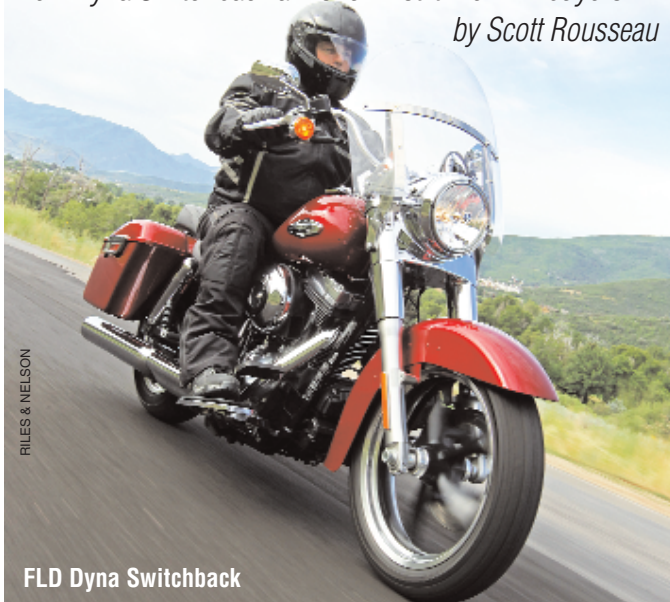


2012 Harley-Davidsons

New Dyna Switchback aims for first-time H-D buyers

by Scott Rousseau



FLD Dyna Switchback

DESPITE THE ECONOMIC challenges facing the US, Harley-Davidson continues to outperform its competition. Harley is the market leader in the heavyweight motorcycle category, number one with its core audience, number one with women and number one with young adults (18-34), African-Americans and Hispanics. According to its 2011 second quarter earnings report, Harley's income rose 36.8% compared with a year ago due to a combination of increased sales and an improved operating margin, the latter proof positive that the operational and payroll cuts implemented over the past two years have led to a more efficient business model. As a result, the Motor Company is now on pace to deliver between 228,000 and 235,000 Harley-Davidson motorcycles to dealers and distributors worldwide in 2011, up from previous guidance figures of between 215,000 and 228,000.

But stealing market share from other manufacturers isn't enough to satisfy Harley-Davidson. The company continues to set its sights on growing the market by creating first-time buyers, and do-it-all models such as the new FLD Dyna Switchback might help it accomplish that mission.

Dyna Switchback & Dyna

To introduce us to the Switchback and the rest of the 2012 lineup, Harley-Davidson invited us to Park City, Utah, home of the 2002 Winter Olympics. Unfortunately, our ride route was an all-too-brief 130 miles, barely enough to give us a small taste of the new Switchback and revised VRSC Night Rod Special.

Harley-Davidson says that the Switchback is the lightest custom touring motorcycle in its displacement category, with a claimed ready-to-ride weight of 718 lbs., some 94 lbs. lighter than a Road King, and it's powered by the same fuel-injected Twin Cam 103 (1690cc), 45° V-twin engine. Rated at 100 lb.-ft. of torque @ 3500 rpm, the 103 offers a lot of get-up-and-go in the lighter Dyna chassis. The engine is mated to a 6-speed Cruise Drive transmission, but unlike the one used in the FL and Softail models, it doesn't have an overdrive sixth gear. That's no problem, as our Switchback galloped along at 2350 rpm at an indicated 65 mph, with plenty of power and even more of that primeval, soul-stirring V-twin rumble in reserve.

The engine is mounted in Harley's well-sorted Dyna chassis, but the Switchback's frame geometry has been altered, and its suspension is the latest and greatest from Harley-Davidson. The Switchback's wheelbase measures 62.8", the shortest in the Dyna family, with a 29.9° rake (28.9° fork angle) that's only slightly more relaxed than the Super Glide Custom, Street Bob and Fat Bob models, but its 5.84" trail is even greater than the Dyna Wide Glide's, enhancing straight-line stability.

Yet we were pleased with how lightly the Switchback steers at all speeds. Initial turn-in is a breeze, yet the bike remains very composed in the turns, leading us to believe that Harley-Davidson's weight reduction efforts have paid off handsomely. The Switchback is no lightweight, but it is a light-feeling heavyweight. We also liked the road feel of its 41.3mm Showa cartridge fork and new twin preload-adjustable, emulsion-type shocks, which offered a composed ride over the ripples we encountered.

Designed to be touring-capable right off the showroom floor, the Switchback gets compact color-matched hard saddlebags and a police-style windshield downsized to match the proportions of the bike. In true convertible fashion, the bags and the screen can be removed in less than a minute, giving the Switchback a completely different, bare-bones custom look.

The "shorty" saddlebags have a combined luggage capacity of 30 lbs., offering roughly 25% less volume and 25% less load capacity than the classic FL bags. Their locks are common to the ignition key, and their external latches don't reduce usable bag volume. Latching and sealing of bags is also different, using what Harley calls a "double-hook system," the inboard portion of the lid is tilted toward the rear fender and hooks over the saddlebag rim before it's closed and secured with a cam-lock similar to the FL.

The switchback's chrome-plated, cast-aluminum headlight nacelle is another new (and weight-saving) item. It splits horizontally rather than vertically, unlike the Road King's nacelle, and H-D's stylists have cleverly hidden the seam. However, the design changes the way the front end is built on the assembly line, requiring the Switchback's triple clamps, handlebar risers and handlebars to be preassembled before mounting to the frame. The fork legs are then slipped through the nacelle and bolted in place, and access holes in the nacelle were needed to allow the forks to be dropped in and out of the fork guards for servicing without disturbing the nacelle.

The Switchback's ergonomics are well-suited to piling on the miles. Its one-piece seat supports the rider just 26.1" above the ground, and its well-placed "mini-ape" handlebar and full-length floorboards enhance the layout. The Switchback also doesn't get (or need) a heel shifter, freeing up more room for the rider's left foot. We were also pleased to note that the Switchback offers a fair amount of cornering clearance before the floorboards begin to scrape. Our only negative impression is that the Switchback's windscreen creates noticeable helmet-buffeting above 70 mph. Riders looking for even more wind protection can opt for the taller and wider Road King screen, which can be bolted directly to the Switchback's windshield frame. We were told that H-D opted not to use the Road King screen on the Switchback for aesthetic reasons.

The Switchback rides on black, 5-spoke, cast aluminum wheels, 18" front and 17" rear, fitted with low-profile Dunlops designed specifically for the model. The optional ABS systems on our test bikes, which use the same tiny wheel bearing-mounted speed sensors as other Harleys, were unobtrusive, and the brakes' power and feel were on par with other Harleys we've sampled recently.

Overall, we're impressed with the new Switchback. Early indications are that it is already resonating with customers, and we look forward to doing a full model evaluation of the bike in the future.

As for the rest of the Dyna family, the excellent Twin Cam 103 is standard on three of the five Dyna models: the Switchback (\$15,999), the Fat Bob (\$15,349) and the Dyna Wide Glide (\$14,849), while the Super Glide Custom and Street Bob retain the smaller Twin Cam 96 to achieve the \$12,999 price point that Harley has established for them.

• The Security Package (\$1195) is now offered as an option on the Twin Cam 103-equipped Dynas, which also includes a security system and ABS. The bundled options reduce model variations for the dealers. The Dyna's ABS system is developed specifically for the model, with a single hydraulic control unit that handles both the front and rear ABS chores.

- The Dyna Wide Glide now gets Michelin tires.
- All Dyna models get a flash-to-pass headlight switch.

VRSC

The impressive, liquid-cooled, DOHC, 4-valve Revolution V-twin engine has now been around for a decade, during which time Harley has steadfastly refused to utilize it in anything more "revolutionary" than the V-Rod models, despite its potential. But the V-Rod does fit Harley's growth strategy nicely, as almost 60% of V-Rod customers are new to the Harley brand or new to the sport. And the V-Rod has succeeded internationally—nearly half of all V-Rods are sold in Europe.

The V-Rod family has been updated for 2012, most notably the Night Rod Special (\$15,299) and special-edition 10th Anniversary V-Rod (\$15,999), which receive a Showa male-slider cartridge fork and less-aggressive ergonomics designed to broaden their appeal. The new fork lowers unsprung weight and also allows Harley to tighten the rake angle. The handlebar has 3" more sweep, and the foot controls have been moved back about 1.25" to allow the bike to fit shorter riders. If that isn't enough, Harley will be releasing a new V-Rod mid-mount control kit at its winter dealer meeting. FYI, the kit won't work on the V-Rod Muscle because of its different exhaust system, which interferes with the right-side mounting point.

The 10th Anniversary V-Rod and Night Rod Special wear new-look, 10-spoke alloy wheels that shave nearly 10 lbs. of unsprung weight which should greatly improve suspension action. The Night Rod Special's wheels are also adorned with orange pinstriping for a racy look. Both models also get a new headlight mount with a slimmer style and a more tapered composite rear fender with a Frenched-in LED taillight designed to accentuate the V-Rod's steamroller 240mm rear tire. All three, including the V-Rod Muscle (\$14,999), will get special 10th Anniversary V-Rod emblems as part of their trim packages.

The 10th Anniversary V-Rod is adorned in Brilliant Silver Pearl paint that pays homage to the raw aluminum finish of the original V-Rod. While not placing a hard production number on the special 10th Anniversary model, Harley estimates that around 1500 units will be built.

FL, CVO & Trike

The FL family is largely unchanged after receiving sweeping updates over the past four years. The touring line includes the Electra Glide Ultra Limited (\$23,799), Road Glide Ultra (\$22,499), Ultra Classic Electra Glide (\$21,499), Road King Classic (\$19,599), Electra Glide Classic (\$19,499), Road Glide



10th Anniversary V-Rod

Custom (\$19,499), Street Glide (\$19,499) and the standard Road King (\$17,499).

• Responding to complaints (both ours and, we're sure, a lot of customers' as well—see Cruise-Off, page 16, June, 2011) the 2012 Road Glide Ultra receives the built-in fairing wind deflectors introduced on the CVO Road Glide Ultra last year.

• New chrome profile aluminum spoked wheels are also available as an option on all touring models. They feature a unique profile with a sealed drop center for tubeless tires and a molded valve stem. Harley claims that the wheels reduce rotational inertia by as much as 30%, which also sharpens handling.

Harley-Davidson's "alpha custom" CVOs return for 2012, with a new hot rod bagger model, the CVO Road Glide Custom (\$30,699), joining the CVO Ultra Classic (\$37,249), CVO Street Glide (\$32,699) and CVO Softail Convertible (\$29,699). The CVO Road Glide Custom replaces the discontinued, full-dress CVO Road Glide Ultra.

The three-wheeled Tri Glide Ultra (\$30,499) returns unchanged, but the Street Glide Trike has been discontinued.

Softail

The Softail family features five models for 2010: the Heritage Softail Classic (\$17,349), Softail Deluxe (\$17,149), Fat Boy (\$16,649) and the Blackline (\$15,499). The Rocker C and the Crossbones have been discontinued.

• Softails get a new heated O₂ sensor that is more carefully concealed on the exhaust pipe. The sensor is designed to improve running quality as the bike warms up; Harley says that it wasn't a necessity but that it offers a nice performance improvement.

• Tubeless chrome profile wheels are options on the Heritage Softail and the Softail Deluxe.

• Both Fatboy models now share the same seat and handlebar profile. The standard Fatboy had a buckhorn profile, while the Fat Boy Lo had a lower profile bar with less sweep, similar to a flat track bar. Harley marketing feedback indicated that the latter wasn't ergonomically satisfying for shorter riders. For 2012, both Fatboys feature a new handlebar that is effectively a hybrid of both, offering less rise than the old Fatboy's and more sweep than the old Fatboy Lo's. The standard Fatboy also gets the Fatboy Lo seat for more of a "sit-in" feel than previous models.

Sportster

The six-model Sportster line includes the XR1200X (\$11,799), XL1200X Forty-Eight (\$10,499), XL1200C Sportster 1200 Custom (\$10,299), XL1200N Nightster (\$9999), XL883L Super-Low (\$7999) and XL883N Iron 883 (\$7999).

• The Forty-Eight returns to the line-up with new more distinctive graphics.

• The XR1200X switches from Dunlop tires to new Michelins designed specifically for the X model. All Sportster models now ride on Michelins.

• Sportster models with Harley's Denim paint jobs will also receive Denim side covers to match. Sportsters with gloss paint jobs will retain gloss black sidecovers.

Final Thought

Harley-Davidson continues to set its own pace, and it will likely continue its market leadership in 2012. ■