

Tasty Leftovers

three very flavorful second-tier 600s

story by Steve Natt, photos and Cyclestats by Dave Searle

THERE ARE TIMES when you feel like shopping around town for what you hope is a great new restaurant, and then there are the times you just want to raid the fridge for a sure thing. So it goes with motorcycles—especially in the heavily populated middleweight sport class. The incredibly competitive nature of AMA and World Superbike racing puts huge demands on the manufacturers to one-up each other on a nearly annual basis. This, of course, causes their leading-edge bikes to be ever more sharply focused as race, not street machines. It also drives the prices up. But luckily for those of us who have hung up our knee pucks, three of the four Japanese builders are still turning out some great bikes that are the functional equivalent of tasty leftovers. These machines sacrifice the very latest in technology, weight-saving schemes, handling and engine performance treatments in favor of older, simpler and more street-friendly systems. Each one is also \$500–\$1600 cheaper than its racy state-of-the-art counterpart.

For about 20 years now, we've enjoyed the performance of 600cc water-cooled inline-four engines stuffed into light, stiff and relatively compact frames. There is something that just feels "right" about this configuration, and that impression is shared in both lap times and sales figures. And while the outsider might stand 20' away from a group of 600s like the ones assembled here and see nearly identical machines, a long ride on each quickly points out their many significant differences. And we say, "vive la difference," because the good news for smart consumers who aren't out to be number one at the next track day is that somewhere in the disparate mix of attributes very likely lies the "right" motorcycle for you.

Genealogy

The oldest bike in this group is the Yamaha YZF600R, soldiering on in its 12th year since being introduced back in '94 as a replacement for the previous FZR series. Its suspension was upgraded in '96 and became the bike we know today with

revised engine, brakes and bodywork in 1997. It was a class-leading supersport machine for several years (Jamie James rode it to a class championship in its first year) until the R6 arrived in '99. But even then, Yamaha knew it had a good thing on its hands and so chose to keep the YZF in the lineup with only graphics changes year



to year. As time and technological development have marched inexorably forward, the YZF is still rooted in mid-'90s performance and styling and looks it. With a steel chassis, it weighs 590 lbs. wet.

The ZZR600 is essentially the same machine as the ZX-6R of 2000–2002, once Kawasaki's top-of-the-line middleweight. It was deposed by a newer-generation Ninja in '03 to return rebadged as the bargain-priced ZZR600 in 2004. Like Yamaha, it seemed a good idea to Kawi marketers to have a more street-oriented 600 in their stable as their new 600 sportbikes became increasingly track-focused. A small technological step behind the Honda F4i, it nevertheless uses an aluminum chassis and subframe and weighs just 441 lbs. wet, but still relies on carburetors, which are becoming increasingly rare due to emissions reasons. A catalytic convertor (two of them on California models) has been added to keep its tailpipe emissions legal.

The Honda F4i's lineage can be traced back to the first Hurricane in 1987, built to "blow away" the Ninja (remember those TV ads?) It was heavily revised in 1991 as the CBR600F2, then again in '95 as the F3, and once more in '99 as the F4. Fuel injection and few other improvements brought it

up to the current engine spec in 2001. The only visible change is that the 2006 F4i comes with a more comfortable seat than the 2001 F4i. Note that the F4i won our five-way 600cc sportbike comparison in 2001.

With the possible exception of the GSX-R750 series, you'd be hard-pressed to identify another model line of motorcycles that has had a greater impact on sport riding than the CBR600 series.

Gene Pool advantage (newest): Honda F4i

Engine & Transmission

As we've said, these bikes may appear similar but are, in fact, very different in feel and function. The Yamaha is right in there in the torque department (41.8 lb./ft. at peak), but is nearly 8 hp down at the top end (82.0 hp max). It also feels buzziest at any given rpm, with high speed vibration tingling the seat at 5000 rpm and passing into the pegs and perimeter steel frame (felt through knees) starting at about 8000 rpm. One tester described the YZF powerplant as feeling the "loosest" of the bunch. On the plus side, its carburetion is clean and glitch-free from idle to redline.

As has been true of all Yamaha sportbike gearboxes up until the R1 of 2004, the YZF600's shifting has a notchy feel—especially balky from first to second under power (the Factory Pro Shift Kit solves this problem; see January 2001). And the clutch suffers by comparison, too, with a less positive feel and a shuddering engagement under heavy throttle. However, the biggest difference in the powertrain is a wider-ratio gearbox than the other two, for more relaxed cruising rpm and significantly better gas mileage.

Overall, though, the Yamaha's engine makes what feels to the rider as plenty of power. It is docile and responsive at low- and mid-range rpm used most of the time on the street, and thrums along pleasantly in top gear at freeway speeds, where at 65 mph the engine is turning @ 5513 rpm—well below the engine's buzz point and at 90% of maximum torque. There's adequate if not thrilling power up top, but the engine has to work hard to pull the bike's extra weight. Think of it this way: The YZF is a bit soft in the midsection, like any normal middle-aged adult, thus its powertrain takes third place in this group.

Because this is a streetbike test and not a track bike test, the Honda slugs in next. It feels comparatively weak and hesitant through its low and midrange rpm, waking up at about 9500 rpm where its buzziness

through the controls parallels the Yamaha's at around 8000 rpm. The engine does smooth out as it heads for redline where it makes the highest peak power (90.1 hp), and seems "happiest" at around 11,000. Some testers were surprised at how slow-revving the engine felt through the low and midrange. And that old early-style EFI bugaboo is still there: It's very difficult to roll on the power smoothly from fully off to on throttle. The EFI seems to hesitate for a split second as the throttle is first twisted, and then pumps in more fuel than you really want. This is most apparent when rolling on the gas coming out of slower corners, causing the bike to lurch slightly. Good riders can adapt (try not to fully shut off the throttle in mid-corner) and aftermarket fixes like a Power Commander may be able to help. Once past this initial rotation of the twistgrip, you'll be glad the EFI is so precise, as throttle response is meaty and instantaneous right to the throttle stop. Just be sure you know how much acceleration you want and when, because there's no delay in getting it. The gearbox has a comparatively long throw, but shifts very positively.

However one tester noted that the ratios were too close together in the top three gears, netting only a 500 rpm differential at some speeds. Chalk this up to the F4i being the most track-oriented of the three.

With a home run combination of strong power across the range, responsiveness and feel, the ZZR powertrain takes top honors. Kawasaki was always good at carburetion, and this engine is a perfect example. Every tester felt the Kawi's was the best mill of the bunch—one tester noted that it's "always strong, never fluffy." Fully 10 hp stronger than even the Honda at 6000 rpm, it makes only a touch less peak power (89.7 hp). It also had the finest gearbox to boot, with a sense of always having the "right" gear available to match power to speed, and the slickest shifting of them all. Enough said.

Powertrain Advantage: Kawasaki

Handling, Suspension And Brakes

There's no doubt that these are all very competent sportbikes that allow good riders to flow very quickly through corners on winding roads, yet sufficiently forgiving that newer riders can make correction mid-corner without unnecessary drama. In fact, handling is the area where the passage of time seems to have had the least effect. Or more to the point, at street speeds, all of these bikes work very well. It's not until you approach racetrack speeds or particularly difficult conditions (very hard accel-

eration out of corners, very hard braking and trail-braking into corners) that any limitations begin to emerge.

Our testers varied in body size as well as in levels of aggressiveness, so this subjectivity played a part in our impressions. The heavier riders preferred the Kawasaki's handling/suspension balance, but all agreed that its rear shock needs more rebound damping (just as it did back in 2001, *Ed.*). Other testers felt the Kawi was the slowest steering, with a nervous rear end that hurt confidence on aggressive corner exits. When you let the willing engine pull you



Honda F4i

hard off the apex (if there are bumps on the tarmac), the rear still tends to pogo even at the maximum damping setting. If we were going to buy a ZZR600, we'd seriously consider looking to the aftermarket for rear suspension upgrades. At factory stock settings, the ZZR flows nicely along the freeway, with the kind of plushness you'd want on a 300-mile day in the saddle.

The Kawasaki's brakes, while generally fine in most cases, had just a touch less feel than its competitors'. We expected more power with less effort and overall better feel from its six-piston differential bore Tokico calipers. They're certainly not bad, but they're just not quite as good as the others.

The Honda feels taut and well-controlled, every bit the race bike. It's by far the easiest bike to ride fast through the twisties, with the kind of planted poise through every kind of corner that tells you there's plenty of room left in its performance envelope. The flip side is that it likes smooth roads, and over bumpy pavement, the rider feels everything—so much so that the pilot will learn to lift himself on the pegs when hard hits are anticipated. This firmness can mostly be dialed out, but we doubt the tradeoff would be worth it to the sportiest riders, and the resulting loss of front end feel could kill one of the great things about this bike. If there are track days in your future, this is the bike for you. However, these same attrib-

utes would make the Honda our last choice for a commuter or sport-tourer. And despite being much improved from the 2001 model's, the F4i's seat is still the least friendly perch in this group. You also need to factor in its EFI glitches and fluffy mid-range, which tend to make stop and go riding more of a chore. One final knock: full lock turns will have your fingers tight against the ram-air tubes next to the gastank.

On the plus side, its four-pot Nissin front brakes are great—the system receiving such kudos as "brilliant" and "sweet" for its stellar mix of feel and fade-free power. One section of our test run included a very steep, twisting downhill section. In normal use, all the three bikes' brakes were more than adequate, but this hill was repeated several times by each rider on each bike, and the Honda's exceptional braking control in this challenging test made it our favorite, with the most tactile feel for stopping power by far.

For overall handling and comfort, we have to give the nod to the Yamaha. We chose to bump up the rebound damping three clicks at the rear and a half turn up front, which settled the bike down nicely. Once dialed in, every tester found this bike easy to ride quickly and smoothly through the corners, with the chassis remaining stable and neutral. At ten-tenths, the same rider on the Honda will pull away, but it's remarkable how irrelevant the YZF's 50-lb. weight differential is in real world riding. Comments like "predictable," "effortless" and "steady and stable" were pervasive. Interestingly, the Yamaha has 1° less rake than the Kawi or the Honda, but nearly the same trail. This geometry combined with the stock Bridgestone BT57 tires allows the YZF to remain poised and planted in every situation. The Yamaha is also the best choice as a tourer, with better wind protection, the best seat, and the most comfortable ergos of the bunch. Its Sumitomo four-piston monoblock front calipers have been an MCN favorite since their introduction a decade ago, and still rank up there with the best of them. In fact, there is so much stopping power available that it's easy to overwhelm the available grip of the stock Bridgestones. If you really want to ride the YZF at its limit, you'll want to upgrade to higher performance tires. The only complaint we noted about the brakes is at the rear, and it's an ergonomic one: The brake lever is set at too high an angle, making it difficult to "cover" the pedal while riding.

Overall Chassis Advantage: Yamaha

Fit, Finish, Controls And Instruments

How we lived with analog gauges so long is a mystery. Perhaps we all had better eyesight back then. But marking a 4" gauge face with 80 increments from 0–160 mph means the numbers are very small, and for those of us suffering from early onset presbyopia, they become almost illegible. A couple of us were unable to read the Kawasaki's speedo at speed, forcing us to memorize the approximate location of key speed markers. Also, we think the reflections in the clear cover, plus the grayish tint to the numbers against the less than black background are the culprits. The Yamaha dash is only slightly better, thanks to whiter lettering. But, the Honda's big digital speedo readout wins handily here, as it's visible in any lighting condition and so easy to see clearly that it can almost be read with peripheral vision.

We liked the Kawasaki's toggle-switchable readout from clock to temp, and missed having a clock on the Yamaha, which instead comes with an analog temp gauge marked in degrees Celsius. As good a commuter/sport-tourer as the Yamaha is, it really needs a good, legible clock instead of a gauge to monitor something that almost never changes; a warning light would be fine for that. Only the Honda comes with a fuel level gauge, but which only illuminates on "reserve." And without reserve petcocks, you'd better pay attention. This is especially true on the Kawasaki which seems to have the widest range of fuel consumption under varying conditions.

All the bikes seemed to have perfectly acceptable fit and finish. The panel cut lines were even, fairing panels laid flat, and all paint was evenly applied without orange peel or hot spots. And we liked the adjustable brake levers on all the bikes.

Instrument Legibility Advantage: Honda

Styling & Ergonomics

Here's where the Yamaha most clearly shows its age. The '06 model is a dead ringer for the '99 edition one of our testers once owned, making it harder to justify buying one brand-new. There's a chance you'll feel

some buyer's remorse the first time you roll up to your Sunday morning hangout only to have people assume you've just bought a used bike. In this comparison, the YZF feels most like a mid-sized sport-tourer, a budget VFR more than anything else. Ergonomically, it's very comfortable, with the highest, widest handlebars and the rider feeling as though he is "in" as opposed to "on" the motorcycle.

The Honda is the most modern and aggressive looking of the bunch, with stylish paint and racer-boy graphics. It looks like what it is, and will therefore be more attractive to



younger and/or more aggressive riders. The grips are lowest and relatively close together, the tank is narrower than the other two, and the whole package feels small and low. With this bike, you feel more "on" than "in." Still, the pegs aren't so high as to bind one's knees, nor are the bars so low that your neck cramps.

The Kawasaki is, to our collective eye, the most pleasing combination. It offers a sufficiently modern look with a kind of subtle maturity that may make it a bit less attractive to cops at a speed trap. Offered only in an attractive silver finish with muted logos, it has a refined, classy appearance that's more Porsche Cayman than Mitsubishi Lancer EVO. The tank is rather wide as is the fairing front. The bars are wide set as well, giving the overall impression that the bike is bulkier than it probably is. The riding position is comfortably neutral, the seat is acceptably comfy with a narrow front allowing shorter riders to reach the ground and a wider rear for good support.

Motorcycles As Dogs?

If dogs age seven years to every human one, how about motorcycles in this world of fast and radical evolution? Well, we think the dog analogy is pretty close. All of these bikes feel in some degree dated and sedate compared with their super-high performance stablemates—but only if you're a racer or a wannabe. If your riding needs include commuting, light touring, carrying a passenger, or any of the other normal activities associated with our sport, then any of these bikes is a more logical choice than the same company's latest race replicas.

So how do you choose between them? Consider these factors. If you're up for track days, or feel the need to be quickest among your friends on that favorite (smooth) winding road, pick the Honda. In fact it's so good, we'd bet it can still give a good account of itself versus the latest race reps. But all that high-strung performance comes at a high price, the F4i is only \$500 less than the latest CBR600RR and a whopping \$1400 more than the Yamaha YZF600S and \$1200 more than the Kawasaki ZZR600, plus you have to deal

with a bit of EFI abruptness, a soft midrange, and a sore butt.

The fact that even a brand new YZF looks like an old motorcycle will make it the last choice of younger riders or anyone who regularly rides with friends on supersport machines. But there is so much that makes sense about this machine in terms of real-world functionality, that if you can get past its dated looks, it's a great choice for anyone who needs one bike that can do pretty much everything well at a very reasonable price.

Which leaves the Kawasaki. It's not so old as to seem old, nor is it so uncompromising a sportbike as to be limited in use. If you had to pick one bike here that would be best at both holding its value and holding its own on country roads or even a track day, this would be it. Just allow room for the idea that you may want to shop around for a better rear shock. With that one "new trick," this old dog will certainly hunt. 🐕

COMPETITORS AT A GLANCE

	MSRP	Wet weight	HP	Torque	1/4 Mile	0-60mph	60-zero	Average MPG
Honda F4i	\$8499	430 lbs	90.1	40.3 lb./ft.	11.26 sec.	3.52 sec.	123.5'	36.7 mpg
Kawasaki ZZR600	\$7299	431 lbs	89.7	42.7 lb./ft.	11.19 sec.	3.42 sec.	119.4'	36.1 mpg
Yamaha YZF600S	\$7099	490 lbs	82.0	41.8 lb./ft.	12.01 sec.	4.12 sec.	118.9'	43.3 mpg

Model Comparison

Our overall favorite, the ZZR600 has by far the best engine, transmission and clutch, comfortable ergos, good brakes that are only a touch behind the competition's for feel and suspension that splits the middle ground between the F4i's racy stiffness and the YZF600R's touring plushness. Plus, it's an excellent value priced at \$7299.



↑ Above: The Kawasaki's front end still looks great to our eyes. A subtle detail are the dimples on either side of the lower 'nose' bridge, looking like whiskers on a cat. Slightly wider at the gastank junction than the others, its ergonomics nonetheless felt very good to all the testers. The Kawasaki's carburetion is superb for exceptional control and rideability. Its transmission is another marvel, very slick in operation with gear ratio spreads that always seemed exactly right for the occasion.

Right: You can see that the ZZR's clocks → are hard to read. Besides their low-contrast markings, the lenses are domed so they create highlights almost constantly. Although no fuel gauge is provided, you do have a clock as well as a low fuel warning light. Gas mileage varied over a greater range aboard the ZZR.



← Left: The ZZR's seat is quite comfortable and better than the Honda's. Both the chassis and subframe are aluminum, keeping the weight down and the exhaust is attractive, a combination of brushed aluminum silencer and bright header section.



Right: The Kawasaki's jutting ram air scoop gives it an aggressive look and allows a certain amount of intake roar to mix with the subdued growl of the exhaust—we all enjoyed the sound. Silver painted wheels match the bodywork to provide an elegant impression. The Tokico six-piston front calipers are very strong and controllable, but had a touch less feel than its competitors'.

TESTERS' LOG

This bike had power everywhere and I never felt like I had to search for the right gear in any condition. At 5'9" I also liked the riding position the best of the three. The bars were perfectly spaced and I liked the forward lean. The seat itself was a little softer than the rock-hard Honda but not as comfy as the Yamaha. The front brakes were very good, the rear brakes, not. Unfortunately, the dashboard leaves a lot to be desired with a hard to read speedo and tach and turnsignals that are also dim and hard to see when they're blinking. However, the real letdown about this bike is its handling. I found myself having to work a lot harder to get this bike to dip into the turns. It just didn't feel quite as flickable from one side to the other in tight twisties. Still, when coming out of a turn you'd forget about the handling and fall back in love with the engine.

—Steven Marks

The ZZR would have to be my choice in this group of remarkably nice motorcycles. The Kawasaki's engine is flawless, with a much stronger mid-range than the others and a wonderful liquid delivery, always smoothly responsive, never fluffy or hesitant. The transmission is also the best of the lot, with a slick, positive engagement that's a delight to use, and a clutch with great feel to back it up. The brakes are very strong and effective, but have perhaps just a touch less feel than the others, but that's split-

ting hairs. Both headlights are lit even on low beam, too. The ride is a nice compromise between the racetrack-stiff F4i and the almost sport-touring feel of the YZF600R. But attempting to stiffen it up for a track day would highlight the rear shock's lack of rebound damping—its only real flaw.

Elegant and understated in its silver paint, and with an MSRP \$1200 lower than the Honda F4i, it's a lot of machine at a very fair price.

—Dave Searle

It's amazing how much power you can get out of such a small engine. The Kawi to me is all about this engine: it carburets perfectly from idle, no matter how fast or slow you twist the grip (which makes the Honda's abruptness even more apparent). The top end rush is a great complement to the mid-range grunt and low-rev tractability. I wasn't crazy about how fat the tank felt between my thighs, or how widely splayed the low bars seemed to be, but maybe that's because I'm 5'8" and not 6'0". I was pretty disappointed by the suspension—no amount of adjusting could stop the rear from stepping out on me when gassing it off the apex of tight corners. Kawasaki engineers know how to make bikes handle, so I am guessing this is a budget thing. Cheap shocks helped bring the price in at \$7299, forcing good riders to dip into their wallets to pay for upgrades.

—Steve Natt

2006 Kawasaki Ninja ZZR600

CycleStats™

SPECIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE DATA

ENGINE

Type:liquid-cooled, inline four
 Valvetrain:DOHC, 4 valves per cyl.,
 shim under bucket valve adjustment
 Size:599cc
 Bore/stroke:66.0mm x 43.8mm
 Comp. ratio:**12.8:1**
 Carburetion:Mikuni BDSR36R
 36mm x 4 with ram-air induction
 Exhaust:4-2-1 w/catalyst

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission:**6-speed**
 Final drive:#525 chain,
 RPM @ 65* mph/redline:5647/14,800
 *actual, not indicated

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase:55.1"
 Rake/trail23.5°/3.7"
 Ground clearance:5.6"
 Seat height :31.6"
 GVWR:836 lbs.
 Wet weight:**441 lbs.**
 Carrying capacity:395 lbs.

SUSPENSION

Front:46mm cartridge fork,
 adj. preload, comp, reb. damping
 4.7" travel
 Rear:single shock, adj. ride height,
 comp. and reb. damping,
 5.3" travel

BRAKES

Front:dual 300mm discs,
 six-piston, double-action calipers
 Rear:220mm disc
 single-piston caliper

TIRES & WHEELS

Front:**120/65-ZR17** Dunlop
 D207 on **3.50" x 17"** wheel
 Rear:**180/55-ZR17** Dunlop
 D207 on **5.50" x 17"** wheel

ELECTRICS

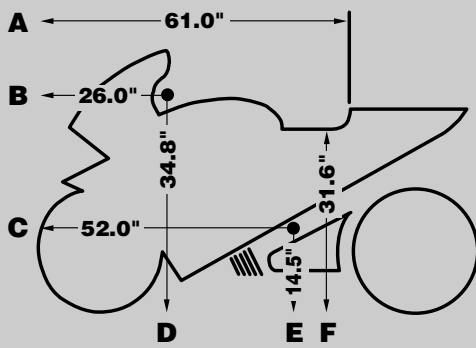
Battery:12V, 8AH
 Ignition:Digital with TPS input
 Headlight:dual 60/55W

FUEL

Tank capacity:4.8 gal.
 Fuel octane recommended:90
 High/low/avg. mpg:41.6/27.3/**36.1**



ERGONOMICS TEMPLATE



- A: front of bike to rear most seating position.
 B: front of bike to center of handgrip.
 C: front of bike to center of footpeg.
 D: ground to center of handgrip.
 E: ground to center of footpeg.
 F: ground to lowest point of seat.

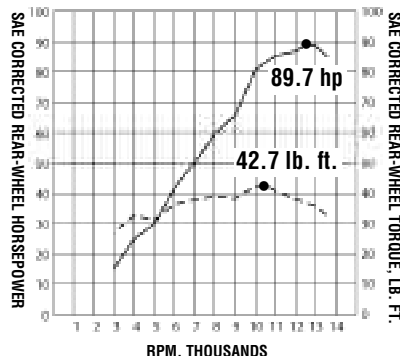
MISCELLANEOUS

Instruments:tach, speedo,
 odometer, tripmeter, coolant
 temp., coolant warning light, clock
 Indicators:hi-beam, t/s, neutral,
 high coolant temp., low oil pressure
 MSRP:**\$7299**
 Routine service interval:.....3500 mi.
 Valve adj. interval:7500 mi.
 Warranty:12 mo., unlimited miles
 Colors:Galaxy Silver

DYNAMOMETER DATA

- Low end ●●●●●
 Mid-range ●●●●○
 Top end ●●●●○

The ZZR600's engine is a reminder of how well a perfectly tuned set of carburetors can work. Always responsive, with no flat spots or abruptness, it makes the strongest power and runs smoothest versus its competitors in this group.



PERFORMANCE

Measured top speed155.7 mph
 0-1/4 mile11.19 sec.
 @ 121.96 mph
 0-60 mph3.42 sec.
 0-100 mph7.80 sec.
 60-0 mph119.4'
 Power to Weight Ratio1:4.92
 Speed @ 65 mph (indicated)61.0

M/C RATING SYSTEM

EXCELLENT ●●●●●
 VERY GOOD ●●●●○
 GOOD ●●●●○
 FAIR ●●●○
 POOR ●●○

Middleweight Sportbike

Engine ●●●●●
 Transmission ●●●●●
 Suspension ●●●●○
 Brakes ●●●●○
 Handling ●●●●○
 Styling ●●●●○
 Riding Impression ●●●●●
 Instruments/Controls ●●●●○
 Attention to Detail ●●●●○
 Value ●●●●●

OVERALL RATING ●●●●●

TEST NOTES

PICKS

- Spectacular engine, responsive and powerful at all rpm
- Exceptionally slick transmission matched to a great clutch
- Refined and attractive appearance avoids "boy racer" look

PANS

- Rear shock suffers from inadequate rebound damping
- Speedo is crowded with numbers and hard to read
- Higher cruising rpm equals lower gas mileage

STANDARD MAINTENANCE

Item	Time	Parts	Labor
Oil & Filter	1.0	\$17.25/\$20	\$60.00
Air Filter	0.5	\$47.00	\$30.00
Valve Adjust	3.0	\$141.64	\$180.00
Battery Access	0.2	MF	\$12.00
Final Drive	0.2		\$12.00
R/R Rear Whl.	1.0		\$60.00
Change Plugs	0.5	\$18.00	\$30.00
Adjust carbs	2.0		\$120.00
Totals	8.4	\$243.89	\$504.00

Model Comparison

Yamaha's YZF600R is still a remarkably good motorcycle despite its aging appearance. At one time a state-of-the-art sportbike, it now feels the most like a sport-tourer with great high-speed stability, seat comfort, relaxed cruising rpm and a plush ride. Its engine, transmission and clutch are a level below the competition's, but its price the best.



Right: The YZF's old style instrumentation isn't particularly easy to read. The speedo (left) is marked to 190 mph and has 36 hash marks in a 220° arc, making for a good eye test. The coolant temp gauge's place (right) would have been better filled with a clock. There's just one tripmeter and it's analog, too, with a roller to reset the tumblers.

Left: The YZF's Cyclops-style headlight looks old, but its fairing gives the best wind protection and its handlebars are the widest and marginally the highest in this group—making the Yamaha a great sport-tourer or commuter bike.



Right: With a broad thick seat, the YZF was judged the most comfortable ride. The silencer is bathed in black chrome, which should hold up well, but the rest of the exhaust system is black painted steel which is unlikely to weather as well as stainless.



Left: Sumitomo's excellent monobloc front calipers actually generated the shortest stopping distance in our comparison, despite the Yamaha's 50-lb. greater weight. The tires are Bridgestone B57s and smaller sized than the competitions', a 160/60 rear on a 5.00" rim and a 120/60 rather than a 120/70 front.



TESTERS' LOG

There wasn't any one thing that was really a highlight about this bike, but, then again, there weren't any real negatives either. The bike has fun and ample power at all ranges and it handles really well. The transmission is a little clunky and the gear ratios are wider than the others. Cruising, it seemed like the bike had a whole extra gear at the top end. Even though it is heavier than the other bikes, you don't feel it. If anything, it feels more stable. The front brakes are very good. The rear brake is the strongest of the three but it's positioned badly, requiring a toe lift to get on top of it. The suspension is comfortable and definitely has the softest seat and most upright riding position. The handle bars are a bit wide for my taste. I really had fun riding this bike and unlike the other bikes, I didn't find myself wishing it had more power (the Honda) or better handling (the Kawasaki). It came in second in almost every category for me (except third in looks and first in comfort) but I would probably end up buying this bike if I was forced to choose only one.

—Steven Marks

At one time a cutting-edge sportbike, the YZF is now much more like a sport-tourer, with a wider-ratio transmission that makes for more relaxed cruising speeds (and much better gas mileage) and a suspension that simply irons out bumps that you

feel clearly on the others. Its high-speed handling is the most secure as well, with a composed, effortless quality that you wouldn't expect from a more high-strung 600. It has the same foibles as so many Yamahas up until the latest R1, a notchy transmission and a clutch that lacks feel and shudders slightly. But its monobloc four-piston front brakes were always some of the best in the business, and it is easily the most comfortable long-haul machine in the test.

—Dave Searle

Okay, so it's got a steel frame and an old school wonky sort of looks, but this thing works. Even after all this time, it works. It's one of those rare things in science where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. To me, it just feels "right," and that feeling lets me flow faster through a challenging series of corners than I would have expected. I last owned one of these bikes in 2002. There have been many different bikes under me in the intervening years, but few have been as easy to ride this fast, as comfortable when droning on the freeway, or as all-around good at stopping and turning. It's a damn fine middleweight motorcycle that just happens to be the buy of the century—even if it looks like it beamed in from the last one.

—Steve Natt

2006 Yamaha YZF600R

CycleStats™

SPECIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE DATA

ENGINE

Type:liquid-cooled, inline four
 Valvetrain:DOHC, 4 valves per cyl.
 shim-under-bucket valve adjustment
 Size:599cc
 Bore/stroke:62mm x 49.6mm
 Comp. ratio:12:1
 Carburetion:Keihin CV Downdraft
 36mm x 4 with ram-air induction
 Exhaust:4-2-1

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission:6-speed
 Final drive:#525 O-ring chain
 RPM @ 65* mph/redline: 5343/13,900
 *actual, not indicated

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase:55.7"
 Rake/trail25.0°/3.82"
 Ground clearance:5.12"
 Seat height:31.8"
 GVWR:868 lbs.
 Wet weight:490 lbs.
 Carrying capacity:378 lbs.

SUSPENSION

Front:41mm telescopic fork
 adj. preload, comp. and reb. damping
 5.1" travel
 Rear:single shock w/ reservoir
 adj. preload, comp. and reb. damping
 4.7" travel

BRAKES

Front:dual 298mm discs
 Sumitomo four-piston calipers
 Rear:single 245mm disc
 single-piston caliper

TIRES & WHEELS

Front:120/60-ZR17 Bridgestone
 Battlax BT57 3.50" x 17" wheel
 Rear:160/60-ZR17 Bridgestone
 Battlax BT57 on 5.00" x 17" wheel

ELECTRICS

Battery:12V, 8AH
 Ignition:digital TCI
 Headlight:dual 60/55W

FUEL

Tank capacity:4.5 gal.
 Fuel octane recommended: 86[R+M/2]
 High/low/avg. mpg:44.1/41.9/43.3



PERFORMANCE

Measured top speed147.3 mph
 0-1/4 mile12.01 sec.
 @ 115.17 mph
 0-60 mph4.12 sec.
 0-100 mph9.43 sec.
 60-0 mph119.4'
 Power to Weight Ratio1:5.98
 Speed @ 65 mph (indicated)59.6

M/C RATING SYSTEM

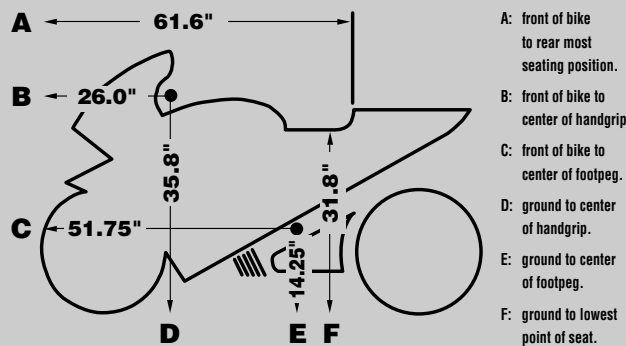
EXCELLENT
 VERY GOOD
 GOOD
 FAIR
 POOR

Middleweight Sportbike

Engine
 Transmission
 Suspension
 Brakes
 Handling
 Styling
 Riding Impression
 Instruments/Controls
 Attention to Detail
 Value

OVERALL RATING

ERGONOMICS TEMPLATE



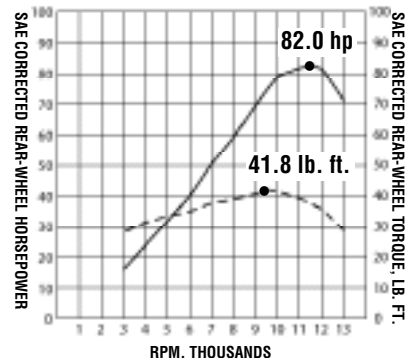
MISCELLANEOUS

Instruments: ..analog tachometer and
 speedometer, odometer,
 tripmeter, coolant temp.
 Indicators:hi-beam, t/s, neutral,
 low fuel, low oil pressure
 MSRP:\$7099
 Routine service interval:4000 mi.
 Valve adj. interval:26,600 mi.
 Warranty:12 mo., unlimited miles.
 Colors:Blue/White, Raven

DYNAMOMETER DATA

Low end
 Mid-range
 Top end

The YZF600R shows its age with the lowest power and redline in the group. Vibration migrates from the seat to the controls at 5000-8000 rpm and the engine sounds "loose." Also we noted backfiring when shutting off from high rpm.



TEST NOTES

PICKS

- Most comfortable seat and highest handlebars
- Excellent and confidence-inspiring high speed handling
- A plush ride from its fully adjustable suspension

PANS

- Notchy transmission matched to a clutch with poor feel
- Looks the most dated compared to its competition
- Fifty pounds heavier, it also has the weakest motor here

STANDARD MAINTENANCE

Item	Time	Parts	Labor
Oil & Filter	1.0	\$14.75/\$20	\$60.00
Air Filter	0.5	\$43.00	\$30.00
Valve Adjust	3.6	\$100.79	\$216.40
Battery Access	0.2	MF	\$12.00
Final Drive	0.2		\$12.00
R/R Rear Whl.	1.0		\$60.00
Change Plugs	0.5	\$18	\$30.00
Adjust carbs	2.0		\$120.00
Totals	9.0	\$196.54	\$540.00

Model Comparison

If the object of a second-tier 600cc sportbike is to offer a 'kinder, gentler' ride, the F4i is a curious proposition. With the stiffest suspension, least comfortable ergos and the balky fuel-injection typical of first-year EFI efforts, it is not much softer than the latest CBR600RR and only \$500 cheaper, pricing it virtually out of contention in this group.



← Left: The most recent edition of these older 600s, the F4i looks the freshest and raciest. The only fuel-injected machine in the comparison, it suffers from a snatchy throttle action and weak lower range but really flies if the revs are kept high. Sadly, only the left headlight is lit on low beam—less effective.

Right: The Honda's instrument package → was our favorite, the most complete and easiest to read—a big digital speedo and clear analog tach, plus a fuel gauge, although it works only on the 'reserve.'



Right: The F4i's bodywork carries the flashiest paint and the firmest suspension for the most agile steering feel in the group. The Nissin front calipers deliver tremendous feel for delicious control in the most difficult conditions. Dunlop Sportmax D207 tires are fitted, which supply plenty of traction.



← Left: Although the 2001 F4i had a very abbreviated seat, which we judged a 'plank,' the '06 model has an earlier style with much better coverage. However, in this group, it is still the least comfortable. The exhaust system is chromed, the alloy frame's finish sparkles in the sun and the overall level of detailing is top notch.



TESTERS' LOG

On the positive side, the F4i is the best handling bike of the three, and it felt the lightest as well. The front brakes were also the best. The rear brakes were average in effectiveness for a sportbike. While definitely the sexiest and most sportbike-looking of the three, the Honda was lacking in a very key area: power. If you find yourself running anything less than 7000 rpm you're going to putt rather than rocket through turns. I sometimes found myself downshifting twice in the middle of a hill just to make it up...and I only weigh 150 lbs. At high rpm the bike vibrates quite a bit, to the extent that objects in the rear view mirror are not only closer than they appear, they're blurrier. On the freeway, the bike feels light, almost unstably so, but then again, I'm used to the solid feeling of my VFR.

—Steven Marks

Honda's F4i was a dazzling machine when first introduced, and I remember it fondly as the machine that I first learned to drag a knee on. It still favors track days more than the other bikes in this comparison, with firm responsive suspension that makes smooth roads a particular joy. However, on rougher pavement, my groin quickly taught me to lift myself on the pegs when encountering bumps. The motor has great top-end performance, but clearly suffers from a lean midrange. The transmission is also

fine, but lacks just a little of the ZZR's polished action. However, the front brakes are superb, with a wonderfully tactile feel for the friction. It also has the best instrumentation, with a digital speedo, large analog tach and a reserve fuel gauge. But, only one headlight lights on low beam. My only concern is that Honda has priced the bike so high compared to its competition. Even when it's better, it's not that much better.

—Dave Searle

I have a bit of a history with this machine—I rode it for three days at Freddie Spencer's wonderful school in Las Vegas. My least pleasant memory was that it forced me to spend far too much time teaching myself throttle workarounds. The new CBR600RR, with its dual stage EFI is better in this area. Which brings me to the real deal killer here, price. At only \$500 under the super-trick RR model, this relatively dated looking F4i doesn't really make financial sense. I think I'd either pony up the five Benjamins for the new bike, or go buy a nice, clean, "previously enjoyed" F4i for under \$6000, order up a cushier seat, dial in a Power Commander and call it a day, using the money I saved for track day expenses. Of course, I'd be relying on Honda's stellar reliability record to keep me from going upside down on the thing money-wise, but that's not all that big a risk, is it?

—Steve Natt

2006 Honda CBR600F4i

CycleStats™

SPECIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE DATA

ENGINE

Type:liquid-cooled,
in-line 4-cylinder
Valvetrain:DOHC, 4 valves per cyl.,
shim-under-bucket valve adjustment
Size:599cc
Bore/stroke:67mm x 42.5mm
Comp. ratio:**12.0:1**
Carburetion:38mm throttle
bodies x 4 with ram-air induction
Exhaust:.....4-2-1

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission:**6-speed**
Final drive:#525 chain,
RPM @ 65* mph/redline:5513/14,500
*actual, not indicated

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase:54.5"
Rake/trail24.0°/3.78"
Ground clearance:5.25"
Seat height:31.5"
GVWR:820 lbs.
Wet weight:**440 lbs.**
Carrying capacity:380 lbs.

SUSPENSION

Front:43mm cartridge fork,
adj. preload, comp. and reb. damping,
4.7" travel
Rear:single shock,
adj. preload, comp. and reb. damping,
4.7" travel

BRAKES

Front:dual 296mm discs,
four-piston, double-action calipers
Rear:220mm disc,
single-piston caliper

TIRES & WHEELS

Front:**120/70-ZR17** Dunlop
D207 Sportmax on **3.5" x 17"** wheel
Rear:.....**180/55-ZR17** Dunlop
D207 Sportmax on **5.5" x 17"** wheel

ELECTRICS

Battery:12V, 8AH
Ignition:digital with TPS input
Headlight:dual 55W H7

FUEL

Tank capacity:4.8 gal.
Fuel octane recommended:91
High/low/avg. mpg:38.2/35.3/**36.7**



PERFORMANCE

Measured top speed 155.9 mph
0-1/4 mile11.26 sec.
@ 121.56 mph
0-60 mph3.52 sec.
0-100 mph7.94 sec.
60-0 mph123.53'
Power to Weight Ratio1:4.88
Speed @ 65 mph (indicated) ...61.3

M/C RATING SYSTEM

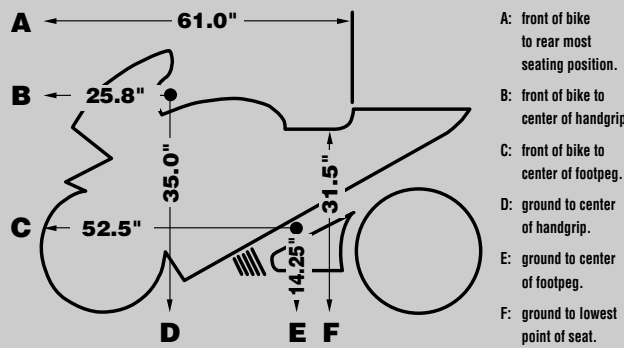
EXCELLENT
VERY GOOD
GOOD
FAIR
POOR

Middleweight Sportbike

Engine ●●●●○
Transmission ●●●●○
Suspension ●●●●○
Brakes ●●●●●
Handling ●●●●○
Styling ●●●●○
Riding Impression ●●●●○
Instruments/Controls ●●●●●
Attention to Detail ●●●●●
Value ●●●○○

OVERALL RATING ●●●●○

ERGONOMICS TEMPLATE



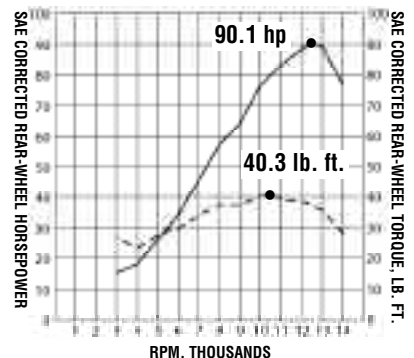
MISCELLANEOUS

Instruments:analog tach,digital
speedo, odometer, dual tripmeters,
clock, fuel gauge, coolant temp.
Indicators: .. hi-beam, t/s, neutral, low
fuel, high coolant/oil pressure warning,
PGM-FI Malfunction
MSRP:**\$8499**
Routine service interval:.....8000 mi.
Valve adj. interval:.....16,000 mi.
Warranty:12 mo., unlimited miles
Colors: Pearl Yellow/Metallic Titanium,
Candy Blue/Black

DYNAMOMETER DATA

Low end ●●●●○
Mid-range ●●●●○
Top end ●●●●○

The F4i's fuel injection is typical of so many early systems, with abrupt on/off response, and a hesitant lower-rpm range. Spun hard, it will run very swiftly, but loses out to the ZZR600 by nearly 10 hp at 6000 rpm. However, used as a track-day bike, you'll hardly notice.



TEST NOTES

PICKS

- The most competent track-day bike in the comparison
- The most up-to-date appearance and sharpest graphics
- Great brake feel

PANS

- A stiff ride that hammers the pilot on rougher roads
- Low- and midrange hesitation and EFI abruptness
- A price out of line with its competitors

STANDARD MAINTENANCE

Item	Time	Parts	Labor
Oil & Filter	1.0	\$14.98/\$20	\$60.00
Air Filter	0.5	\$43.99	\$30.00
Valve Adjust	3.0	\$114.25	\$180.00
Battery Access	0.2	MF	\$12.00
Final Drive	0.2		\$12.00
R/R Rear Whl.	1.0		\$60.00
Change Plugs	0.5	\$65.48	\$30.00
Adjust FI	1.0		\$60.00
Totals	7.4	\$258.70	\$444.00