

1969 "Sandcast" Honda CB750

Text & Photos by Paul Garson Old Bike Journal, October 1994

While many "authorities" argue that the title of "World's First Superbike" is owned by the Norton 750 Commando, Brough Superior or Vincent Shadow, perhaps the larger masses bestow those laurels upon Soichiro Honda's milestone motorcycle - the Honda CB750.

Those first CB750s, 1969 models, debuted at the October 1968 Tokyo Motorcycle Show. The year 1994 marks the 25th anniversary of the CB750, and it is those early "sand cast" versions that now hold considerable classic and collectible status worldwide.

Honda started the ball rolling way back in the mid-1950s when, using considerable insight and finances, it entered the motorcycle marketplace. Banking on selling bikes to people who would otherwise never look twice at a two-wheeler, they portrayed an image of youthful independence and romantic adventure.

Honda, as did the other Japanese manufacturers (Kawasaki, Yamaha and Suzuki), also zeroed in on a reputation of dependability and userfriendliness. By incorporating racing features into street machines, they brought a new dynamism as well as a new image to motorcycling that would have far-reaching effects.

As a result, Japanese bikes have attained a "history". Though, not quite the cult-like following of Harley-Davidson, or the exotic intoxication of Ducati. Without a doubt, Honda has earned a spot in history with their 1969 CB750.

Honda first gained international attention by blasting into 1959 with wins in some of the most prestigious World Championship roadraces. The one big difference between Honda and its competitors was while the others focused on two-stroke power plants, Honda pressed forward with four-stroke design - way forward.

Honda's racing machines, though of smaller displacement than the 1969 CB750, passed on many design features developed from a decade of race-winning machines including the four-stroke, multicylinder engine mounted transversely in the frame. While the racing machines incorporated double overhead cams, the new 750 was a single-overhead-cam system, chosen because the double-overhead-cam set-up would take up too much space.

The use of four - instead of the popular twin-cylinder configuration promoted by the great English machines - enabled Honda to utilize cylinders of smaller mass (185cc per cylinder). This in turn provided short piston strokes, higher crank shaft RPM as well as smaller masses of pistons, connecting rods and valve train parts. All of that translated into new levels of durability and reliability.

In addition, Honda refined previously rejected designs such as four valves per cylinder (two inlet, two exhaust). A design popularized in World War I aircraft and later by Moto Guzzi in 1924 for their 500cc racer that won the first European championships (the British made Rudge also later adopted the four-valve design). In any case, Honda really got it right - and right into street machines.

One of the most "right" motorcycles from Honda, or anyone else for that matter, was the CB750. Featuring a single-overhead-cam design, the four-cylinder engine pumped out a healthy 67 hp (at 8,500 RPM) combined with a "smoothness" and elasticity of drive that are quite "unusual *as heralded by reviewers on its debut. Besides having gobs of power and the ease of an electric starter, it was most civilized in both smoothness and decibel levels - both mechanically and sound-wise. Basically, it was well-mannered in all respects.*

Despite some naysayers concerned about its weight and handling, customers - fully enamored with its sophistication styling and affordability - ran to their Honda dealers when the CB750 bombshell lit up the magazine covers. Featured prominently was the hydraulically-controlled 300mm front disc brake, another race-bred carry-over that wowed a public that was fast considering safety and improved braking a major concern. While on one hand the suspension was described by some as "excellent", others called it "harsh", and described the double cradle, tubular frame as "flex-prone".

The CB was also considered "complex" by the standards of the day because of its four 28mm monobloc carbs and ignition that fired twin sets of points. However, all criticisms paled in the face of its all-around performance and attributes - especially after Dick Mann won the 1970 Daytona 200 aboard a CB750. The engine, displacing 736.4cc, was inclined forward 15 degrees. Internally, the bore and stroke was 61x63. Compression was 9:1, good enough to carry the somewhat heavy 485lb (dry) machine upwards of 125 mph.

One motorcycle magazine of late 1968 reported, "The U.S. is already tense with anticipation for the new machine". Prior to the arrival of the new CB750 to showroom floors, Honda dealers complained that "advanced news of the new 750 sent customers rushing to their shops, eager to buy a machine that dealers would not possess for at least several months". It was one of those rare expectation levels that was fully realized, and further confirmed today with the marking of the 25th anniversary of the CB750.

With the CB750, Honda was the first motorcycle manufacturer to market a high-speed, large-displacement, reliable, finely assembled and mass produced four-cylinder machine.

The SOHC CB750 stayed in production for about 10 years, and many are still rolling smoothly along just as they did more than a quarter century ago.