

SEND LETTERS TO THE EDITORS OF MCN

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What About The *Little* Dual-Sports?

Since I'm in the market for a street-legal, dirt-capable motorcycle, I read your dual-sport showdown (October) with considerable interest. Being severely in-seam challenged, the big problem for me with the 650s is their stratospheric seat heights.

Yamaha (XT250) and Honda (CRF230L) have both introduced new or upgraded "baby" dual-sports for 2008. How about a comparison test of these along with Suzuki's DR200SE in a future issue?

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Rick, I prefer the extra power of the bigger 650cc dual-sports for street use. The DR650SE has the option of a lower suspension setting built in, down from 10.2" of travel front and back to 8.7", 1.5" lower. Plus the company makes a lower gel seat that is about 1.5" lower, to bring

the seat height down from 34.3" to 31.3", which is pretty low. A shorter kickstand is also in the parts catalog to work with the lower suspension.

We're looking forward to testing the smaller dual-sports soon. —Dave

XR's Run Lean!

As the owner of several Honda XR650Ls and a couple of XR600Rs prior to these, I read your dual-sport review/comparison with great interest. You were pretty spot on with your points regarding the aging XR, but I am particularly interested in one remark about the bike being jetted rich out of the box. These bikes have had the reputation of being jetted very lean from the factory and folks increase both jets several sizes as a matter of course in an attempt to make more power.

Any info you have would be greatly appreciated.

Monte Chester
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Monte, a well-placed source (who must remain nameless) tell us the cure for the XR650L is a freer-flowing muffler, a K&N jet kit and air filter and a block-off kit for the smog plumbing. It won't be legal, but it will run right, he says.

KLR Clatter

Thanks for the honest test on the four dual-sport bikes in the October issue. I've been wanting another KLR650, but my biggest complaint was always the engine clatter at low rpm. I was hoping the minor engine improvements had addressed this problem. A couple of test reports in the "shiny" magazines only gave the expected rave reviews, so I anxiously awaited your opinions. I was quite disappointed to hear the problem is still there, but at least your complete report answers my question.

I can't wait another 20 years for Kawasaki to fix it, so I'll just hope someone figures out what makes the racket and hopefully how to cure it. Until then, it's time for a Suzuki.

Eddie Copeland
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Design vs. Style

I propose that the column titled "Motorcycle Design" be renamed "Motorcycle Style" as Glynn continually interchanges the terms "design" and "style" as if they were one and the same. Glynn, they are



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not. Style speaks to how a thing looks, while design speaks to how a thing functions or to its fitness for a particular purpose, usually mechanical. The two are not the same.

While a wonderfully functioning thing (a good design) is oftentimes beautiful to look at, its beauty is often incidental to its function and largely not the original goal. It's not always the same result in reverse.

When Mitchell designed the Supermarine Spitfire, one of the most, if not the most beautiful aircraft ever built, beauty (style) was not the original goal. Huh? Blasphemy!

He knew that his design had to be fast and maneuverable since he also knew that would be what the other guys would show up with, and it had to be sturdy, reliable and be able to be flown in combat by 19-year-olds. Its sleekness speaks to his former goals and Mitchell knew that an elliptical wing offered the most lift for the least amount of drag, thus giving the kids a chance of surviving.

The fact that it is a beautifully styled aircraft had virtually nothing to do with its intended function, which was to shoot down other nicely styled aircraft, a function in which it excelled. If Glynn were writing a column on World War II aircraft, he would have you think that the RAF used the Spitfire because it was nice to look at. Sorry, Glynn. Putting wrapping paper and a bow on a cardboard box does not improve its function. If you really want to talk design, spend a year with Kevin Cameron and get back to me.

Rob Caso
Boyertown, PA

Rob, you're right that design means different things to different men, but styling, however distasteful the word, is also very much a part of the plot. The emphasis on form over function depends on the type of product. With certain consumer goods, where fashion is considered more important than utilitarian needs, styling can be given such importance that function is actually compromised, as noted in my May 2001 column, "Design vs. Styling."

I agree with you on the inherent beauty of well executed engineering, a point I've acknowledged many times in my column. But aircraft can hardly be considered consumer products, especially those with a military role. Modern motorcycles, I would argue, very much are. This is confirmed by marketing surveys in which buyers rate styling as the primary purchasing motivation over performance, handling or even price.

I would far rather gaze at a Manx Norton than any of today's plastic-coated

marvels, including those I've had a hand in creating myself, so our views aren't poles apart. In fact, as a collector, my interest in motorcycles peters out around the early '80s—at about the time the stylists took over.

As a professional, though, I make a living designing bikes for the 21st century, on which sophisticated body styling is a prerequisite. And while I try to address both angles as a writer, the emphasis must surely be on current trends.

A year spent with Kevin Cameron would require five in rehab, although the few hours I have shared with him were entertaining and informative—enough for me to recommend him to the producers of "The Best Ever Motorcycles" as the best technical oracle they were likely to find. But you can't engineer a modern street-bike in its totality any more than you can style an aircraft. One wouldn't sell, the other wouldn't fly.

I agree that styling is only one aspect of design, but it is a vital part of bike sales these days, and as an insider within that field, that is what I report on. And why MCN has a page devoted to the subject every month. —Glynn Kerr

Outrageous CVO Prices

I have been an H-D owner for over five years. I currently own a '03 Road King, a '05 BMW R1200RT and a '98 Honda Magna. I previously owned a '03 V-Rod.

Every year when the new H-Ds are announced and reviewed, I keep waiting for the guffaws when the prices are given. Of course, they are elbowed out of the way by the requisite complimentary reviews. Same this year on the CVOs, the annual Emperor's New Clothes reviews. When is someone going to come out and say (between laughing fits) that up to \$35,000 for a cruiser that struggles to break 80 hp is laughable? Even at those prices, almost every buyer will have to spend more to correct shortcomings, like the seats and horns. And why aren't they called mid-sized?

Don't get me wrong, I enjoy riding my Road King, aside from the pitiful brakes and lack of room in the riding position. At 6'3", I am too cramped on it for much time in the saddle. I have tried four seats and three different handlebars in various combinations to add room. My BMW and Magna will both run circles around the Road King and are roomier.

The RT tops 100 hp right out of the box and other BMWs top 150 hp. When you get one, you don't need to replace anything. After riding the RT, riding the H-D is like driving a BMW and then driving an old Chevy. Both are fun, but who will

be first to say that an H-D that is 60% higher in price and puts out a bit less in hp than a BMW, or nearly double the price of a Starliner, 109 or VTX is absurd?

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Jim, we tend to think that CVO prices, like prices in general, are a matter of economics: If the company can get those kinds of prices, who's to say they are crazy. Also, the rate of depreciation on used CVOs is the same as on standard Big Twins as nearly as we can determine.

Rotax Weakens Buell Brand Loyalty

I think Glynn Kerr is a bit off target. It isn't just the younger crowd that wants better performance from their Harleys. While I don't plan to get rid of my Panhead, I'm tired of waiting for the good folks at H-D to build a balanced sport-touring rig around the V-Rod engine. It may be time for me to trade in the Electra Glide for another brand or maybe I'll have to build one myself.

I'm sure the Rotax engine is a fine working piece, but it is a major component and by outsourcing it, H-D has just stabbed their own brand loyalty in the back. By using it, they've just announced that folks should consider the BMW F-series bikes as Buell alternatives.

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Headlight Modulators Confusing To Drivers

In the June article, "Headlight Modulators: Fact, Fiction and Installation," I noted the lack of valuable data, with only anecdotal evidence of their effectiveness. I too have a lot of headlight modulator experience: 20 years and over 200,000 miles on multiple bikes. I have commuted to and from work in the Atlanta region for over 15 years, which is why I used a headlight modulator. Traffic is a killer. Everyone is in a hurry, and motorcyclists are few, so nobody looks for us. But I have found some problems with using modulators, which has led me to start using driving lights instead.

First, headlight modulators confuse some people a lot, which is something you don't want, particularly in rush hour traffic. With everyone blitzing along the highway you don't need the person ahead of you slamming on the brakes for no reason. I have even had people ahead of me drive off the road into the ditch as they stare in the rear view mirror, thinking I'm an emergency vehicle. Modulators can be a hazard, particularly in heavy traffic.

Second, target fixation. As motorcyclists, we know that where we look is where we go. I have had oncoming traffic fixate on my modulated headlight. Nothing wakes you up like a big SUV going left of center heading right for you, the driver likely not even aware they are doing it, as they stare with a blank look at that modulating headlight.

Third, they irritate people. To some extent, who cares. But these same people vote and make other decisions that can impact my ability to even ride motorcycles. Do you really want to irritate the person in charge of determining whether motorcycles are covered by the insurance company they work for?

Because of these issues, I have discontinued using modulators, instead adding low wattage driving lights that I use during the day. I have found that the driving lights do as good a job or *better* at making me visible. They do not confuse people, and I have not had any problem with people fixating on the lights. You can also see better on those mountain roads at night when you can turn them on. I've even developed an automatic dimmer to lower the wattage in slow traffic to save the battery and be less irritating to stalled traffic around me.

While I wouldn't stop anyone wanting to improve their visibility with a modulated headlight, I would feel they need to be warned about the risks.

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Fat As Ballast

In the early '80s, at the dawn of the cruiser craze, I traded in my Honda 500-four for a Yamaha Virago. It had the Easy-Riderish big tall bars, forward pegs and low seat.

On my first cross-country trip from Denver to Key West, I discovered that the way-cool, feet forward seating position was cooking my lower back and shoulders.

Observing patrons in a cafe somewhere in Louisiana, the reason for my distress became painfully obvious. Everyone, including me, sat instinctively with their feet tucked under their seats, not in front of them like I was forced to on my new bike. I surmised that riding with feet and hands forward rotated my pelvis, flattened my lumbar curve and caused some serious pain. Trip over, I sold the cruiser, went back to standard motorcycles and have traveled many pain-free miles since.

But cruisers are all the rage in the US and cruiser riders, contrary to my own experience, insist they are comfortable.

What I have noticed though is that many of these riders have...how can I say this... large frontal protrusions. Watching these same people walk, it is obvious that the extra mass carried in front tends to exaggerate the normal lumbar curve.

Is it possible then that this frontal weight acts like ballast holding the spine and upper body in an upright position when seated on a cruiser? Or are they just victims of popular culture and actually just as uncomfortable as I am on a cruiser?

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Mario, see doc flash's reply to this question is in this month's Medical Motorcycling, "Gut Feelings."

Consumer Tips On Batteries

In addition to the technical issues raised in "Batteries 101," (Open Road, November), there are several noteworthy consumer tips that should be shared:

1. Brands and heat: Most batteries of a given technology are a commodity, meaning there is little difference among most brands in general. Thus, you can expect similar performance and a lifetime rating of 3–5 years at constant 77° F in most typical motorcycle applications. Above all else, heat is the enemy of battery longevity, and above 122°, lifetime exponentially drops, so don't store the battery in high heat if you can help it.

2. Odyssey by Enersys: The most notable exception to the "in general" statement above is the "Odyssey" battery series made by Enersys. For many years, we've used these batteries in the rugged uninterruptible power supply systems we manufacture at my company for the military, as Enersys is the only battery the military will accept for mission-critical applications.

Compared to more generic sealed batteries, these Odysseys last 8–12 years at the same 77° constant, are significantly more resistant to shock and vibration, have dramatically better cranking performance at extreme low temperature, and can be ordered with operating temperatures of up to 176°.

In addition, they have a shelf life of about two years, as opposed to a more generic battery's three months—meaning Battery Tenders are no longer necessary if you ride with any regularity. My controller at work has had the same Enersys battery in his Harley Softail since 1998, and it's still performing perfectly. I use them in all of my motorcycles, and recommend them highly.

At work, we get them for about \$65

wholesale, as we buy them in bulk for the equipment we manufacture. Online prices are not much higher. In dealerships, they can run as high as \$225.

3. Physical size: A vast majority of 12-V sealed, maintenance-free batteries in a given Ah range are a standard physical size. This takes some of the mystery out of cross-brand shopping. Of course, one should double check this before buying, but chances are Brand X's 12 V 15-20 Ah battery is almost identical in size to Brand Y's battery of the same rating.

4. Pricing: There is arguably no purchase where motorcyclists are ripped off more than batteries. A generic sealed, maintenance-free battery for a modern Harley or BMW costs \$18–30 wholesale. At a dealership, you will pay \$90–125 for the exact same battery. A smart shopper should check a local industrial supply houses, and likely to find the battery required for under one-third of what a dealership charges for the identical product.

—Moshe K. Levy

MCN contributor Moshe K. Levy has spent the last 10 years as a manager at Nova Electric which designs and manufactures custom uninterruptible power supplies for military applications.—Ed.

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