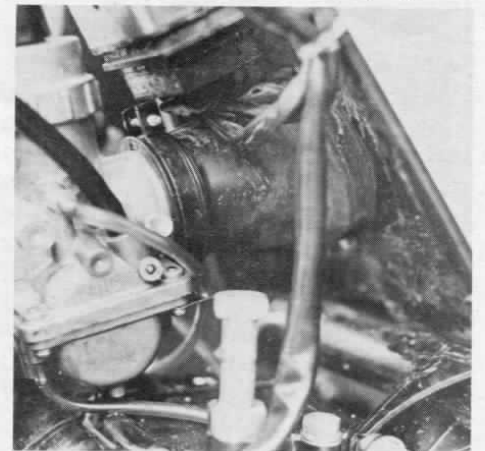
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Honda sprocket stays tight this year. Suzuki sprocket finally mounts solid to the hub. Both bikes could use a beefier chain.



This is where the Suzuki smokes the Honda. Honda rear suspension is standard, old-style kick-you-in-the-butt-type. Suzuki offers forward laydown gas/oil shocks and over seven inches of travel. Definitely the deluxe setup.



If you put the screw on the carb air hose clamp on top like this on the Suzuki, it will rub through the wires coming out of the CDI black box and short out a million dollars' worth of parts. Also, case castings are from the TS engine and carry a hole for the neutral indicator switch from which pops a rubber cap to let sand into your gearbox. Check out grand prix emergency plug.

Cont'd from page 27

like riding a big, squashy sponge. It dulls every sharp point the track can throw at it. Even at high speed the RM lopes along at low amplitude. Potholes, which send the Honda sideways, only dent the Suzuki's line. In comparison, riding the Honda feels like you're on a Ping-Pong ball being played with by a kitten.

Your smiling, blissfully unctuous Suzuki dealer will tantalize you with the satin-smooth action of the heavy-duty, high-capacity, seven-inch-travel front units, in a dazzling display of forky-bouncy right there in the showroom. He will demonstrate the cush stroke of the trick upside-down gas/oil Kayaba shocks in 7½-inch travel, forward mounted laydown trim. The fact is it all works great. They hit the springing and damping right on the button. Honda forks can be made to work a little better, but all the Suzuki forks need is your own personal dial by preload and Bel-Ray. The Honda shocks work pretty good and with the bigger shafts offer a fair amount of service, but only 4½ inches of travel. The Suzuki shocks contain the 7½-inch stroke very nicely and don't seem to fade very much, although they get hotter than a campfire rock. How long they'll last and how easy they are to get at the parts counter remain to be seen.

ODDS AND ENDOES

The chain on the Suzuki stretched like crazy. The Honda's didn't so much, but both bikes could use heftier chains. The tires (Bridgestones) were good on the Honda. Suzuki's rear Bridgestone felt all right, but the front tire, something called an "IRC Motocross" felt kinda strange.


The stamped and welded steel air box on the Suzuki is neat but heavy. Honda avoids the issue by not having one.


The Honda comes equipped with D.I.D rims. The Suzuki sometimes has smooth Akronts and sometimes Takasagos.

The Honda fork caps are plugs with O-ring seals that are held in with snap rings. If the O-ring on one of the plugs gets a good grip, the only way to get the plug out is to

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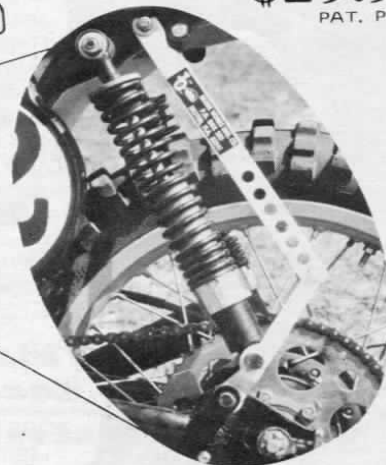
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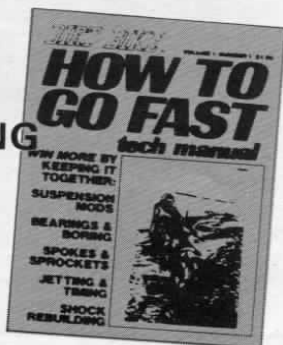
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SUZUKI-HONDA

Continued

compress the forks till the spring drives it out. When the cap finally blows, the spring gets launched in a geyser of fork oil sending 20-weight all over you, the dog and your mom's laundry. After taking a deadly bermshot off the ceiling, the spring wraps itself around your head and twangs you to death. What a way to go.

It takes five wrenches to adjust the chain on the Suzuki and only two on the Elsinore.

The handlebars bend rather easily on both bikes. Of course, maybe it's because we crash rather hardly. Whatever.

The Honda comes with a really boss owner's manual that has complete maintenance instructions, teardown directions with pictures and exploded drawings, all the design specs and service specs, and a list of optional parts. The Suzuki manual is a standard "one down, four up" instruction booklet that advises all work more complicated

than inflating the tires be left to your authorized Suzuki dealer. They should've at least included instructions on how to remove your wallet from your pants.

The Honda steering head tends to loosen and must be checked regularly. First to loosen on the Suzuki are the sprocket bolts.

Both bikes enjoy a fairly good reliability record. The first few '75 CRs had some bad cranks in them, but that problem seems to have been rectified. The TM Suzuki engines used to suffer some bizarre explosions now and then, but we saw a herd of 20 RM test bikes survive Press Day at Indian Dunes without a single failure.

After a while the kickstarters will flop around on both bikes and stick you in the leg. You can feel the bulges on the sides of the RM with your knees but after a while you don't notice it.

It seems to us that the Off-On-Reserve progression of the Honda's fuel petcock is more logical than the Reserve-Off-On progression of the Suzuki's.

The Suzuki is yellow, and the Honda is red and gray. Gilbert likes the Honda. Roland likes the Suzuki.

To pick one bike over the other would be an injustice. In stock form the Suzuki would hold the edge because it has better suspension. But there are shock laydown kits that would put the Honda equal with the Suzuki and then the Elsinore would have the advantage because it has a six-speed. But Suzuki offers a hop-up kit that'll make the RM just as fast as the Honda. But then how many shops and mail-order companies have built their businesses making hop-up kits for the Honda? Favor can shift back to the Honda because it has a lower CG. Of course smart companies will come out with frame lowering kits, up-pipes and trick air boxes for the RM that will wheelie it away from the Honda. The possibilities are limitless.

The bikes offered by both companies are worth the money. Neither fights the other head-to-head on strong points but both capitalize on the other's weak points. The choice of which bike is better for you rests squarely on which bike you prefer. Get near one and see what kind of vibes it gives you, then spend some time with the other to see if it tugs you any harder. Your hankers will show.

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