

Honda 599

Japanese Heart, Italian Soul

by Franke Santos

THE ACTUAL ORIGIN of the naked class has been the subject of debate. Ducati claims that the Monster M900, introduced in 1993, was the original “naked” bike, but others might argue that the Honda Hawk GT, produced from 1988 to 1991, started the whole street-fighter trend. And still others may argue that the Europeans who stripped bodywork off crashed Gixxer 750s in the 1980s really started the whole thing, so Suzuki might be the unwitting originator.

These days, there are several models that stand out in the middleweight naked category, and among them is the Honda 599, known overseas as the Hornet 600. Introduced in 1998 as a 1999 model in Europe, it quickly rose to become a sales star: it was the single best-selling bike in Europe in 2001 and 2003. It received upgrades in 2000 and 2003 and an overhaul in 2007.

I had the opportunity to test the 2006 599 for an extended period, allowing me to experience the bike in all kinds of riding conditions: commuting, day trips, and fun rides through local canyons. I quickly formed a serious attachment to it: as my first bike after a long layoff, it was steady enough to be forgiving, light enough to handle with ease and eye-catching enough to make my butt look fast. I likened it to the best kind of sidekick: dependable, but always looking for a good time.

The 599 In The US

The Hornet was brought to these shores in the 2004 and 2006 model years, to see whether its European success could be duplicated here. Its performance and light weight made it competitive with several other bikes in the category. However, its price was not so competitive: In 2004, a brand-new 599 was priced at \$7099, making it significantly more expensive than a brand-new Suzuki SV650 (\$5899) or a Yamaha FZ6 (\$6599). In 2006, the 599's MSRP was \$7399, while the SV650 and FZ6 were \$5949 and \$6799 respectively.

Color options were limited: in 2004, it was offered in Yellow and Asphalt, while in 2006 it was offered only in Asphalt. No sexy pearl red or Candy Tahitian Blue for the stateside riders. Unfortunately, 2006



The handlebar provided good leverage and a comfortable ergonomic layout. The digital speedo was very readable.



Honda added several options, including luggage options and ABS, to the 2007 Hornet, which will not be imported to the US.

was also the last year that the 599 was sold in the US, though its big brother, the 919, is still sold here.

We've been told by American Honda that the reason its importation didn't continue was because of the price difference compared to its competitors. The bike is built by Honda Italy, thus, its manufacturing cost and market price are tied to the euro. Due to a historically weak dollar and a strong euro, the bike would now cost considerably more than its class brethren, which would make it much less competitive sales-wise. Current prices in the mid-sized naked class range from \$5999 for a Suzuki SV650 up to \$7999 for a Triumph Street Triple. Based on an average of the Italian price (€6580 or \$9950), and the UK price (£5299 or \$10,560) it would now command about \$10,250 in the US, and that's even before other costs associated with importation are considered.

Which is really too bad, because the 2007 Hornet is a beauty. Its engine is now the same one that powers the 2007 CBR600RR, the swingarm is aluminum, the gastank has been enlarged and Honda has added a good number of bits to entice

buyers. They've added the option of ABS, plus a number of luggage choices. The muffler on the 2007 model was also moved down low, to improve mass centralization.

In our original comparison test between the 599 and the Yamaha FZ6 in March 2004, the 599 came in second place, but not by much. Both bikes were lauded for their newbie-friendliness due to their light weight and manageable power and their ability

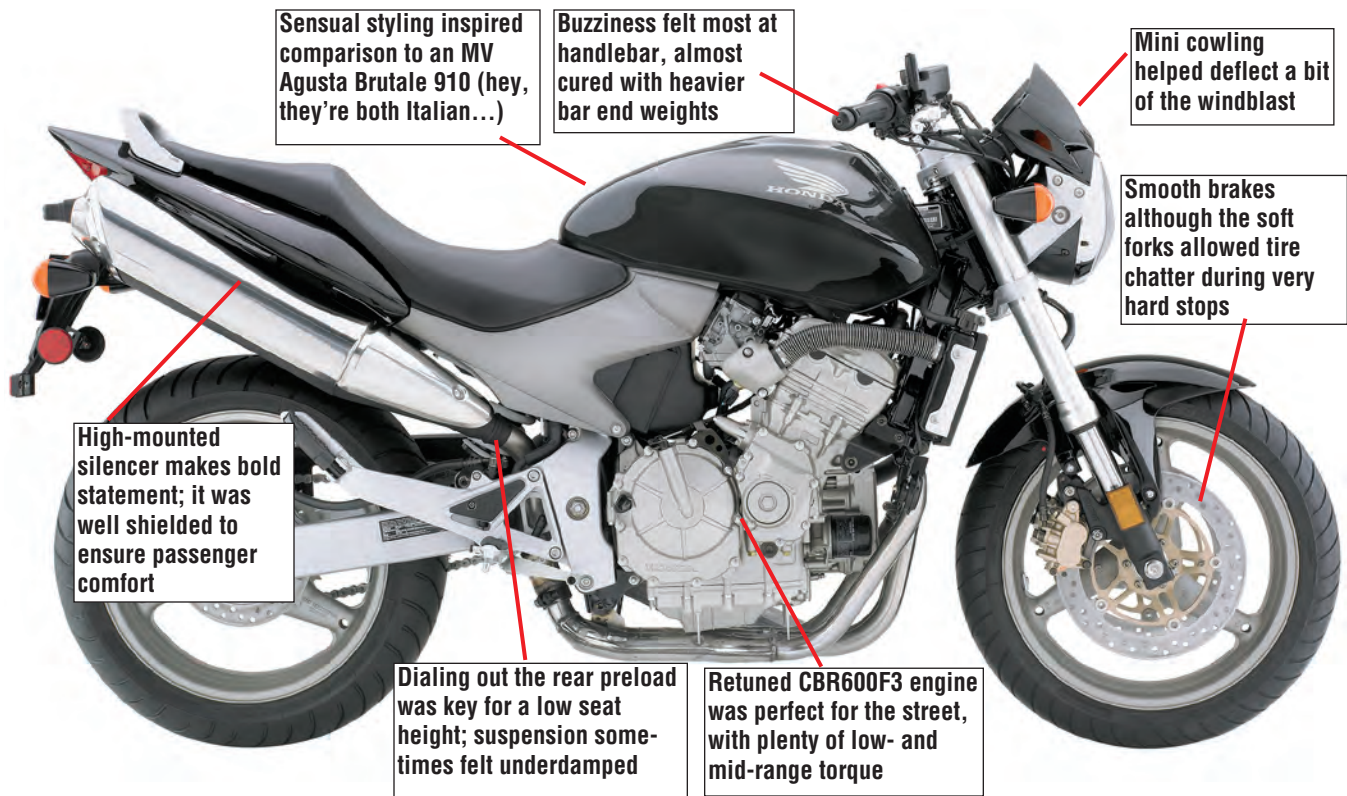
to satisfy more experienced riders. The two bikes tied in several categories: engine, brakes, handling and riding impression. The Yamaha bested the Honda in suspension, value, instruments and controls, attention to detail and styling, while the Honda edged out the FZ6 in transmission.

Strengths

The original Hornet 600 was a marriage between a CBR600F3 engine and a Hornet 250 chassis. (The CBR600F3 won two AMA Supersport championships in the mid-'90s, and the Hornet 250 is a popular model in the Japanese domestic market.) Honda's engineers gave the CBR600F3 engine smaller carburetors, a longer intake tract and headpipes and altered its cam timing, all to give the 599 more low-end and mid-range torque. The CBR600F3 we tested back in 1997 made 90.2 hp and 43 lb./ft.; the 2004 599 made 80.4 hp and 41.7 lb./ft. And because the 599 continued to use carburetors, the bike never had the lightswitch on/off throttle response that afflicts so many fuel injection systems, making it an incredibly smooth ride from zero to whatever.

The detuned sportbike engine meant that the 599 was a beautifully performing machine, whether scooting through heavy traffic, opening it up full throttle on the freeway, or cornering through the canyons. It felt well-balanced throughout the rev range, and the bike was always just plain fun to ride. Its only drawback was some serious buzziness between 6000-6500 rpm, typical highway cruising speed.

My enjoyment made me sometimes wish my daily commutes were longer than nine miles, and on particularly nice days, I would occasionally find a longer way home. It always put a smile on my face.



No wishing that the bike were lighter, no fighting with heavy steering, no cursing an incredibly high seat. Being able to twist my wrist and go with ease was always a pleasure. It always felt so planted in the corners, so happy to be twisting around in hairpin turns.

Styling was also a point in the 599's favor, with sensual lines that invite you to sit and encourage you to take a ride. The high-mounted muffler was a conspicuous fashion statement. The designers smartly placed a heat shield over the muffler, ensuring that pillion riders hopped off with uncooked calves. The little cowling at the front of the bike meant windblast was cut down from what it would have been with no sort of protection.

Oil changes were easy on the 599 due to the easy-to-access spin-off oil filter, just behind the exhaust header pipes. This demonstrated one of the best attributes of naked bikes generally: little or no bodywork to remove and replace in order to complete maintenance tasks.

I found the ergonomics of the 599 to be just about perfect. (I'm 5'6" with a 27" inseam.) A different handlebar that swept back just 1/2" more would be the only ergonomic change that I would have made to the machine. In our FZ6/599 comparison in 2004, larger riders found the FZ6 more comfortable, while smaller riders found that the 599 was the right size. When we test rode the FZ6 in March 2007 (comparing it with the Kawasaki Ninja

650R and the Suzuki SV650S) I found that the Yamaha's handlebar seemed too far away compared to the 599's layout. To make the bike fit even better, we dialed down the rear preload to the minimum setting, shortening the seat height considerably. I went from complete tiptoe to almost being able to put my feet completely on the ground, an important attribute to inspire confidence.

Naturally, gas mileage varied depending on whether I was riding like there were no patrol cars present or riding like my mother was following. The lowest I ever got was just under 40 mpg, while the highest I got was about 48 mpg. I averaged about 42 mpg over the course of my long-term testing.

Weaknesses

The 599 has a limited fuel range, though this is typical of bikes in this class. The fuel capacity was listed at 4.5 gal., and the low-fuel warning usually came on after about 150 miles, or about 3.6 gal. Capacity has been increased on the 2007 model, with a gastank that holds 5.0 gal.

We also found that under very hard braking, it was possible to bottom the forks and generate chatter at the front wheel. The somewhat soft suspension was probably to blame for this trait, but it was rarely a problem during my routine riding.

The 599's only suspension adjustability is rear preload, something that could have easily been a strike against it. The

suspension was great on almost any surface, except for the freeway. To be fair, Southern California's freeways range from bumpy to crack- and pothole-ridden, but at high speed, I could definitely feel how underdamped the rear suspension was.

Modifications

The buzziness of the engine could be easily felt through the handlebars and to a lesser extent, through the pegs. Much of the buzziness was cured by heavier bar end weights from Manic Salamander (which we had to cut down with a hacksaw) and a pair of new gel grips (intended for dirt bikes) from Pro Grip. The buzzing could have been further deadened with the addition of weighted footpegs. Other riders reported that they felt the buzzing through the seat, but I may just have more padding in that department, so it was less noticeable. The buzziness was inherent to the design, as the 599's chassis uses the engine as a stressed member, meaning that a lot of the engine's vibration gets transmitted straight through the frame into the bike's extremities.

Predictions

We predict that the 599, with only two years of US production, may become a cult bike, like the Hawk GT that preceded it by 15 years. Rare bikes almost always find a dedicated fan base. A bike that's as fun to ride and as versatile as the 599 deserves a loyal following. 🍌