

# Rider Retrospective

## Honda CB750A Hondamatic 1976-1978



Year: 1976 CB750A Hondamatic.  
Owner: Dan Marshall, Atascadero, California.

**T**he Honda with the Matic was a pretty good unit, really, but the marketing mavens had not gone about their business well. In 1976 who was willing to spend \$2,200 for a motorcycle that didn't need to be shifted?

Honda had chosen to believe that it would be possible to sell a motorcycle to virtually every able-bodied American—if it just came up with the right package. Cubs, Dreams, Superhawks, Touring and Trail 90s, CB350s and 450s, the 750/4, the Gold Wing—there was something for nearly everybody. And if there wasn't, Honda would build it.

Since so many American drivers had cars with automatic transmissions...one can see the thinking. The CB750A was going to be a hit. Had to be. Attract all those sluggards who didn't like stirring a shift lever in a tranny.

Automatic transmissions on motorcycles were certainly not unknown in the 1970s. Rokon had built rather a good unit for use in its dirt bikes, and Moto Guzzi had recently introduced the 1000 Convert to the U. S. market. Not that either of them had gone exactly gangbusters in the sales sector.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE AUTHOR

The CB750A package started with the SOHC four-cylinder engine that had moved motorcycling a giant leap forward. It was detuned a bit, with smaller carburetors, milder camshaft, and a lower compression ratio than the standard 750K, all with the intention of increasing low-rpm power. However, it still had a lot of horses.

The transmission was no slap-dash, let's-throw-it-together-and-run-it-up-the-flagpole affair, but a very sound piece of engineering. It should have been, as it was based on the same unit found in small Honda cars. Technically speaking, it was a hydrokinetic torque converter; a layman (at least this one) might think of it as being two tiny windmills in a container of oil, with the engine spinning one windmill, forcing the swirling oil to spin the other, which turned the layshaft.

It had two speeds, just in case the rider was trying to get up, or down, the side of Mount Whitney. Low was good to 60 mph, while drive could top 100 mph and was more than adequate 99 percent of the time. To get from neutral to drive required passing through low, and *See page 83*

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some critics felt that neutral would have been better placed between the two gears.

Put the key in, pull the choke, press the button. The bike had a whopping 290 watt alternator to keep things charged, but if that wasn't enough, under the seat was stashed a detachable kickstarter. Should the battery have run down, the rider could affix the starter to the stub of a shaft that ran out just behind the shifting pivot and cheerfully kick away.

Once burbling, the engine took its own sweet time to warm up, which had to do with the amount of oil that had to be heated to operating temperature. The crankcase/transmission unit took nearly six quarts, 50 percent more than the standard 750, all used to help convert the torque into driving power.

Lift the shift lever into low and the rider would hardly know he was in gear, with no metal-to-metal clunking. Twist the throttle and away he went, somewhat reminiscent of an old

Buick Dynaflow. Smooth, oily power. Shift to drive and forget about gears.

The Hondamatic was no slug. Granted, the slush was no match for a five-speed box, but it could do the quarter at 90 mph in under 16 seconds, an embarrassment to most cars. Acceleration from highway speed was the equivalent of any comparable standard-transmissioned bike.

Two safety features were the parking brake and the sidestand shift-lock. If the bike were parked on a hill, where a normal bike would be left in gear to prevent rolling, the Hondamatic's rear drum brake could be locked. And any time the sidestand was deployed the transmission automatically went to neutral and could not be shifted unless the sidestand were retracted.

However, with all this fine work it was as though Honda had given a party and nobody came. Sales were dismal. After three years they dropped the 750 version of the Hondamatic and put the transmission in a 400 twin. It still didn't sell.

It was a nice idea whose time had not come. Maybe they'll try it again some year. ■ *Clement Salvadori*