

Fit, Finish, Controls & 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 ft	36.7 mpg
Kawasaki ZZR600	\$7299	431 lbs	89.7	42.7 lb/ft	11.19 sec.	3.42 sec.	119.4 ft	36.1 mpg
Yamaha YZF600S	\$7099	490 lbs	82.0	41.8 lb/ft	12.01 sec.	4.12 sec.	118.9 ft	43.3 mpg