

GL1800 SURVEY RESULTS

■ BY BILL SHAW ■

WITHOUT THE TREMENDOUS backing we receive from our devoted, enthusiastic and conscientious readers as it relates to Owner Surveys, we would never be able to report our findings with any degree of accuracy. In this regard we are extremely grateful to all the GL1800 owners who took the time and made the effort to respond to our questionnaire. As usual, we were overwhelmed with responses.

These surveys are very enlightening and oftentimes reinforce—or negate—impressions about a particular motorcycle. For example, if we asked a group of non-Gold Wing riders what they thought about the GL1800, we might here something along the lines of: They are big, heavy, albeit low-maintenance touring machines which are usually adorned with lots of chrome and lights. We'd like to think that our readers' surveys help dispel these generalizations and stereotypes which, of course, are made about every brand of motorcycle on the planet.

So, do opinions based on biased perceptions reflect reality? Here are the results of our GL1800 survey. We'll let you make the final determination.

The Bikes And Their Owners

This is the fifth year the GL1800 has been in production, and not surprisingly, the largest groups of respondents (84.4%) were owners of 2001, 2002 and 2003 Gold Wings. Interestingly, 91% of our readers purchased their GL1800s new from dealers. Since only 9% were purchased used, it appears that owners really love their bikes and are holding on to them. Gold Wingers are also exceedingly loyal to Honda as evidenced by our survey, where a whopping 91.8% said they would buy another GL1800 (6.8% said they were uncertain and only 1.4% said they would not). This is the kind of feedback that marketing directors love to read.

Brand loyalty is not uncommon and plays a significant part in the buying process. This was reflected in our survey, too, as previous GL ownership was the reason that most influenced our readers to purchase a GL1800. Almost half (49.3%) previously owned a GL1500, and 95.6% said they owned at least one Honda before, while 70.7% owned three or more (one of our respondents owned 23). Other influential factors that helped owners decide to buy a GL1800 include test rides (27.6%), perceived reliability and comfort (16%) and magazine reviews (9.9%). And given the choice of what brand to buy as a second bike, 57.5% said they would choose a Honda again, while BMW was a distant second at 17.2% and Harley-Davidson third at 8.4%. Brand loyalty was further supported by the general satisfaction rating from our readers which scored a 95.2% (calculated from the top two brackets on the 1–5 scale). That's high by anyone's standards. One respondent even stated that his "wife wanted (a) Gold Wing"—which is to say that her comfort was an important factor in their decision to buy the GL1800. Respondents also gave a 71.2% dealer approval rating in terms of customer service after the sale. But only 58.4% approved of Honda's responsiveness to consumer complaints. We were actually surprised this number wasn't lower given the much publicized and recent spate of frame re-welding and brake proportioning valve recalls.

Although we did receive a number of "I didn't consider any other bike" responses (4.6%), BMW was the brand most often considered before buying the Gold Wing. Of all the models offered by BMW, 32.5% understandably said they thought about buying a

K1200LT. Despite the fact that ABS is a staple on most Beemers, only 37.2% of our readers elected to purchase/order a GL1800 with this option. Since the cost of ABS is only \$1000—about the price of a factory CB radio—there is probably a reason other than cost which explains why people aren't buying this safety feature. Perhaps it has something to do with 1) the perceived complexity of the system, 2) our readers' belief they can control/stop their bikes quicker without it, or 3) the view held by some in the Gold Wing community, based on their past riding experience, that ABS is a needless luxury; i.e., they never had an accident with their GL1500 which didn't have it. Whatever the reason, ABS is not a big part of the Gold Wing culture—yet.

The social aspects of riding a particular make/model also significantly influences the decision making process. Honda has known this for years and actively reaches out to its customer base by promoting, supporting or sponsoring major events like the Honda Homecoming, Americade and the Honda Hoot. And apparently this marketing strategy works as evidenced by the large number of readers who said that they attend organized events or rallies every year (83.4%). Along these lines, 87.8% said that they ride with a group and 55.3% of our respondents enjoy either extended touring or weekend trips with their significant others—87.8% regularly carry a passenger. The Gold Wing Road Riders Association has the highest percentage of members among our readers, 65.3%, while the American Motorcyclist Association was next with 45.3%, and the Honda Riders Club of America was the third most popular organization with 11%. Of those readers who modified their bikes, 92.1% set it up to pull a trailer, 7.9% have a trike conversion, and 1.8% have a sidecar attached to their GL1800. Clearly, Gold Wing riders are a very social group and are probably second only to Harley-Davidson owners in this regard.

Lastly, the youngest GL1800 reader in our survey is 27 years old; the oldest is 82 years old. Most are 50 years old or older (76.5%) and 94.1% of our respondents were male.

Maintenance, Tires And Accessories

As stated before, Gold Wing riders love their bikes—and they love to ride them. Accumulated mileage at the time of our survey ranged from a low of 900 miles to over 90,000 miles. The majority of respondents (37.9%) ride their GL1800s between 6000–10,000 miles annually, and 23.4% ride their bikes 11,000–15,000 miles a year. This equates to a lot of maintenance and explains why so many owners work on their own bikes—57.8% of respondents do 50% or more of the maintenance themselves.

It also means frequent oil changes, as well as buying a lot of gas and tires. The majority of riders (44.4%) got between 40–42 mpg. Dunlop Tires were favored as the tire of choice over Metzeler by a margin of ~2:1 (57.8% to 27.1%). This isn't too surprising since late model GL1800s come equipped with Dunlop tires from the factory and many owners, absent derogatory information, simply replace with the factory rubber. Bridgestone also scored with some of our readers (9.6%) as did Avon (7.5%).

While readers reported that a new front tire lasted between a low of 1200 miles and a high of 24,000 miles, most were replaced in the 10,000–15,000 mile range. The range of rear tire wear was listed from 1000–23,000 miles with 10,000–15,000 miles being the replacement norm. The engines on these bikes also appear to be

under-stressed and as a result, have long service intervals. The GL1800 only requires the air filter to be changed every 16,000 miles and the valves to be checked/adjusted every 32,000 miles. This is a good thing since the difficulty of maintaining the bike was raised several times: "Make the air filter accessible without the need to dismantle the bike for access." And, "Bring back hydraulic lifters," were comments.

One fact we find interesting is that only 57.8% of our respondents use synthetic oils. We can't help but wonder if this is due in large part to our testing which has confirmed that regularly changing a bike's oil with a name-brand product, synthetic or petroleum, will meet or exceed the manufacturers' specifications. Still, we thought the number of GL1800 owners using synthetic oils would have been higher.

When it comes to accessorizing, GL1800 owners take as much pride in the appearance of their bikes—if not more—than most motorcyclists. After we had input all the data and printed out the list of accessories installed on our readers' bikes, it was two and a half pages long. Suffice it to say that the GL1800 aftermarket accessory business is very much alive and doing well.

Topping the list of accessories at 63.7% were lights, followed by chrome accessories (52.3%), luggage racks (45.2%), and heated handgrips (32.7%). Electronic goodies like satellite radios (16.1% had an XM radio), GPSs (specifically Garmin at 22.8%), and MP3 players (23.2%) were conspicuously present. Of the non-electronic accessories listed, aftermarket seats, highway pegs, passenger floorboards, wind deflectors, and windshields were omnipresent, with the Windbender and Tulsa windshields specifically mentioned most often.

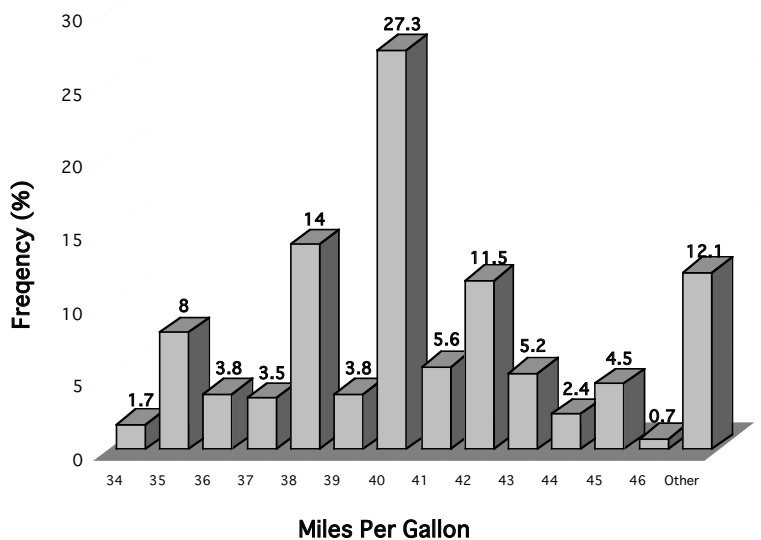
The factory upgrades listed as the most popular were a CB radio (72%), intercom (52.4%), rear speakers (50.4%), and CD changer (34.6%). This wasn't a great revelation to us since one of the joys of owning a premiere touring motorcycle is having access to a wide range of audio inputs.

Quality Control

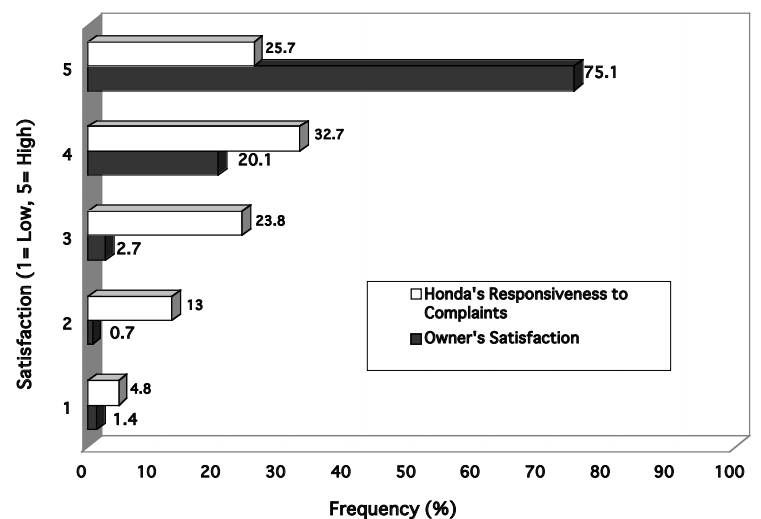
One theory holds that sales of a new model are often strongest a year or two after their introduction. The basis for this premise is that most riders feel that they do not want to "Beta Test" a new model and are hoping the manufacturers have all the bugs worked out in the years immediately following a new bike's release. This hypothesis appears to be supported by our survey. Most of our readers purchased their GL1800 in the second and third year of production: 34.7% and 26% respectively, as opposed to 23.7% for the first year. We suspect that the overheating issue probably contributed to lower than expected sales as news spread over the Internet like wildfire. It, no doubt, kept more than a few prospective buyers on the fence until Honda announced that it had resolved the matter by replacing the Engine Control Module (ECM).

Due to the overheating problem and the aforementioned frame and brake proportioning valve recalls, general reliability for the GL1800 is not up to Honda's usually high standards. During the first year of ownership, 62.4% never brought their bike in for warranty work or only had to take it in once. However, this means that more than one third of new GL1800 purchasers had to take their bike back for repairs two or more times in

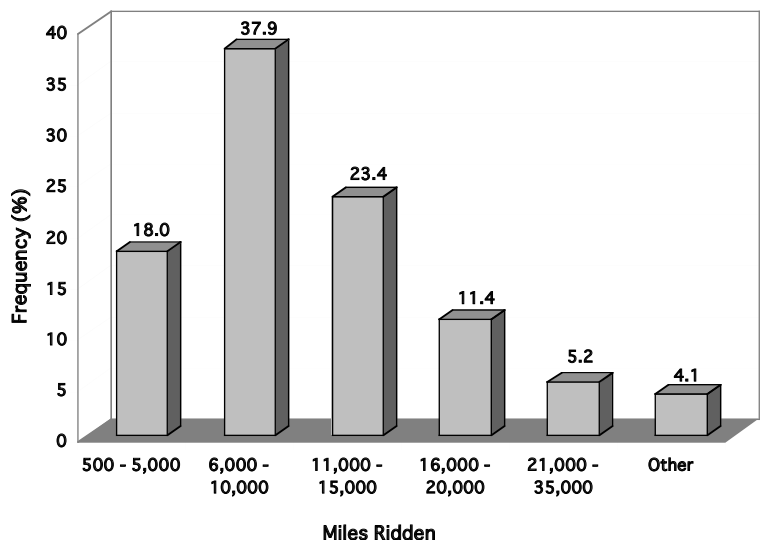
Average Mileage Per Gallons

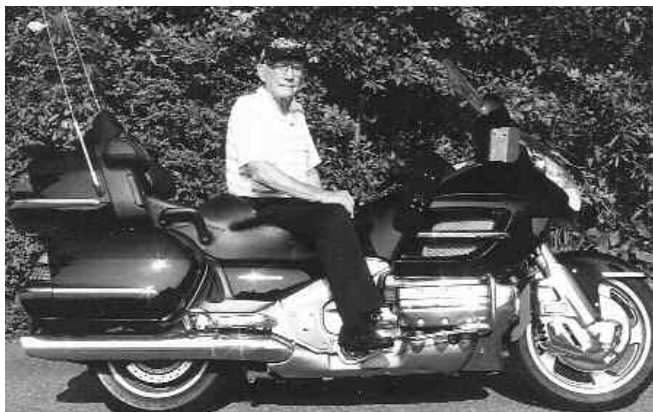


Satisfaction Index



Average Miles Ridden Per Year





Our oldest respondent—Van Hamilton of Anniston, Alabama: At 82 Van is very satisfied with and rides his '02 about 16,000 miles a year. Among nine other bikes, he has owned a GL before and his current bike is equipped with an intercom, CB radio and XM Satellite radio.



Randy Rosebro is 61, from Swansboro, North Carolina, rides his '02 GL1800 about 7000 miles a year. Randy has owned approximately 65 motorcycles. His current fleet includes; an '04 KTM SMC, '74 Honda XL350, '91 BMW R100GS, '99 Aprilia RS50, '82 Yamaha Tomy and an '84 Yamaha RZ350.



Danny Nunes, 51, is from Woodland, California and bought his ninth motorcycle, an '02 GL 1800 new. Danny has put 38,000 miles on his bike and likes to take day trips. Besides the Trunk Opener Unit he's had no problems and says, "Thank you Honda for building a reliable and low-maintenance machine."



James and Kathryn Pittman, 51 and 44 respectively are from Rittman, Ohio. He rides his '02 and she rides her '03 12,000 miles a year together. James performs 99% of the maintenance himself on both bikes. The Pittman's take long day trips, the photo was taken after a 10-hour ride to New Rumley, Ohio.

the first year. As expected, one of the main reasons why the GL1800 was brought in for warranty repairs was related to the overheating/ECM recall on all 2001 and 2002 models (61.6%). Other problems listed were related to the radio/CD (62.1%), the trunk opener (46.3%), factory tires (19%), the speedometer (18.1%) and frame welds/crack (15.3%). And, in response to our question concerning what specific item(s) owners had repeated issues with, saddlebag problems were overwhelmingly mentioned, followed next by difficulty with the radio, front end/tire problems, and the cruise control.

Which this begs the question: Has Honda's ironclad reputation for reliability begun to slip?

Dear Mother Honda

And then we printed out the messages that our readers wanted us to convey to Honda. Six full pages and several hours later we were done interpreting and evaluating the results. Understandably, Honda loyalty came through and there were a lot of positive comments. A common remark was simply, "Thanks, guys." Another said: "This is the most fun on any motorcycle I've ever had." And even though

there were several owners who wanted more power, the majority of riders are very satisfied with the current engine platform and handling characteristics of the GL1800.

But there was no shortage of suggestions on how to improve the GL1800. Chief among these was the need to improve wind protection, specifically in the form of an electric windshield. We suspect that most of these respondents either owned/tested BMW's K1200LT or installed/rode a bike with the Windbender Windshield: "... all it needs is an electric windshield," we read many times.

The radio also garnered its share of complaints: "The GL is a top notch design with an inadequate audio system." Another said, "...if the GL1800 is your flagship bike, then use premium parts; i.e., speakers, radio, CB, CD player, etc." There were also requests to offer a GPS and satellite radio options in the future. It would surprise us if Honda did not improve upon the radio's apparent shortcomings and at least offer the option of upgrading it and the speakers, as well as integrating the most popular accessories like satellite radios and GPS systems.

Other requests to Honda include increasing the fuel capacity of



Chuck Howe, 49 of Puyallup, Washington was influenced by his wife to buy a GL1800 but now says, "This is the most fun on a motorcycle I've had, considering that the majority of my biking experience has been on smaller machines or crotch rockets." The photo was taken at Mt. Rainier National Park. Chuck is also the Chapter Director for the Oregon-Washington chapter of the GWRRA.



Jim Funcannon, 56 from Martinsville, Indiana is on a trip to Black Hills in the photo above. His message, "As a past as well as a current owner of both Honda automobiles as well as motorcycles, it seems to me that the effort and extent to satisfy the customers is much better (more zealous) in the automobile division. This applies to dealers as well as the manufacturer."

the Gold Wing by making a larger gas tank, fixing the cruise control, and improving the transmission and/or upgrading it to a six-speed. Two readers even wondered "When is the automatic transmission coming?" The overheating issue was raised numerous times causing one respondent to urge Honda to "Fire the engineer who designed the fans to push air forward instead of pulling in air to cool the bike."

But more than any other theme, readers wanted Honda to be aware of the quality control issues and dealer complaints: "Pay more attention to quality control." And, "Customer satisfaction is less than acceptable, (most) motorcycle dealerships are not trustworthy." Another said: "Too many service bulletins (16) indicate a lack of quality control in your 'Flagship.'" Lastly, "Have a greater sensitivity to customer complaints." These remarks really didn't surprise us since GL1800 riders truly want to work with Honda to improve upon an already excellent platform.

We were surprised, however, that there were no calls for Honda to incorporate a real trip computer that would display average-speed, average fuel consumption (expressed in miles per gallon) and esti-



C. Roger McDaniel is 64, lives in Gold Canyon, Arizona and has 97,000 miles on his '01 Gold Wing. McDaniel's bike had to go back to the dealer twice during the first year, and like others, he has had problems with the speedometer. Given the means, McDaniel would own a 1953 restored Indian Chief. His message to Honda, "Keep up the good work."



Larry Klink, 56 and Roxanne Cornelius from Ramsey, Minnesota did not even consider another bike when purchasing their '01 GL1800. Larry sometimes pulls a trailer for extended touring. Although the bike only went to the dealer once during its first year he has had problems with the ECM, overheating and the speedometer. Larry would like Honda to get a jump on BMW for 2006.

mated remaining travel-range. This has been one of our big gripes—especially for a touring bike of this stature.

Bottom Line

The chart entitled "Satisfaction Index" best sums up the GL1800 experience in the eyes of our readers—even though Honda is perceived as not being responsive to customer complaints, the typical owner is still extremely satisfied with their Gold Wing. Brand loyalty with Honda in general, and with respect to the GL1800 in particular, is very strong. This is important since BMW will seize upon every opportunity to convince any disgruntled Honda owners that it has a better product.

Honda and BMW will certainly be battling for dominance of the touring market for the foreseeable future. And with a riding population that's slowly aging, this segment is sure to grow in size and importance in the coming years. Therefore, Honda can't ignore its loyal customer base, or those who perceive that the company and dealer network have forsaken them. After all, it is about perception—and perception is reality. 🍌