



by Dave Searle

SPORT-TOURERS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

THAT THREE MAJOR new sport-tourers have been introduced in a single year is something of a sensation for a small and heretofore moribund niche in the overall market. Only 3000 sport-tourers were sold in America in 2001, mainly models that had remained virtually unchanged for a decade or more.

We have given separate, full evaluations to the Yamaha FJR1300 in the July 2002 MCN and the ST1300 in the August 2002 issue, so we suggest you read those for more details. The BMW K1200GT is new, but as you'll see, it is not all-new, but based heavily on the K1200RS, which is now five years old (Sept. '97 MCN).

Although the ST had been promised first, it was very slow to actually reach customers, with deliveries commencing late in 2002, just prior to BMW's release of the K1200GT. Delays were said to have been based on problems in Europe where the bike was first released...then recalled. The changes: A new oil sump minus a projecting tab (intended to guard the drain plug) that could hit high road obstructions (speed bumps in England are notoriously steep and high), snapping a hole in the sump; additional heat shielding, venting and air-flow baffling to solve complaints of cooked legs; and retorqued engine hanger bolts to

address reports of less than perfect stability at speed.

The Yamaha is unchanged from our first test, but the 2004 model will be. It is to be sold like the first one, with dealers taking \$500 deposits from Feb. 1st through March 30th. If the dealer will only send Yamaha the deposits (sadly, some didn't), the customer will get a guarantee of priority delivery (beginning in July). The FJR has been hard to get, and only dealers smart enough to put down their own money on extra bikes have had them for sale. The 2004 model will offer larger 320mm front brake discs, a 4"-taller windshield and a glovebox in the fairing for just \$100 more. At last, ABS will also be offered, for \$1000 more.

We took the bikes on a side-by-side trip from our offices in Irvine, CA to Zion National Park in Utah via a variety of back roads with some inevitable droning freeway for good measure. Three riders and one passenger rotated turns on the various saddles, and the conditions, although unseasonably warm for January, included heavy gusting winds and blowing dirt, rain (the worst gully washer was thankfully avoided), and electric vest weather in the evenings. Of course, the bikes were ridden separately every chance we got, before and after the trip, so we feel confident we've uncovered their strengths and weaknesses.

Engine

Yamaha 1st, Honda 2nd, BMW 3rd

Powerwise, it was really no contest; the Yamaha makes 120.7 hp @ 7700 rpm, the ST 106.1 @ 7500 and the BMW 103.7 @ 8600. Top speeds reflect this power variation; the FJR fastest at 148.9, the ST at 143.6 and the GT at 142.5 (all fitted with luggage). But, overlay the dyno charts and you see that the Honda has a slight edge beneath 3000 rpm, and the smoothest power curve, with torque peaking at 6000, and dropping gradually in hp after 7500 until the rev limiter intervenes at 8700 (redline is 8500).

The Yamaha has a 7 hp advantage over the ST at 3700 and 4 hp at 5100, but has dips at 4400 and 5500 rpm where it is barely stronger. Above 5600 rpm it climbs away decisively, and it pulls the highest rpm, with a redline at 9000 and limiter at 9300, for even more power under the curve.

The BMW, with the smallest displacement, 1171cc, gives away a lot of torque, as much as 12 lb. ft. at 6000 rpm vs. the ST and FJR. But it is more highly tuned, taken intact from the K1200RS sportbike. It actually makes its peak power just before redline at 9000, with limiter interruption at 9100.

But what's surprising is how the two Japanese models feel so very responsive,

and the BMW revs so much more slowly. We'd attribute the difference to more crank or flywheel weight on the Beemer, probably explaining why it's so smooth, too.

The tractability award goes to the BMW, which can pull smoothly uphill in sixth gear at as little as 1500 rpm—remarkable. It never loses its silken cool at any rpm range, always glassy smooth.

The Honda is also very good, very smooth and refined. Its counterbalancer system removes almost all traces of vibration, and it would happily pull from as low as 2000 rpm.

The FJR, like the ST uses its engine as a stressed member, saving weight and stiffening the chassis to sharpen its handling. It's very good, but its counterbalancers do allow a vestige of vibration through to the bars at 4000 rpm. The level is low, however, and not fatiguing. Also, the engine has a distinct whine, and although it wasn't constant, there were occasions when the FJR's injection would "hunt" and growl at bit at rpm around 2500. The majority of the time, it would pull without protest from as little as 2000 rpm.

Sound levels on all three are very quiet, befitting a long-distance mount, but the ST was almost too quiet. Onlookers in pristine Zion Park actually expressed surprise not to be assaulted by "motorcycle" noise as all three prepared to leave.

Transmission

1st—Tie: Honda & Yamaha, BMW 3rd

While we had some criticism for the FJR's transmission on our first encounter, this one was better for some reason—very good. The Honda was arguably its equal in terms of shift quality and ease. But the BMW was sub-par in this group, good but not great. Like every big BMW in recent memory, it was also reluctant to go into first gear from a stop, requiring more than one stab of the foot to engage.

However, the Beemer has a six-speed and the others just five. But, for some reason we wished for another gear more on the Yamaha than the Honda, even though the FJR turns slightly fewer rpm at 65 mph than the ST (3700 vs. 3830). Perhaps its greater power made even that rpm seem higher than necessary. Whatever, our left feet kept grabbing for one more.

Also, you'd figure that a sixth gear would give the BMW a mileage advantage, but this was not the case and it actually produced the worst, just 38.0 mpg average, to the FJR's 39.9 and the Honda's 41.6 mpg. We suspect the FJR's deficit to the Honda came when we enjoyed its extra oomph to the full; during passing and acceleration.

Driveline lash was not an issue with any of the bikes, and they were all very good in this regard.

Suspension

Yamaha 1st, Honda 2nd, BMW 3rd

The FJR really shines in the suspension department. Its ride is very well controlled, but tactile and plush at the same time—the sort of feeling you expect from pricey aftermarket components. Also, its forks are fully adjustable, the only machine here with this feature. Although we did lots of fiddling with the preload and rebound adjustments on the rear of the others, the Yamaha was so good that with the simple addition of two clicks more rear rebound it unanimously won the nod for best suspension.

Easy adjustability for the weight of a passenger is important, and getting your rear



preload set correctly can make the difference between a bike that impresses or a bike that severely disappoints. Both the Honda and BMW use a knob situated above the left passenger peg. A graduated sleeve lets you to return to the solo and two-up settings you've chosen. In the Honda's favor, its knob is accessible while you ride, allowing you to play with the preload to achieve a balanced jounce front and rear. The BMW insists that you get off to make changes. The Yamaha uses a very simple lever arrangement to employ or disable (by coil binding) a short pillion spring above the primary spring. Movement of the lever is so quick and easy you wonder if it can really make a difference. However, in practice, the Yamaha was the unanimous first choice in terms of suspension quality for both solo and double use, and getting the others set just right proved to be much more difficult than we expected. Set incorrectly, they were harsh and the bike's ride quality disappointing, which left us even more impressed with the FJR's foolproof system. Even more surprising was that the FJR could be impressive to both solos and doubles in either of its

two settings, although we favored the pre-arranged ones.

The Honda's ride was very good, but tested side-by-side, was still noticeably short of what Yamaha had accomplished. It didn't have the degree of control over low-velocity bumps that the FJR did.

However, the BMW's Telelever forks and Paralever rear end, while they felt very plush to the rider at high speed, even better than the Honda, had harshness at lower speeds that drew complaints—even more loudly from passengers—as if the suspension's unsprung weight exceeded the abilities of the low speed damping.

Brakes

BMW 1st, Yamaha 2nd, Honda 3rd

Decisions in this category are difficult because the BMW and Honda have ABS systems and the Yamaha doesn't.

ABS can be a deciding purchase factor for many sport-touring riders, and we do regard it as a significant safety feature. That said, as far as controllability goes, the FJR shines in this department, with the kind of feel that allows you to react quickly and stop surely without incident on clean pavement whenever the need arises.

However, the BMW recorded a best stop of 117.5', besting the FJR by a foot, and can also keep you upright on slippery pavement when your own best judgement might result in a spill. Thankfully, it also carries the partially integrated version of the company's new EVO ABS, so that rear braking is separated, and the rear pedal's sensitivity has been reduced—a big improvement over the original fully integrated design.

The Honda also carries ABS and, with a best stop of 124.3', it slows at a rate just slightly less than 1 G., exactly as we've come to expect of everyone's ABS (note that all but one of the BMW's stops were in this same range). But, in less than maximum braking, the extremely progressive feel of the ST's brakes made them difficult to modulate in situations like wet hairpin turns, for instance. While the ultra-performance CBR954RR has the same feel, the need to stop from triple digit track speeds may somewhat justify such power, but we think the ST would be better served with a more linear reaction to rider effort. New pads, which are not terribly expensive, would no doubt be a fix.

Handling

Yamaha 1st, Honda 2nd, BMW 3rd

Honda claimed to have found the source of the slight instability we found in our first ST—engine-mounting bolts that weren't