

VFR Headlight Bulb Appetites

As you have previously reported in the Downtime Files, the Honda VFR seems to have a voracious appetite for headlight bulbs. My 1994 Honda VFR (purchased new in March, 1994) has 78,000 miles on it. It eats its headlight bulb every 12 to 18 months. I use my high beams in the daytime, too. My bike is totally stock. OEM bulbs around here run \$18. What can be done about this?

Chris Buckner
Asheville, NC

Very often, we find that when bulbs blow out frequently there are two likely causes: Excessive vibration of the filaments, or high voltage spikes. Since your problem bulb is fairing mounted, either one could be the fault. Start by checking all the mounting hardware and fasteners for the fairing itself, and for the bulb fixture, as any looseness will cause things to rattle, shock the bulb filaments and shorten its life. Next, check all connectors including the bulb socket for rust, dirt or other contaminants that may be causing an intermittent voltage spike to be developed, as they will ruin a bulb in a very short time. Finally, check all ground connections and their wireframe bonding points to make sure that paint, rust, dirt or a looseness isn't interfering with a secure ground connection. Good luck, intermittent problems are the bane of electrical troubleshooters.

Not at Maximum Maxim

I bought a 1983 XS400 Yamaha Maxim with 20K from my neighbor in the summer of 2003. Being out of motorcycling for 23 years, I fell in love with it. Besides, the price was right, \$300...or so I thought. I was informed it had not run for two years, with gas left in the system, and had carburetor problems. It also had a flat front tire and needed front brakes. Still, it seemed a good bargain, so I pushed it to my garage. Needless to say, once it began to run, only one cylinder was working. So I took it to a mechanic who said one carb was bone dry with rusted parts. He got both cylinders running, but rpm was limited to 3000. He said I needed a pick-up coil assembly, which Yamaha no longer had in stock. After locating one at CycleTherapy.com, who sent me one for \$100, my rpm were increased to 4000. Next step was to replace the CDI box (electronic ignition). Since these are \$400 new, I opted to go with one from the same salvage yard. (But there was no way to run a diagnostic.) This change gave no improvement, the bike was still cutting out on acceleration. It was time to get a second opinion, from a certified motorcycle mechanic. He concluded I needed new jets and another carburetor cleaning. By now it was winter and the bike sat four

months. Last week, I got to put 80 miles on the bike while running 93 octane gas with fuel injection cleaner added. Up to half throttle it performs well, but under a load or if you accelerate past half-throttle, it cuts out, surges and has no power, until I roll back off the throttle. Needless to say it's back at the shop. The mechanic says I probably need bigger jets. In talking to others, I have been told to check for the following:

1. Sticking throttle valve
2. Bent floats
3. Bad rev limiter in CDI box
4. Bad plug wires

At this point I am very frustrated. If you could provide some guidance I would be very happy. I thought this would be a good starter bike.

BeetleGrinder

There are a few things that can cause the kinds of problems you are describing. The plug wires (or boots) are a possibility, as is a problem with the fuel level height (if the level is too low or the carb is not refilling fast enough). But perhaps there is a more likely culprit. Since the bike surges at high speed, it does not sound electrical, but rather that you are seeing a high speed lean condition. Considering the age of the bike, it is very possible that you have developed an air leak in the intake manifold between the engine and the carb. This can be checked with starter fluid (ether) sprayed on the intake manifold boots with the engine running. A sudden rise in rpm will indicate a leak. Another thing to check for is a vacuum leak between the carb manifold and the petcock (air going into the manifold will lean things out and the petcock won't fully open). A short length of new hose will eliminate that possibility. We would check for things like that before thinking about a rev limiter problem or a jet change.

GL1500 Reverse Switch Bugs

I have a stock '98 GL1500 with 34,500 miles. Recently while riding in moderate temperatures (low 70s) when the reverse lever was activated, the "rev" light on the dash didn't light and reverse gear would not engage. I returned the lever to the normal position and shut the motor off to sort things out. Then I noticed that there was no neutral light on the dash and, even more alarming, the starter would not engage. All other electrics; horn, side stand, lights, radio, etc., were normal. I finally managed to bump start the motor and on the way home the neutral light started working again. However, upon activating the reverse lever the exact same symptoms recurred; no "rev" light and no neutral light and no starter engagement. This process repeats itself every time I operate the reverse lever.

I'm guessing there is an interlock somewhere that needs adjustment or an electrical harness/connector problem.

Any ideas would be most appreciated because as things stand now the bike is not 100% reliable in my opinion. Thanks.

R. Fortune
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According to the shop manual, there are several places that the neutral switch system can interact with the reverse system. The first place we would look, however, is the "Reverse Control Unit" located under the trunk (you have to take the seat off first). It is clearly marked and has a 14-pin connector plugged into it. Pin 7 controls the starter circuit and Pin 8 is the neutral circuit. A bad connection in this connector set, or a defective (intermittent) control unit is a very likely cause of your problems. There is a full test procedure in the manual that demonstrates the testing procedure for all connections and functions of this unit. Pay careful attention to the pin layout because it is not at all obvious and it is not sequential (We have no idea why they did that). We would also check the condition and connections of the five diodes that are part of the reverse system; since it is possible that one or more of them can be working intermittently. These diodes are located on the wiring harness under the right saddlebag.

Front Brake Bug

Last summer my 2001 Road King Classic with 14K miles began having a front brake problem. The lever felt spongy and pulling hard, I could pull it all the way to the grip. However, the pads were not worn down and there was no leakage indicated.

Under my extended warranty, my dealer first tried a rebuild kit for the master cylinder and on a second try, replaced the front brake hose assembly as well. But I still had the problem, which was then presumed to be air in the system that would not bleed out.

My dealer called the factory rep who suggested that he pull off both calipers, remove the pads and compress the pistons back into their bores and then re-assemble and bleed again. This cured the problem.

My dealer then said that other owners of tour models, mostly Road Kings, 2001 and newer, had complained of similar symptoms and now they knew the fix.

That repair was done one week prior to attending the Milwaukee centennial. I put on more than 3000 miles on that trip and about 1500 after, the spongy front brake problem returned. The pads still look good and there are no obvious leaks. I pulled the calipers, followed the procedure and all is okay once again. I can only assume that

somehow air got into the system again, but I don't know how it could. I alerted the dealer mechanic that was familiar with the problem, and he had no idea either how it could reoccur. Any ideas?

Moscooter@aol.com

Since the problem is air getting into the system, and you have no sign of leakage, we can rule out things like a pinhole in a brake line or a loose fitting because they would weep fluid out as air is brought in to the system. The situation you seem to have is an action like a one-way valve where air is being brought in as the brake is released. We suspect that you have a bad seal in the slave cylinder and the air is riding is as the brake piston is brought back. Disassembly, inspection and replacement would be the only way to check it. Also, since it only shows up after about 4500 miles, it's hard to tell if it's been fixed, but that would be a good first step.

Ninja Noises and Antifreeze Smell

I own a '97 ZX900R Ninja with 15K miles. I change the oil religiously, and take good care of it with routine service, etc. For the past few years, I have noticed a sound similar to a rattling, or marbles bouncing around, upon cold start-ups, full choke out, emanating from the top-right side of the engine. After a few minutes, once the oil is flowing, the sound goes away, and the bike runs fine. But it is definitely noticeable at start-up, and it has gotten somewhat louder and lasted longer in duration, as the years have passed. Some say it's just the nature of the engine (a Kawasaki trait), other mechanics I have left it with say they didn't notice it. Believe me, it's there! Forum responses have listed the cam chain and the cam chain tensioner as likely culprits. What is the history of these engines? Do you think I am on the right track? Also, almost since day one, I have noticed the distinctive smell of antifreeze when the bike is at operating temps, yet no source is found. Can you please help? Thank you in advance for any and all input!

Mark Coughlan
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Engine sounds are hard to diagnose without hearing them, and because sound "telegraphs" throughout the engine structures and chambers, it is often difficult to tell exactly where the noise is coming from. Often, mechanics use an engine stethoscope to try to determine the nature (is it a rotating part or a slapping part) of the sound and its true source. An inexpensive alternative is a long screwdriver, held handle to the ear, with the blade touching various parts of the motor. Since your mystery sound

occurs on start up and goes away as oil pressure and temperature increases, it is possible that the cam chain tensioner is the culprit, but it could also be caused by wear, causing increased tolerance between a rotating part and its journals.

The anti-freeze smell may be coming from your exhaust, since you don't see a leak. It is possible that you have a slight head gasket leak or similar passageway for the coolant to find its way into the combustion chamber. Is your coolant level going down significantly? If not, don't worry about it.

Oil Grade Confusion

I'm confused about motorcycle oil. Honda oils are rated SJ, and I can get SJ rated oils from K-Mart at around \$1/quart.

But according to Spectro, SJ oils are for automotive use. Why should I pay \$4-\$5 for a quart of Honda oil that's designed for cars? Is Honda giving me a lot of hype?

Another question: Why is it that motorcycle manufacturers don't recommend motorcycle-specific oil? Can you clarify?

Roland Hacopian
Ontario, CA

Enclosed is the letter I received from Honda:

Dear Mr. Hacopian,
Thank you for contacting American Honda. We manufacture oils for various vehicles. We upgrade oils as time is needed and we have had the opportunity to test them on our products.

Additionally, we do not recommend any additives or use of other oil than what is recommended in the owner's manual. Our engineers have determined that the oil recommended in your owner's manual is the best for the overall performance and life of the engine. Since we do not do any testing with other oils such as synthetics or other ratings, we do not know what effects it will have on the engine. The use of other oils may cause abnormal running conditions or even severe engine damage.

If you have any further questions, please contact your local authorized Honda dealer. Thank you for being part of the Honda family, we wish you many miles of great riding.

Sincerely,
American Honda Motor Co., Inc.
Darrin MT41
Motorcycle Customer Support Dept.

Also, this from Spectro Oils:
Dear Mr. Hacopian,
Thank you for your fax which we received this morning.

You should continue to use SG oil and not SJ. SJ oils have reduced amounts of zinc and phosphorous (anti-wear agents/additives) in their formulations.

This may be fine for an automotive application—low engine RPMs—but not for a high revving motorcycle engine that produces more horsepower per CC than an auto engine.

Ken Ciocci
National Sales Manager
Spectro Oils of America

Roland, we'll try to make this brief—MCN's original report on motor oils ran in two parts, about 10 pages total.

Basically, Spectro is being much more "up front" with you than Honda. SG oils have been proven to be better for motorcycle engines. However, other grades won't do any harm at all, so long as you don't use any with a viscosity rating below 15-weight. Manufacturers are forbidden by federal law from requiring you to use an "OEM-branded" oil in your bike, but they can "recommend."

Honda's HP-4 motorcycle oil actually scored lower on our extensive battery of laboratory and real-world tests than many of the automotive oils made by Mobil, Castrol, etc. And Spectro, by the way, scored very well, but as you note, is pricey.

Buy the K-Mart oil and don't worry about it (but remember not to get any 10-weight, stay at 15W or above). If you change it every 3000 miles, we promise you, your bike will never know the difference—because there isn't any.

—Fred Rau



Downtime Files

is a joint service of
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of Daytona Beach, Florida.

Please keep in mind that since the AMI staff has not seen your motorcycle, the answers given are best-guess assumptions based on prior experience and education, and may not necessarily be correct. When in doubt, take your motorcycle to a qualified shop.

Send your typewritten questions and photos if possible to:

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