

2008 Kawasaki Concours 14

by Dave Searle



HAS YOUR WALLET been smoldering, waiting for the new Concours 14 to arrive before deciding which sport-tourer to buy? Wait no more. We've just ridden the new C14 hundreds of miles in northern California, and although we haven't compared it side-by-side to its competition—yet—we've got a pretty good idea how it will shake out.

There really is no comparison with the old Concours, a bike that should get some kind of award for lasting 21 years nearly unchanged—long years for a motorcycle, at that. So we won't even waste time on that subject.

Yamaha's recently updated FJR1300 is the best seller in this class, having stolen the crown from BMW. Of course, BMW's latest K1200GT is a serious contender, but loaded with all its trick technology and optional extras, it's a rich man's ride, not in the same value league as the FJR. The Concours 14, with an MSRP of \$12,899 (or \$13,799 w/ABS) targets the Yamaha's price point precisely: The FJR1300A is \$13,799 including ABS.

Motor

If the FJR's appeal rests partly on its powerhouse engine, the C14 has that base covered, as it's derived from the ZX-14 Ninja, the most powerful production bike on the planet. The basic dimensions haven't changed: DOHC, 16-valve, transverse four-cylinder displacing 1352cc from an 84mm x 61mm bore and stroke inhaling through twin-snorkel ram-air.

Because the ZX-14's near 200 hp wasn't needed in this application, it could have easily just been detuned for more mid-range to suit the extra weight of luggage and a passenger. But Kawasaki went much further with the engine redesign, incorporating a type of variable valve timing that's unique to motorcycling (but similar to what some high-end automobiles have used for several years). Because the closing point of the intake valves in the four-stroke cycle largely determines where in the rpm range maximum torque will occur, Kawasaki has opted for a design that can vary the intake cam's phasing over a maximum of 24°, depending on both rpm and throttle position. Worthy of an article in itself, it works like this: The engine's ECU adjusts a solenoid valve located on the right side of the cylinder head that diverts engine oil pressure to a vane-style cam position controller (see the photo for a visual of how it works). For instance, at 1/8th throttle, the total cam advance will be just 8.75°, at quarter-throttle, it changes 13°, and at half-throttle, 19.5°, etc. The transition from minimum to maximum advance happens in the 2000 to 4000 rpm range, and after 6000 rpm, it will actually begin to retard again, reaching roughly half of its maximum advance figure at 10,000 rpm, presumably to rein in the peak hp output.

The best part is that the intake timing changes happen with infinite smoothness and there is no harsh transition or step in the power delivery, as we found on the Honda VFR800 (the only other bike sold in America with a type of variable valve timing). In practice, the engine offers smooth and potent low- and mid-rpm torque and all the top end power a sane rider could desire, together with strong engine braking effect off the throttle. Note that engine braking effect is minimized when an engine uses aggressive cam timing, as we found on the latest Triumph Sprint ST and Speed Triple.

Naturally, the C14 is fuel injected. Its ECU is the latest 32-bit type for superior ignition and fuel mapping, and smaller throttle bodies (40mm vs. the Ninja's 44mm units) use dual throttle butterflies to optimize port velocities for crisp low- and mid-range throttle response. It also gets new injectors that use twelve 75 micron orifices and spray a wider pattern than the ten 60 micron nozzles of the ZX-14. Although Euro models of the new Concours

use closed-loop EFI controlled by O₂ sensors (making aftermarket controllers like a Dynojet Power Commander ineffective), US models use open-loop EFI, which tends to offer better driveability. In fact, we were very pleased with the C14's fuel injection, clean, linear and glitch-free. To meet emissions regs, two 200-cell catalytic converters, one in the exhaust collector pipe and one in the single muffler, convert any escaping hydrocarbons. Claimed power is 156 hp @ 8800 rpm, with a peak torque of 103 lb./ft. @ 6200 rpm. That's 11 hp more than the FJR claims.

To cool the motor and avoid baking the rider (a serious problem with some big-inch sport-tourers) dual fans suction its large curved radiator to blow the heat out large finned outlets on either side of the fairing. And the trailing edges of these outlets are fitted with removable spoilers to let this heat blow back on the rider in cold weather riding.

ZX-14 DNA

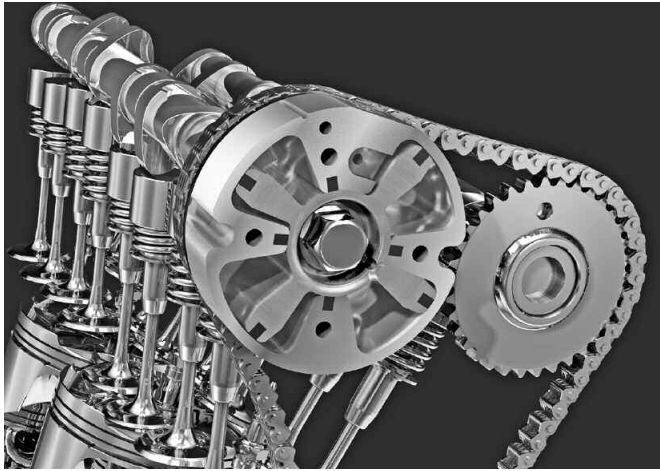
Running smoothness is important in this class, and as we found the ZX-14 exceptional in this regard, we found the C14 equally good, with no bothersome vibration at any rpm range. Credit two engine counterbalancers for this, one on each side of the crankshaft. Also, to aid quiet operation, the camchain is now tensioned by oil pressure for ideal tension at all rpm.

Features such as a stacked transmission to allow for a long swingarm and even a slipper clutch, to prevent inadvertent rear wheel locking during deceleration, are also part of the package. No other current sport-tourer offers a slipper clutch. Other ZX-14 holdovers include the use of radial pump master cylinders for both the clutch and front brakes, a design that offers the ultimate in linear feel at the lever.

Also shared with the ZX-14 is its unique monocoque chassis, a fabricated aluminum overhead structure that uses cast sections for the steering head and swingarm pivot areas welded to a center section made from stamped sheets that form the airbox. Strengthened to handle the C14's extra weight and shaft drive, the design combines light weight and great rigidity with a narrow profile between the rider's legs.

Handling

One of the most impressive aspects of the ZX-14 was its exquisite handling balance, so we hoped the new Concours wouldn't lose that feel. Thankfully, it's still there. Despite its extra weight, an increase in rake from 23° to 26° and a 60mm longer wheelbase, the C14 provides very neutral steering manners and responds



Above: The Concours 14's new VVT system uses this vane-style device to adjust the intake cam's phasing. The cam sprocket is attached to the circular part, while engine oil pressure is introduced to move the vaned center attached to the camshaft.



Above: The maximum travel of the Tetralever shaft drive system and the Uni-Trak rear suspension are shown. The linkage is double sided for strength, necessary with the engine's power. It rides just like a chain-driven bike, with no odd lift or squat.

well to a light touch on the bars. Free-way speed stability is also excellent.

Claimed to weigh 606 lbs. dry, or 132 lbs. more than the ZX-14's dry weight, we'll estimate 690 lbs. is close to its true wet weight.

As the new Concours has been converted to shaft drive from the chain-driven configuration on the ZX-14, perhaps its most distinctive feature is what Kawasaki calls its Tetralever system. The Tetralever four-link system is much beefier than a single-sided swingarm, to handle the bike's power output, and also serves to keep the engine output shaft and the rear gear case input shaft perfectly parallel, which is important to impart true rotary action through the universal joints at each end of the driveshaft. Plus, the four-link geometry avoids the need for a variable-length splined coupling in the driveshaft, reducing driveline lash. Although other torque-controlled shaft drive systems, like those from BMW and Moto Guzzi, also serve to eliminate the lift on deceleration and squat on acceleration that would normally be expected, let's remember that the FJR doesn't use any such system. And while it does use a relatively long driveshaft to minimize these effects, the FJR could definitely use help, as it loses rear end traction noticeably when rear braking and decelerating are combined.

The C14's system provides much more effective rear wheel braking than the FJR's, behaving just like a chain-driven bike from the rider's point of view.

Suspension

The suspension at both ends of the bike is adjustable for both preload and rebound damping. The forks are 43mm male-slider units and the rear suspension is a monoshock in Uni-Trak progressive linkage outfitted with a handy remote preload adjuster knob on the left side, where it can be tweaked in motion (with due care for road conditions) to easily achieve balanced front/rear spring rates. Overall, we found the spring rates sporty, great on smooth roads, but a bit harsh on second class pavement.

Brakes

The brakes are top spec: A pair of big 310mm petal discs in front gripped by radial mount, four-piston, four-pad calipers, and a sub-



Alfonse Palaima

stantial 270mm rear disc. ABS is optional (adding \$900 to the price). There is no ABS integration; the front and rear wheel systems work independently.

Features

Naturally, hard bags are standard equipment, and when detached the mounts are unobtrusive. A centerstand is also standard, as well as an electrically adjustable windshield offering a stepless 4.5" range.

Instrumentation includes trip computer functions like average and instantaneous mpg, distance to empty (the tank holds 5.8 gal.) as well as battery voltage, gear position, a clock, fuel gauge and two tripmeters. Tire pressure sensors are also standard.

Perhaps the C14's most controversial feature is its KIPASS system, for Kawasaki's Intelligent Proximity Activation Start System, a security and convenience device. With KIPASS, the rider carries a key fob transponder in his pocket that automatically activates the ignition switch whenever he's within 63" of the ignition switch. Two keys are provided, but up to six can be programmed to work. Judging from the number of fearful questions the system generated, you'll have to imagine its convenience is worth the anxiety. Q. What happens if the transponder's battery dies? A: You get a low battery meter on the fob. Q. What if you leave it behind at a gas stop? A. It was supposed to tell you how far out of range the fob is, but that feature turned out to have already been patented. Seems to us that they could have given us heated grips for what the KIPASS system cost them. Sadly, heated grips are not even an option.

Bottom Line

Our impression is the sport-touring class is about to crown a new champion. The handling, braking, power, comfort, convenience and wow factor of the Tetralever system all serve to make the Concours 14 a standout. Although the weather ranged from pleasant to hot during our testing, the bike's heat control appears adequate to prevent the sort of problems that plagued the FJR1300 when it was introduced. We'll reserve final judgement until we've had a chance to do a proper comparison, but it looks like a winner.