

Model Comparison

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-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 homerun 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 & 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 4-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 by far the most tactile feel for stopping power.

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 pound weight differential is in real world riding. Comments like "predictable," "effortless" and "steady & stable" were pervasive. Interestingly, the Yamaha has one degree 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 4-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 set at too high an angle, making it difficult to "cover" the pedal while riding.

Overall Chassis Advantage: Yamaha