HONDA TL250 TRIALS

A Heavyweight That Takes Some Getting Used To.

Cycle World Road Test

■ THE FIRST INDICATION that the public got concerning Honda's interest in the trials field was photos in the Japanese motorcycle magazine, *Auto-By,* of a new model called the "Bials." The Japanese like to give their machines unique names. Witness the Honda "Gold Wing" (elsewhere in this issue), the title "Van Van" domestically applied to the Suzuki RVs and even the dubbing of their newest Datsun 260-Z as the "Fairlady."

But although they find appeal in this generally harmless pastime, they are aware that such cuteness many times serves no purpose in the foreign marketplace. Therefore, when the first "Bials" arrived in the U.S., it had been renamed the TL125.

The bike was an instant success as far as trialers go. Its only existing competition came from Montesa's Cota 123, a machine that, although lighter and a more capable bogwheeler, was also more expensive by several hundred dollars. Trialers weren't the only ones purchasing TLs either. The bike was tractable, troublefree, and as reliable as tomorrow. It could be fitted with lights and made into a superb camper's play bike.

For serious trials work, it was obvious that some modifications would be needed. Overbore and long-stroke combinations proved to be the most rewarding. A general displacement of about 165cc, coupled to a long, straight exhuast pipe fitted with an aftermarket silencer/spark arrester, was common among the better-performing TLs. But the cry was out for a 250, which Honda had in the works even before the first 125s were released. Two-strokes were capturing most of the competition wins around the world in trials. The day of the four-stroke thumper was history as far as many were concerned. For others, the revival of the four-stroke trialer just needed some encouragement, since development work on the thumpers had literally come to a standstill after the first successful season of the snappier ring-dings. If anyone was going to be able to do the prodding, it would have to be a big company with a worldwide marketing network. Who else, then, but Honda?

Realizing that they had a good product in need of some fine touches for the American market, Honda flew two top American trials riders over to Japan for final R&D work. These riders were surprised at how complete a machine they found. The designers had done their homework well. So well, in fact, that soon after Honda was able to sign the legendary Sammy Miller to a works contract.

The production TL250 Honda feels somewhat awkward. It takes a great amount of readjustment to get the most out of the TL. First, there is the size of the bike. It is small when made to stand next to a European counterpart. This would normally make for excellent maneuvering, but it doesn't, because the Honda is wider than any other trialer we've encountered. Body English has less effect on the machine because you are limited in the amount you can use. And finally, it is very heavy. At 236 pounds with a half tank of gas, it weighs well over 20 pounds more than other trialers and 30 >


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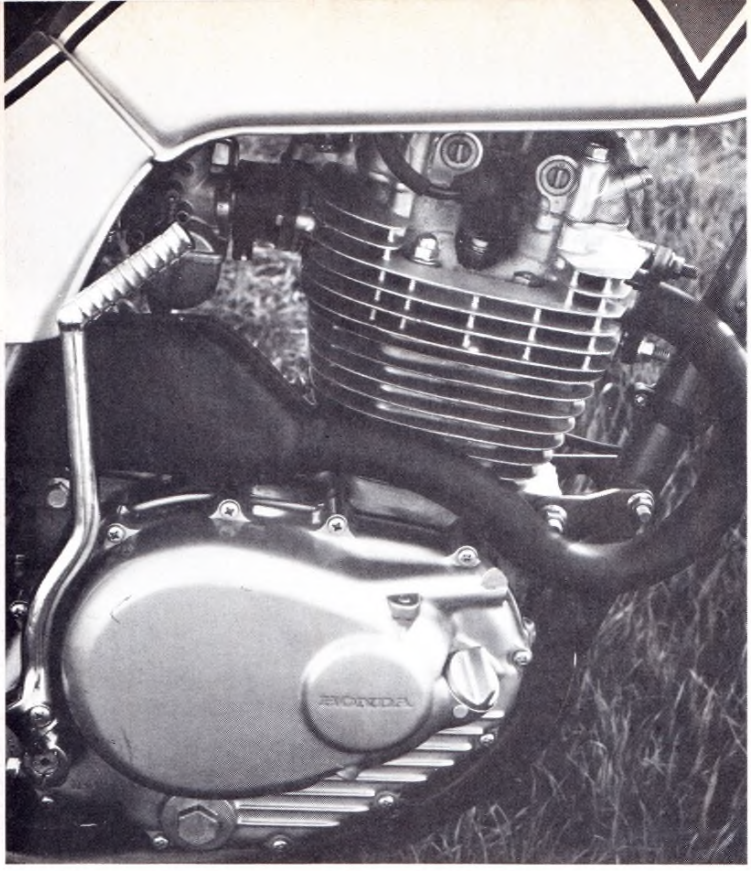
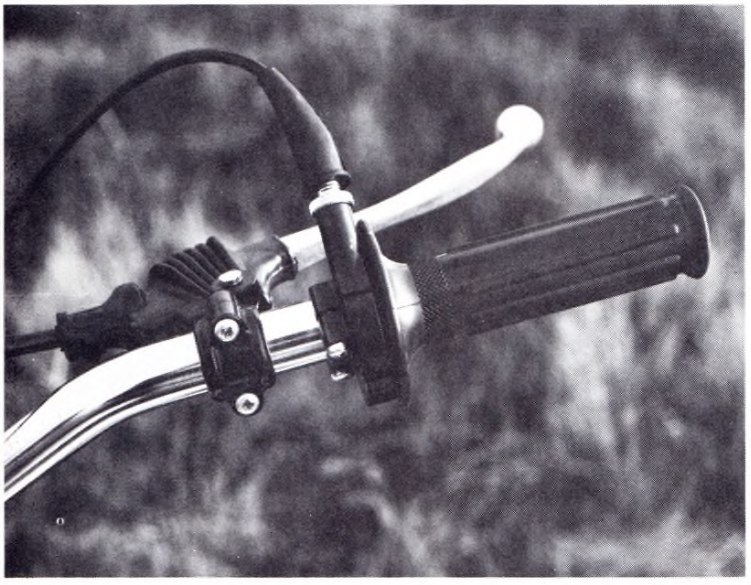
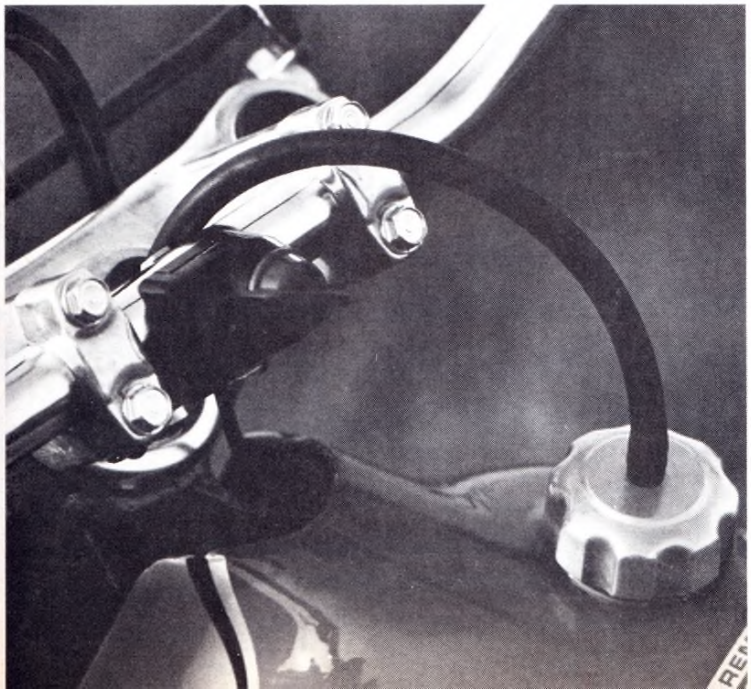






HONDA TL250

more than the latest Bultaco. Pre-production prototypes were weighing in at around 206 pounds; but much lightweight material got cut from the production bikes because of cost.

The power that the machine produces is unique. At first it feels as though it's geared too low. . .until you realize that the engine can be buzzed to nearly 10,000 rpm. Super-low chugging impulses are much more violent than on two-strokes, since combustion must produce enough power to spin the crank over twice until the next power impulse, while a two-stroke only has to spin once. However, theory indicates that traction occurs during the time between the firing impulses, which gives a four-stroke a definite advantage. Those riders with whom we've talked—who competed in the National Trials Series—mentioned that the works Honda riders had tremendous traction in the muddier trials. Unfortunately, even winter in Southern California produces little in the way of mucky gorp for us to test in. Besides, the Bridgestone Trials Universals that come on the Honda probably wouldn't have done it justice in the wet. They certainly didn't when it was dry.

The snap that one normally associates with a trials bike is lacking in the TL. This is not to say that it is sluggish. Quite the contrary. The engine churns smoothly and pulls with surprising power. It just won't "jump" like a two-stroke. You must ride much more ahead of yourself than you might be accustomed to doing. This is all part of the readjustment that we mentioned before. The rider must begin to loft the front wheel for an obstacle sooner than before. Yet he can brake later for tight turns, allowing him to maintain his momentum and speed—both of which are essential to balance—a little longer. The deceleration of a four-stroke engine is greater than that of a two-stroke. This is what delivers the braking advantage. Also, the rider is not forced to use his brakes as hard as he might otherwise have had to when descending steep downhills where traction is questionable. Just plunk the TL into low and ride down while feathering the binders.

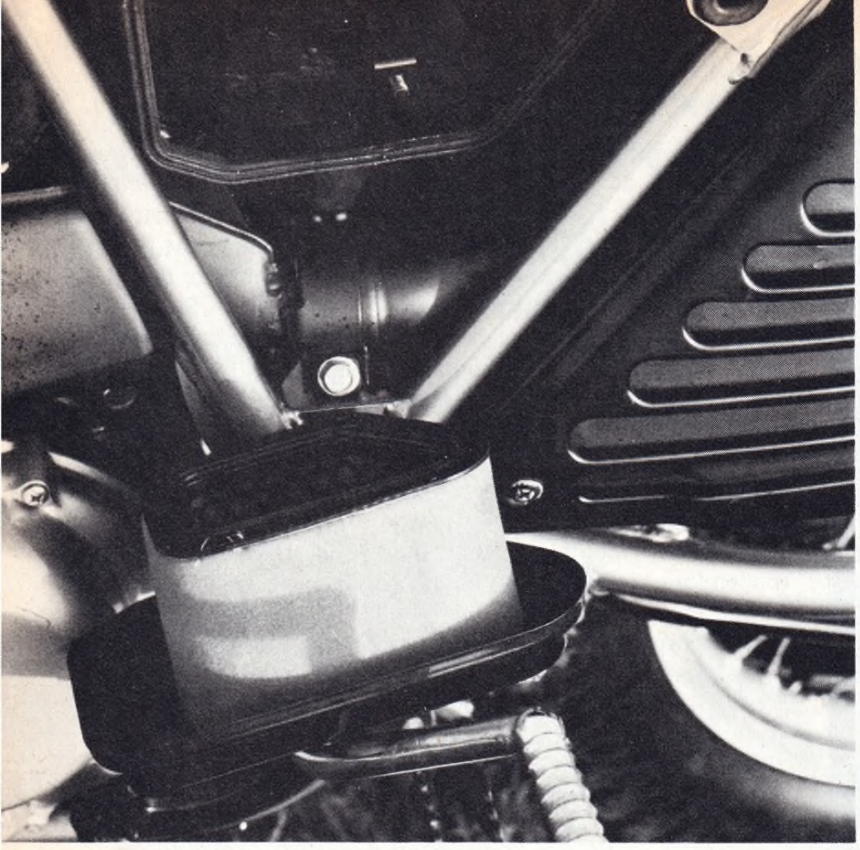
The steering geometry of the Honda is *the* best. Each of the other trials bikes CYCLE WORLD has tested has exhibited a unique trait or two. Some are very quick, others too slow. Some steer very well in turns, others push the front end. The Honda is the most stable and neutral steering trialer we've ever swung a leg over. Careful examination revealed that there is nothing special about the lower fork legs with the forward-mounted axle that decreases the trail to 3.4 in. They are CR125 lower legs. Both front and rear hubs also look like CR125 items. This is indicated not just by their appearance, but their performance, as well. It's excellent.

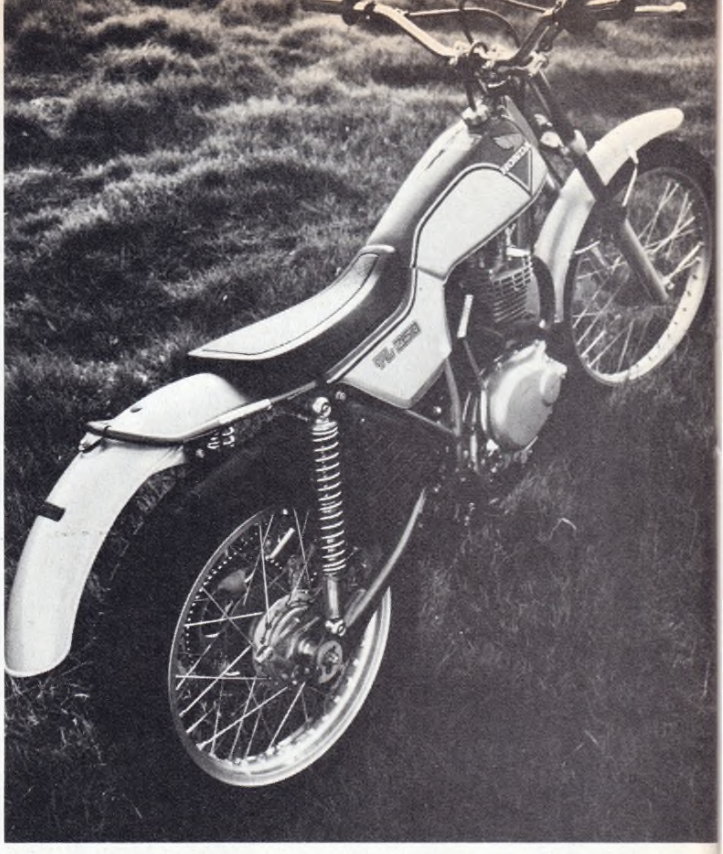
The 250's frame is of regular mild steel with average-looking welds holding things together. It is a single down-tube—necessary because of the engine's offset exhaust port—that splits into a twin cradle at the cylinder base. The cradle sweeps up and forward to meet the single backbone at the tank/seat junction. The engine is not particularly narrow, so Honda has included a bash plate for additional protection.

Footpegs are very similar to the CR type and are both folding and spring-loaded. A chain tensioner is provided and well-positioned for protection. The kickstand mounts to the swinging arm. It is an atrocity. Not only does it hang and snag on just about anything in its way, but the tab on which it pivots has a sharp corner that could injure the rider's heel when jammed against it by a rock.

Suspension both fore and aft is good. The forks are well-behaved and the rear shocks' dampening and spring rate >

Photography: Fernando Belair, Virginia DeMoss, Walt Fulton, Randy Papke





are right on. A nice feature on the shocks is the nylon strips glued to the shock bodies to prevent wear by the action of the springs. Shocks mount to the frame with flush Phillips-head screws, eliminating the possible danger of a rider smacking his leg into protruding bolts as he dabs in a section.

Combination tank/seat moldings are popular on trialers. The Honda is no different. A silver and red scheme carries from the aluminum fuel tank to the side panels where the logo "TL250" is emblazoned. The seat is traditionally skimpy, although contoured and actually acceptable for a short trail ride.

Transmission operation is stiff. Even after continued use, it still hasn't loosened up. The TL125s had this problem, but it could be remedied by removing the external shift linkage and placing the shift lever right on the shift shaft. The 250 has no such linkage to deal with. It comes with a shifter positioned in the normal place. We suggest that it be mounted vertically for protection against undesired gear changes. Besides, shifting fast is rarely, if ever, necessary in a trials.

A Honda wouldn't be a Honda if it didn't have an array of little cable routers and zippy-doos to keep everything nice and tidy. And all competition Hondas are supplied with D.I.D. alloy rims. The standard Off-Run-Off kill switch is located on the handlebars between the mounting clamps on the upper steering crown. More machines should have their kill buttons mounted in such an out-of-the-way manner.

Quiet is almost an understatement when discussing the amount of noise the TL makes. Fitted with both a silencer and a separate spark arrester, the machine utters little puff-puff sounds as it trundles along. Even when you have to run the engine hard, the noise it makes wouldn't wake little sister up from her nap.

Carburetion is supplied by a 24mm Keihin. It was brisk and accurate at all times, providing easy starts and smooth idle. Even though the engine would respond to quick throttle openings, it would shut off and stall if the throttle was whipped open from idle. This is a characteristic of four-stroke engines that the TL certainly adheres to. Even some two-stroke bogwheelers exhibit a delayed response to this same exercise. You should never, though, have to "instant on" the throttle in trials. A fast roll-on is occasionally necessary, but never a cable-stretching blitz.

While riding sections on the Honda, we noticed that blipping the throttle is truly a bad practice when applied to this bike. It is easy to see why it is so popular though. Many times, a rider will find himself with anywhere from 10 to 40 feet of free space between one major obstacle in a section and the next one. Since he is psyched up for the section, his concentration strong and his adrenaline flowing, his right hand twitches, setting the bike up in an anticipatory attack. When you blip the throttle on the Honda, it surges forward and then literally stops, due to its compression braking. The rider rocks atop the machine and is many times thrown off balance by the drastic change in speed. Again, the readjustment we talked about comes into play. The TL rider must force himself not to blip the throttle, but rather to hold it smoothly at a comfortable pace when between major obstacles. Once mastered, it starts making the TL much more fun to ride.

Overall, then, our impressions of the Honda TL250 go like this. It is dreadfully heavy. It will take more pruning and trimming—to get it down to a competitive weight—than the average backyard mechanic will be willing to perform. But the weight will be a factor only in some sections. Its engine is as strong and more tractable than any 250cc two-stroke trialer's, but it lacks "snap," although only off idle. It steers impeccably and has fine suspension. It is reliable, shouldn't foul plugs, is comfortable, but needs better tires.

It is not the equal of European machinery, particularly now that both Montesa and Bultaco will have machines on the market with displacements above 300cc. But you can always go larger with the bore and stroke, like they did with the smaller TLs (at additional cost, of course). Some staffers said they wouldn't mind owning one, just to see what could be done to it with a little time and patience. One staffer said he wouldn't want one at all. It all boils down to whether or not you can adjust. Hopefully, for Honda, enough people will be able to.

HONDA TL250 TRIALS

SPECIFICATIONS

List price	N.A.
Suspension, front	telescopic fork
Suspension, rear	swinging arm
Tire, front	2.75-21
Tire, rear	4.00-18
Engine, type	four-stroke Single
Bore x stroke, in., mm	2.91 x 2.28, 740. x 57.8
Piston displacement, cu. in., cc	15.1, 248
Compression ratio	9.1:1
Piston speed @ rpm ft./min.	3724
Carburetion	24mm Keihin
Ignition	magneto
Oil system	wet sump
Oil capacity, pt.	3.8
Fuel capacity, U.S. gal.	1.0
Recommended fuel	low lead or regular, minimum octane 86
Starting system	kick, folding crank
Air filtration	oil-wetted foam

POWER TRANSMISSION

Clutch	multi-plate, wet
Primary drive	helical gear
Final drive	520 single-row chain
Gear ratios, overall: 1	
5th	9.9
4th	13.8
3rd	21.1
2nd	30.5
1st	39.8

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, in.	52.2
Seat height, in.	30.0
Seat width, in.	8.0
Handlebar width, in.	32
Footpeg height, in.	14.2
Ground clearance, in.	10.2
Front fork rake angle, degrees	26.5
Trail, in.	3.4
Curb weight (w/half-tank fuel), lb.	236
Weight bias, front/rear, percent	44.9/55.1