

By Bob Greene ■ Honda's just had a baby... baby Four that is! Having already dwarfed all previous big motor records with their 750 Four, they were persuaded to follow it with a two-thirds-scale version that threatens to do it to the competition all over again. We've just wrung it out and, believe us, Honda's looking good in the 500cc class.

Why, when they already had a sizzling DOHC 450 twin, did Honda come out with this smaller version of the big Four? Apparently the four-cylinder concept has set enthusiasts' imaginations afire; and the 750, being impractical for people of smaller stature because of its weight and saddle height, left the door open for a diminutive counterpart that could be handled more easily by the little people, not to mention girls.

Where the 750 Four set an all-time class record at 522 pounds wet, the 500 scales out 72 pounds less at 450, a very

A Honda Four everybody — sensational!

the 500

noticeable difference. It is interesting to note, however, that in the shrinking process the machine became relatively heavier in respect to its displacement-to-weight ratio. While the 750 was packing 11.6 pounds per cubic inch, the new 500 is burdened with 15 pounds per inch, a 3.4-pounds-per-cubic-inch disadvantage over its predecessor. But it shows up only in performance; the 500 is definitely less of a handful and, naturally, is smoother.

For the 500 Four is not a bomb, even in its class; it is an exceptionally sophisticated, irresistibly attractive mount that is more sweet than hot. Top speed is right at 100 miles per hour. There are four-stroke and two-stroke 500 twins that can beat it in speed, acceleration and handling, but none that can touch its magnetic allure. Performance is, however, in the top bracket of 500cc machines and must therefore be termed

brisk; acceleration and top end are better than most.

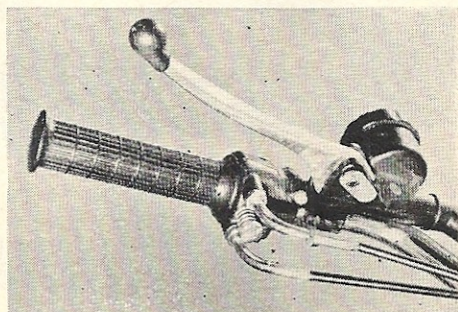
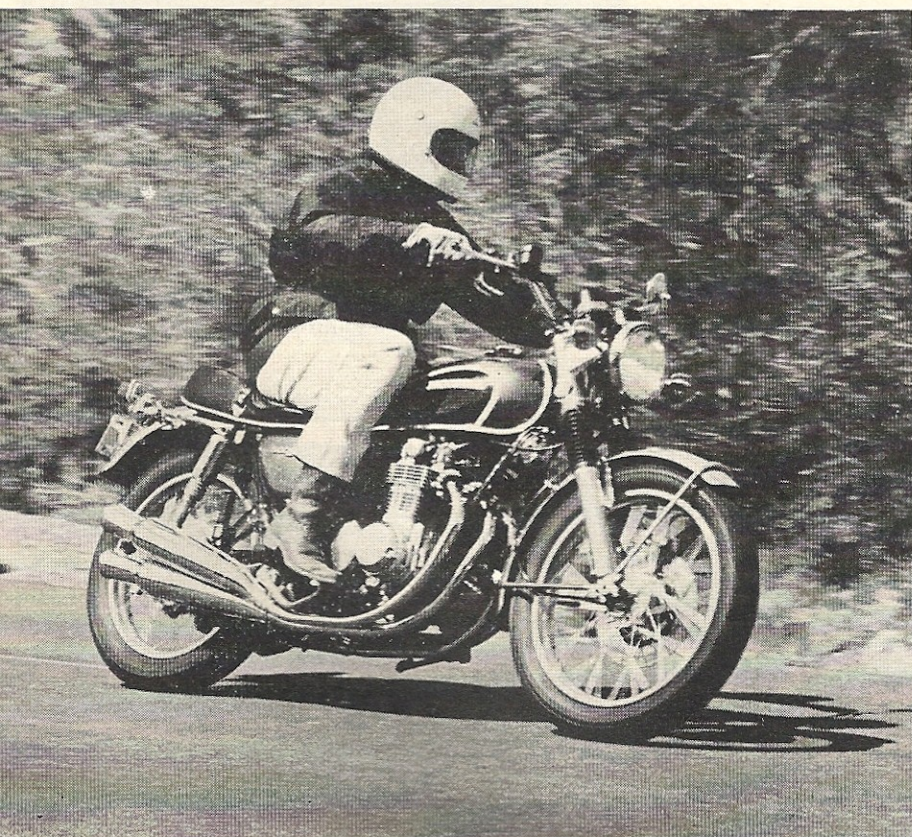
Along with three other 500s, the Honda Four was subjected to 240 miles in one day. Due in part to the novelty — it was the only all-new model of the lot — the Honda was always at a premium in rider preference. But it wasn't all novelty; the Honda alone had an electric starter, and its engine smoothness was unapproached. The soft purr of the Four, the unprecedented array of instruments and control panel lights, the lack of vibration, all contributed to

a feeling of rider importance that was further heightened by the admirers who always seemed to be waiting at each stop. Strangely enough, the most interested observers were current Honda 750 owners. Having sat on the 500, they were visibly pleased by the improved and softer padding in the saddle, and the way they could at last place both feet flat on the ground. Some even picked up on the subtle change from the 750's stamped-steel swing arm to the 500's tubular member—and the wet-sump lubrication system whereby engine oil is now contained in the crankcase, automotive style, rather than in a separate tank as on the larger Four. All were delighted at the narrowness of the engine (about two inches less than the 750) and the new look achieved by setting the cylinders more upright than the forward cant of the earlier model. Few seemed daunted by the fact that performance was considerably down from the 750, but were more concerned with the relatively petite feel and look of the 500 and its smoothness. As long as the junior model would cruise 70-80 mph all day long — and it certainly does that — they were satisfied with a 100-mph ceiling.

As a matter of fact, the 500 is perfectly happy at a steady 80, a speed which it could sustain endlessly, for revs are a mere 6000, nowhere close to the 9400 red line. At a more leisurely — and legal — 70 mph, the Rs are backed off to a lazy 5100. Actually the only real limitation to extended high-speed riding is the rear chain, since no chain oiler is fitted and she begins to rattle after a hard all-day run. It's an endless rear chain, with no master link, aggravating replacement but ensuring against master link loss.

The Honda 500 was a joy to ride, for the most part. Chassis geometry seemed to be as right as it could be in light of the high center of gravity dictated by wet-sump engine design. Ideally the weight should be lower, for the 500, somewhat like the 750, is a little more susceptible to side wind gusts than normal and the high engine weight

So smooth one might expect it to be made by General Electric. \$1345 Honda 500 Four crests new horizon in motorcycle achievement. Throttle shut-off is now guaranteed by dual cables; one pulls it on, the other off.



photography: Eric Rickman

placement is suspect. Another point of contention is the forks. At 70-80 mph on a typical cement slab freeway, bearing friction appears to nullify fork action to the point where there's very little going on and the frame head starts to buck. It all comes together at the crest of a sweeping, fast turn, complicated by a side wind of buffeting effect from a truck being passed, when the frame head does a little oscillating dance. Normally handling is very acceptable, with the high c.g. entering into the picture only on such rare occasions, but the forks do need to be more sensitive in deference to the excellence of the total concept. The rear shocks, conversely, reacted instantly to even small irregularities and provided a soft ride at the back.

Our only other criticisms focused on driveline snatch — still a bit much — and gearshift articulation. Sure shifts were not always guaranteed, and neutral was occasionally elusive. An annoying hitch in shift lever travel was eventually overridden by applying more than normal pressure, but it shouldn't have been necessary. Some of our Honda-mounted friends say the box will free up in a few thousand miles, but we couldn't hang around to find out. Quite the opposite, the gearbox in our test machine seemed to operate better at first, becoming more laborious with the passing miles, despite a lack of abuse.

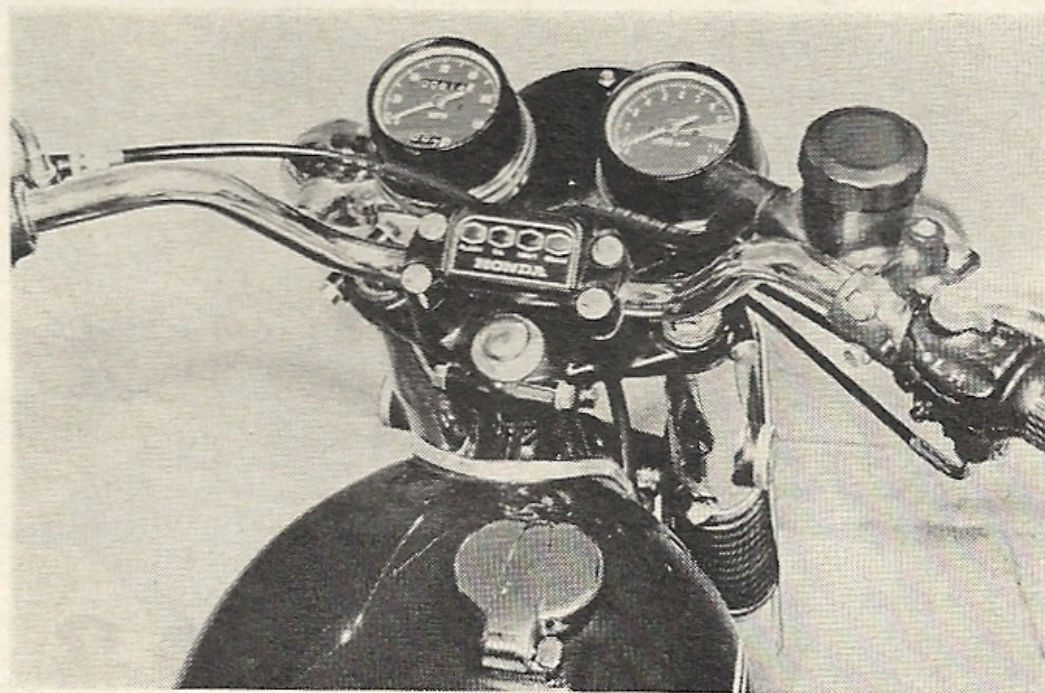
Otherwise all mechanical systems were "Go." The brakes performed with ease and in a positive, reassuring manner. Honda's front disc cannot be faulted; it even works in reverse, which is more than can be said for most of the currently popular dual-cam drum setups. Carburetor control is now first-rate; a dual-cable handlebar control positively pulls the carburetor slides closed as well as open — no more slide hang-up. If

the 500 seems to have less mechanical noise than the 750, it is because the primary drive chain on the former is automotive-type silent chain. While the smaller engine is basically the same as its big brother, with plain bearing mains, rods and wrist pins, there are small refinements. The 500's cam nests half in the rocker cover, and the rockers are contained completely therein. Cam and head may be removed without taking the engine out of the frame — not so with the 750. The little one is oversquare, with a 2.205-by-1.992-inch bore and stroke. No wonder it's smooth — like four 125s in a row. Compression is 9-to-1, with a factory horsepower rating of 50 at 9000 rpm.

But it's the total concept that will guarantee the Honda CB-500's instant success: Styling, finish and appointments are so slick that they almost break with (admittedly lagging) motorcycle tradition. Handlebar switches are smooth of operation and fall easily to hand. The tiny four-light indicator panel is integral with the central handle-

bar clamp. Side panels and mufflers have soft, flowing lines that reflect weeks of drawing board exercises. Engine appearance, though similar to the 750, is subtly refined, with a more delicate, blended grouping of components that has now reached classic status. It is extremely difficult to style a beautifully proportioned motorcycle, many times more so than a car. Honda scaled the peak in their 500 Four.

At a certain blueprint house here in Los Angeles, about half a dozen "shaggers" are all 750-Honda-mounted, using their Fours in the most arduous daily traffic work. To the man, they express rare satisfaction with the performance of their fleet of personally owned machines over the last year. Maintenance is low, dependability high. Add their experience to our delight with the even smoother and better-looking 500, and the package becomes almost irresistible, especially when one contemplates Honda's lightning-fast reaction to legitimate suggestions for improvement. Hopefully our few observations will be so taken. ■ ■



LEFT — Miniature light panel indicates turn signal, oil pressure, neutral and high-beam operation. Note hydraulic front brake master cylinder on right handlebar. Spring-loaded gas cap requires two hands, is purposely strong so it will not fly open in an accident.

Good! BELOW LEFT — Dual throt-

tle cables pull two-way spool that actuates master throttle bar, ensuring uniform movement of all throttle slides. Carbs breathe through common plenum chamber, single cleaner. Note rubber anchor for rear gas tank mount, made fail-safe when saddle is down in position. BELOW RIGHT — Honda is first to pick up on my years-old plea for pop-in air filter.

