



# 1979 Honda CR250

# THE HOLESHOT SPECIAL

Fast, furious and flawed  
By the Staff of Dirt Bike

History has an absolutely amazing way of repeating itself. Take 1973, for example. A good year for certain wines and an excellent year for the then-new Honda Elsinore. Yup, make no doubt about it, when the silver-tanked 250 Elsinore made its debut, it quite literally shocked the dirt bike world.

Think about it for a moment. Every other MX machine in '73 was heavier, slower and about three years behind the Elsie. And, to rub it in, the Honda even cost less than any other 250 racer on the market. It had aluminum rims when other bikes had steel wheels. It had a five-speed box when other bikes made do with four speeds. Even the suspension travel was longer than its competitors.

Naturally, people went out and bought it in droves. The starting lines sprouted silver and green bikes wall-to-wall. Everybody just *had* to have a Honda. Then, to fuel the masses on, Marty Tripes went out and started winning races on an Elsinore. Al Baker won Baja. Gad! Was there no stopping the onslaught?

Time stopped it.

One year later, articles started appearing all over the place on how to make the Elsinore handle better, how to make the engine faster, how to fix the swingarm bushings, how to replace the shocks with something that would live, how to cut the frame, how to get the forks to work, etc.

The magic of the Elsie was starting to get tarnished, but people were still buying them. Another year went by, and the Elsinores hadn't bothered to change much.



However, the other bike manufacturers, smarting from the success of the Honda 250, were not sitting on their hands. The midnight oil burned and new models were brought forth.

Those new efforts, while not perfect, were a big improvement. Suddenly, the Elsinore was not only no longer "the state of the art," it was becoming a bit . . . well . . . dated.

The long-travel Maicos and Yamahas just about put the wooden spike through the heart of the Elsinore. Monoshocks and forward-mounted suspensions were all the rage. A year too late, the Honda 250 responded with

a halfhearted try at a long-travel bike.

By 1977, the 250 Elsinore was a joke.

The only people who bought one, simply didn't know any better, or perhaps, couldn't afford anything else. All the Honda freaks kept waiting for the New Bike. And while they were waiting, everything else on the market got better and better and better. Would Big Red ever catch up, asked the faithful?

In 1978, Honda caught up. They brought out the Red Rocket. The Killer 250. The Mighty Motor. Horsepower dripping off the fins. And travel? Hoooooeee! Nearly 12 inches front and rear, Leroy. Hot damn and mercy!!! Space-age!!! Trick to the max.

The press slobbered shamelessly over the new effort. They drooled. Rant-and-rave reviews were the order of the day. They got up and beat their editorial chests, telling just how wonderful the new Elsinore was and how nothing else even came close.

People went ga-ga. Gotta have one. Gotta get me one 'a them Marty bikes. Pant, pant.

What you had here was a basic lemming-like hysteria that was almost pathetic to watch. A lot of magazine types got on the Honda and ran it through the gears. The bike was so damned fast that they almost wet their collective pants. They ran for their typewriters and proclaimed the virtues of the Red Rocket. Fast? You bet. Handle? Don't ask.

It is now one year later. We can now take a look at the Honda 250 Elsinore with a colder, more hardened eye.

Fast? Undeniably so. It still remains

an absolute butt-kicker of a motor. Our 1979 model was even more impressive in the power output than the 1978 version. It pulled harder down low and even seemed to rev out a bit further, if the rider demanded it. Truly marvelous!

Suspension? Again, don't ask. Don't ask because you may not be happy with the answer. The 1979 Honda Elsinore CR250R, in a nutshell, is hurting in the suspension department.

There simply is no rational excuse for the shocks. They not only have too much compression damping, but also have so much rebound damping that it's easy to pack the shocks down badly over small bumps. Some have said that the spring rate is simply too high, and switching over to lighter springs will solve the problem.

Nonsense.

The choice of damping rates is simply out of the ballpark, and no spring in the universe is going to help that rear end. Complicating the action of the rear end is a swingarm that could double for a divining rod. It flexes and wobbles, inciting tossed chains along the way. One has only to look at the track record of Team Honda for 1978 to witness the incredible problems they've had with chains and swingarms. . . even with factory mechanics on the job.

#### Handling

Whew! We *think* that the Elsinore might be a decent-handling bike *if* the suspension was sorted out, but it remains a sad fact that suspension components greatly affect how a bike turns.

Our test bike would turn like a maniac at times. Then, at other times, it would feel like the steering head bearings were square and rusty. The only word we can think of that accurately describes the mannerisms of the CR250R in the corners is. . . vague.

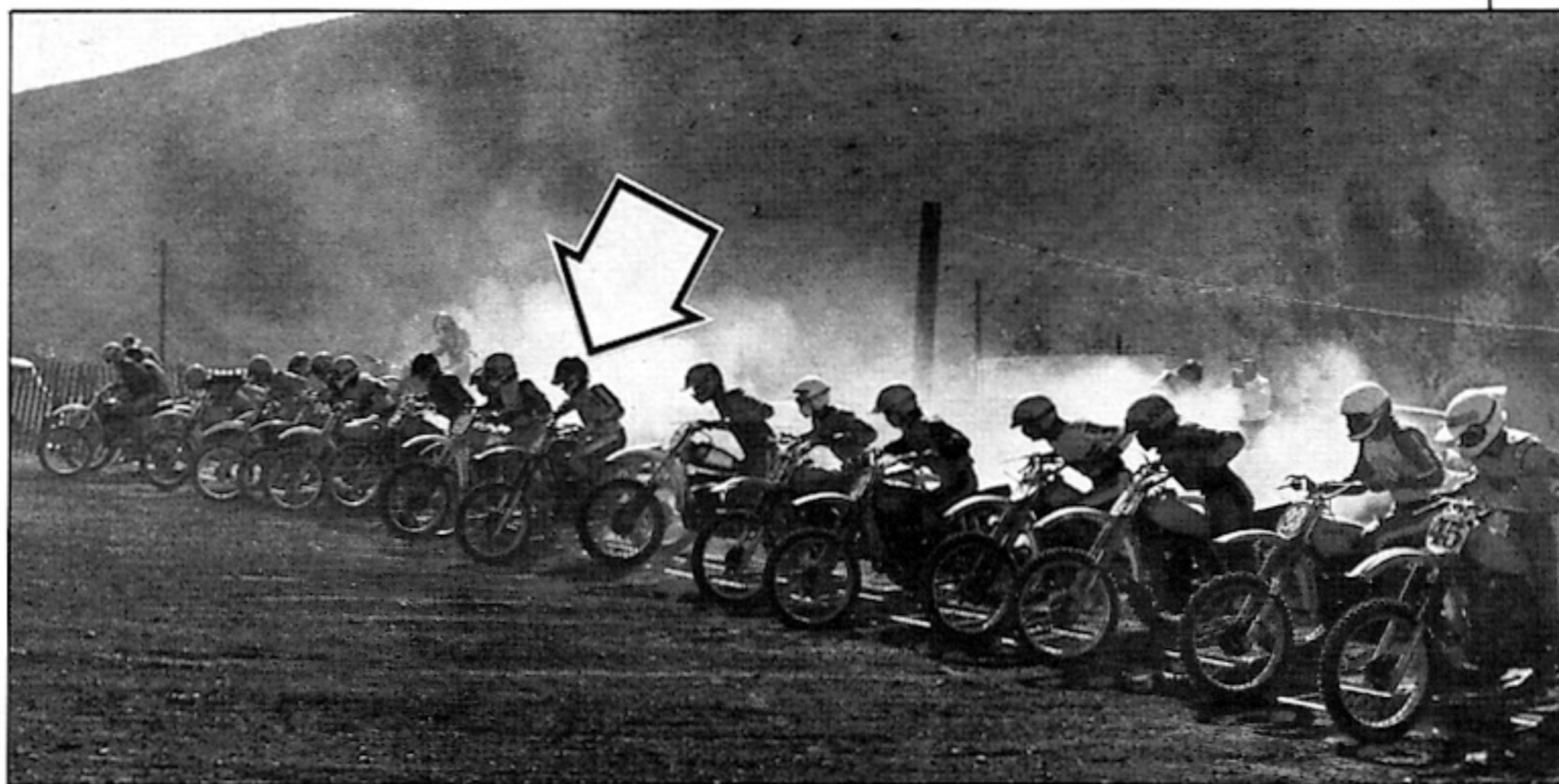
You might go in and through a half-dozen turns in a satisfactory way, only to dive into the seventh turn and have the Honda lift straight up and climb over the berm like a demented fiddler crab.

How about another visual trip? You ride through a tricky S-section four or five laps in a row, then on the very next lap, the Honda takes a horrendous lurch and spits you off. You never really know why it happened.

Unsettling?

Of course. One thing a good bike should — no! *must* — do, is act the same way all of the time. The rider can adapt to different mannerisms after a certain period of time, but there's no way he can adapt to sudden changes in handling traits.

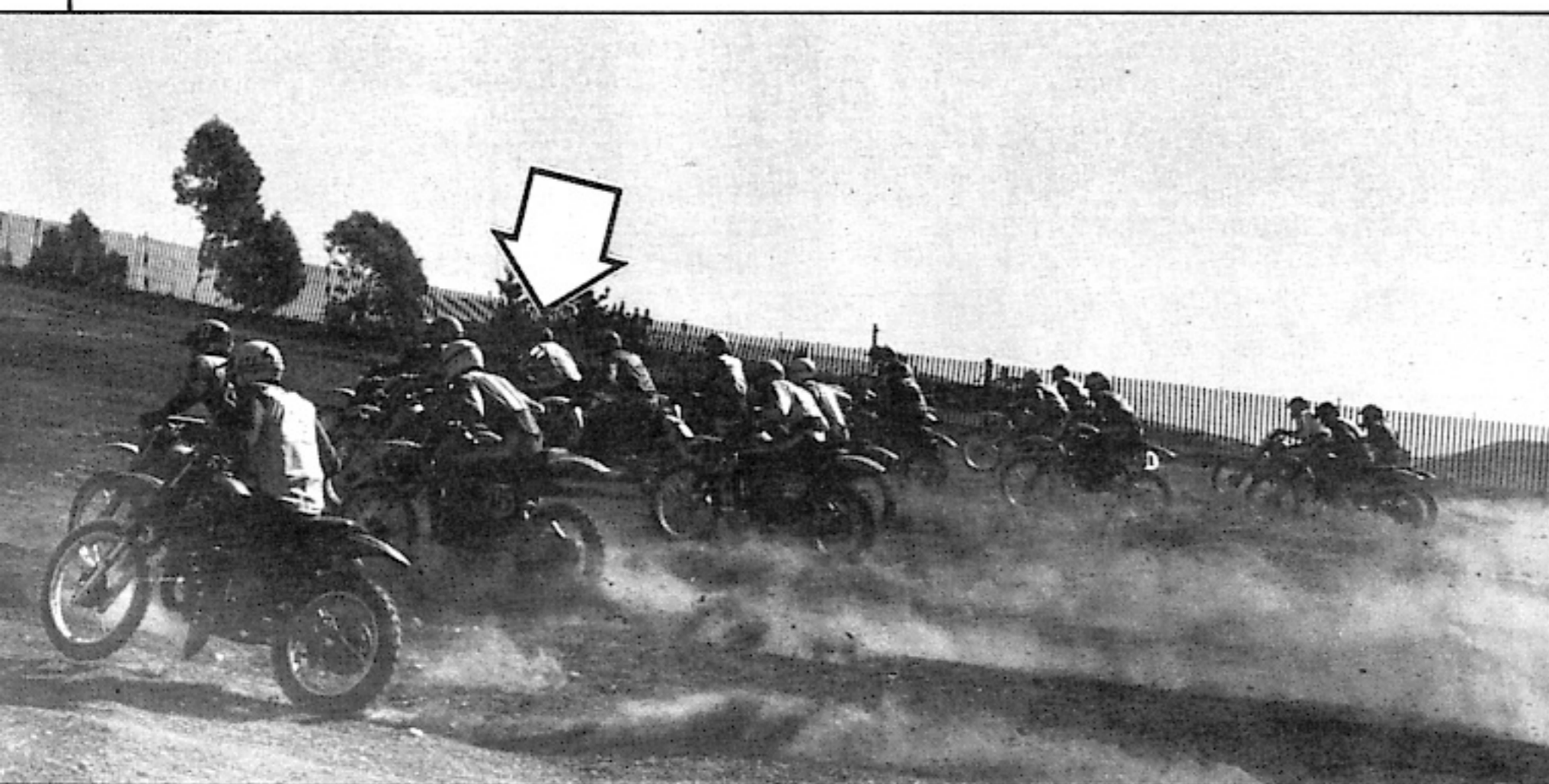
Does this mean that the situation is



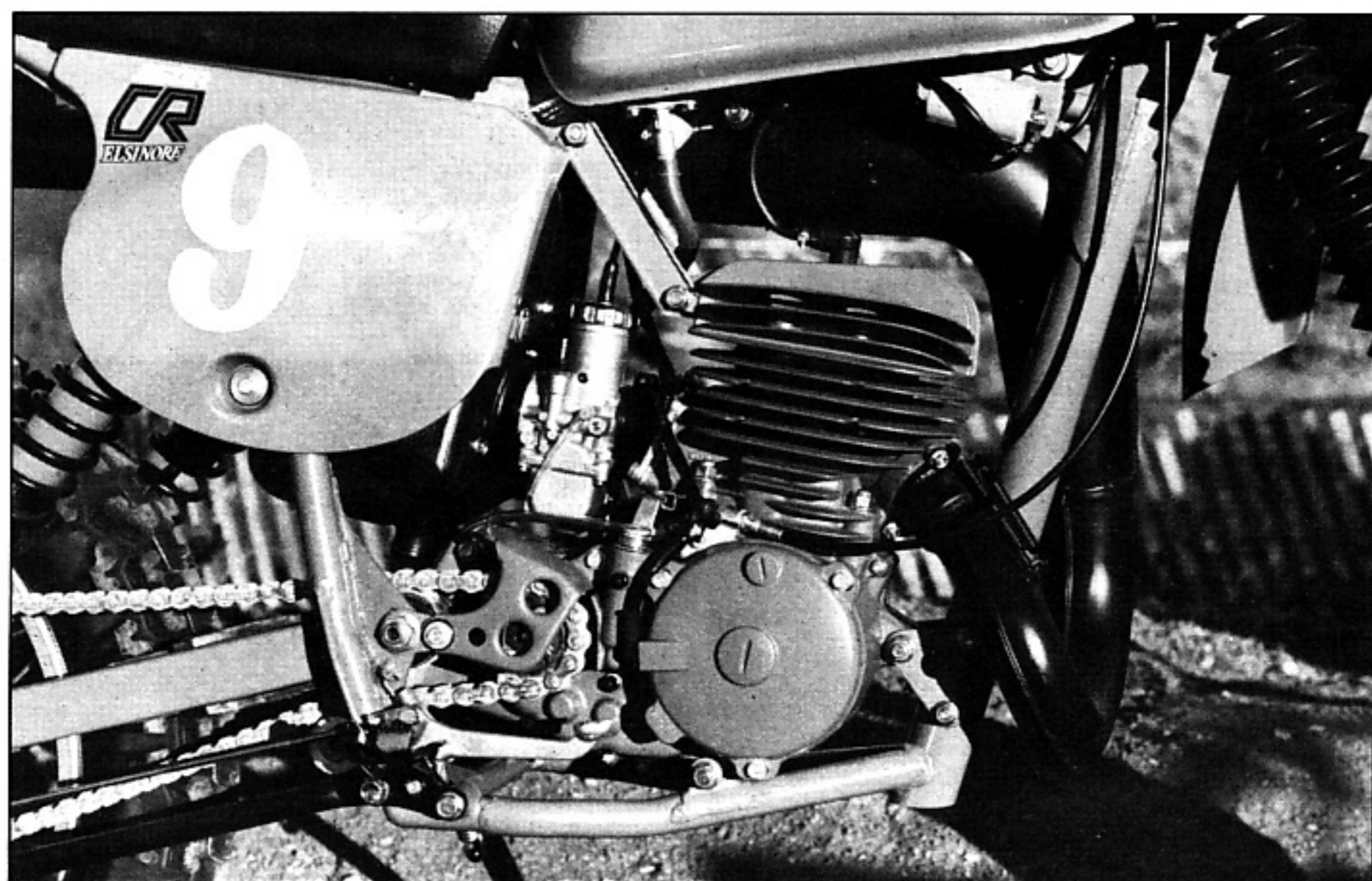
No doubt about it . . . the Elsinore had plenty of power. Here you can see test rider, John Rudder, coming off the line with more than 20 other 250s.



Kenny Zahrt, at work.



Even though the bike was not the first over the Saddleback Park starting gate, it was in the lead by the halfway mark up the long hill.



(ABOVE) Engine compartment is packed without being crowded. Placement of parts shows much thought. Head steady at rear of motor is important. Keep it tight.



(RIGHT) Extensive use of aluminum helps keep the weight down. Even the kickstarter is aluminum!

hopeless? No. Not at all. We have had the opportunity to have ridden well-prepared 1978 CR250 Hondas. Bikes with good shocks, fork kits and accessory swingarms. You wanta know something? They work pretty good.

But, you ask, what is a stone-stock 1979 model really like, and what's it going to take to get it right on the money?

OK. Let's say you just rolled the 1979 Elsie right out of the back of your Datsun three-year-old mini-truck. You paid 1800-plus dollars for the bike and this is the first time you're going to sling a leg over it.

You flip the gas tap straight down, pop the choke into the rich position, and fold the left-side kickstarter out to an angle you can boot comfortably. Two or three easy prods later, things are stirring around. The exhaust note is surprisingly quiet for a racer. Not much in the way of mechanical clatter is heard. Even cold, though, the revs seem to build fairly easily, indicating little mass on the crank ends.

After the motor is warmed up, you can get on the bike (unless you're short, in which case you'll need a milk crate) and slip it into gear. When low is engaged, you'll feel a sort of internal lurch. The bike won't move or creep forward, but you sure do know when it's in gear.

First-time riders tend to stall a lot getting used to the right combination of throttle and clutch. It's easiest to just give it a quick burst of throttle and spin the rear wheel when getting under way.

Your initial impressions will be of mucho power. And all of it the right kind. This fabulous engine is probably what wins people over so thoroughly. There is no denying it: The Honda 250 Elsinore puts out more power over a greater range than any other 250 we've ever ridden. There are bikes — like the Can-Am — that put out as much at the top end, but they give a bunch away down low.

It's obvious that the total overall impressive performance is the result of what must be endless hours in the dyno room. It's hard for us to imagine a stronger all-around 250 racer. If you fail to get to the first turn in the lead, it will not be the bike's fault.

As you start to put in laps on the Honda, some things other than the power start to become apparent. One is that your hands and forearms are taking a beating. The overall ride tends to beat the rider. Harsh, jarring thuds from the rear end somehow end up as vibrating ripples at the ends of the bars.

It's possible that the forks are decent. We couldn't tell. The rear end was so bad that it affected the front end

— an all-too-common phenomenon. We plan to try some accessory shocks soon to see what the real potential of the bike is. It's a shame not to investigate the Elsinore more.

When negotiating a turn, the rider on an Elsinore will find it difficult to pick an accurate line. If the turn is wide enough to allow for errors in steering, the throttle can just be left on, and the bike will power through OK in most cases. However, if you need to plant that front wheel in a small lip, or groove, it becomes a chancy situation. Even with your weight placed well over the gas tank, steering is not precise.

We don't think this is any basic fault in the frame or geometry. It's our opinion that all of the steering ills can be traced to suspension shortcomings. Again, we plan to look into this closely in future issues.

### Lots of changes

It's not that the engineers haven't worked on the '79 Elsie. They list more than 30 improvements in the new bike. For what they're worth, here are some of those "improvements."

- \* Improved cylinder porting results in one hp increase.
- \* New, patented grid pattern reed valve design improves low-speed response.
- \* New, improved countershaft sprocket cover design.
- \* Improved front fork damping and spring rates.
- \* Improved rear shock damping rates.
- \* Industry-exclusive, Honda-design claw action MX tires.
- \* Improved heavy-duty chain guide rollers with fully sealed needle bearings.
- \* New front fork axle attachment design improves rigidity and handling.
- \* New, reinforced air box design for easier maintenance.
- \* Improved seat is more durable.
- \* Front number plate material is color-impregnated.
- \* Stiffer springing/less damping for front forks.
- \* Less damping for slow piston velocities (small bumps) for rear shocks.

It should be obvious at this point that some of those 30 changes aren't exactly earth-shaking. Still, many genuine improvements have been made. However, what bothers the scholarly DB editors, is that history does indeed seem to be repeating itself. Instead of Honda spending its time shaping the suspension up and sorting out the handling, they've chosen to concentrate on a faster engine. In '78, the engine was plenty fast. It'll probably be fast enough for the next decade. So, why dwell on the power? Get to the problems that need fixing.

## 1979 Honda Elsinore CR250R

<b>ENGINE TYPE</b> . . . . .	Two-stroke single, reed valve
<b>BORE AND STROKE</b> . . . . .	70.0mm x 64.4mm
<b>DISPLACEMENT</b> . . . . .	247cc
<b>HORSEPOWER (CLAIMED BY FACTORY):</b>	
. . . . .	37 at 7500 rpm taken at crankshaft
<b>CARBURETION</b> . . . . .	KEIHIN 36mm
<b>FACTORY RECOMMENDED JETTING:</b>	
Main jet . . . . .	185
Needle jet . . . . .	N/A
Jet needle . . . . .	28A
Pilot jet . . . . .	60
Slide number . . . . .	2.5
<b>RECOMMENDED GASOLINE</b> . . . . .	Premium —
. . . . .	octane required, 92 to 100
<b>RECOMMENDED OIL (MFR.)</b> . . . . .	Honda 2-stroke
. . . . .	8.5 liters
<b>FUEL TANK CAPACITY</b> . . . . .	(2.2 U.S. gallons)
<b>FUEL TANK MATERIAL</b> . . . . .	Aluminum
<b>GAS/OIL RATIO</b> . . . . .	20:1
<b>LUBRICATION</b> . . . . .	Pre-mix
<b>OIL CAPACITY</b> . . . . .	N/A
<b>AIR FILTRATION</b> . . . . .	Oiled foam
<b>CLUTCH TYPE</b> . . . . .	Wet, multi-plate
<b>TRANSMISSION:</b> Five-speed, constant mesh	
<b>GEARBOX RATIOS</b> . . . . .	
1 . . . . .	1.900:1
2 . . . . .	1.591:1
3 . . . . .	1.240:1
4 . . . . .	1.000:1
5 . . . . .	0.839:1
<b>GEARING, FRONT/REAR</b> . . . . .	14-49
<b>IGNITION</b> . . . . .	CDI
<b>PRIMARY KICK SYSTEM?</b> . . . . .	Yes
<b>RECOMMENDED SPARK PLUG</b> . . . . .	NGK
. . . . .	B9EV, Champion N-2G
<b>SILENCER/SPARK ARRESTOR/QUALITY:</b>	
. . . . .	Silencer only, average noise
<b>EXHAUST SYSTEM</b> . . . . .	High-pipe, left side
<b>FRAME, TYPE</b> . . . . .	Single downtube, split
. . . . .	cradle, chrome moly

<b>WHEELBASE</b> . . . . .	1445mm (56.9 inches)
<b>GROUND CLEARANCE</b> . . . . .	300mm
. . . . .	(11.8 inches)
<b>SEAT HEIGHT AT TANK</b> . . . . .	940mm
. . . . .	(37.0 inches)
<b>STEERING HEAD ANGLE</b> . . . . .	28.5 degrees
<b>TRAIL</b> . . . . .	4.7 inches
<b>WEIGHT WITH ONE GALLON GAS</b> . . . . .	224 pounds
<b>RIM MATERIAL</b> . . . . .	Aluminum
<b>TIRE SIZES</b> . . . . .	
Front . . . . .	3.00x21 knobby — claw action
Rear . . . . .	5.10x18 knobby — claw action
<b>SUSPENSION</b> . . . . .	
Front, type and travel . . . . .	Telescopic — 300mm
. . . . .	(11.8 inches)
Rear, type and travel . . . . .	Swingarm with
. . . . .	shocks, 280mm (11.0 inches)
<b>INTENDED USE, MFR</b> . . . . .	Motocross, off-
. . . . .	road racing
<b>COUNTRY OF ORIGIN</b> . . . . .	Japan
<b>PRICE, APPROX</b> . . . . .	\$1800
<b>PARTS PRICES, HIGH-WEAR ITEMS</b> . . . . .	
Piston assembly, complete . . . . .	\$27.55
Rings only . . . . .	\$6.72
Cylinder . . . . .	\$131.19
Shift lever . . . . .	\$20.56
Brake pedal . . . . .	\$22.26
<b>DISTRIBUTOR</b> . . . . .	
American Honda	
Gardena, California	
<b>OVERALL RATING, FROM 0 TO 100,</b>	
<b>VARIOUS CATEGORIES, KEEPING</b>	
<b>INTENDED USE OF MACHINE IN MIND:</b>	
Handling . . . . .	70
Suspension . . . . .	50
Power . . . . .	99
Cost . . . . .	95
Attention to detail . . . . .	88
Effectiveness, stone stock . . . . .	82

### A brief look at those new tires

They are different, eh? The whole idea behind the unique design of the claw action tire, is to have a flexible setup that pinch-grips the ground. Under certain conditions, the tires lend incredible traction. Part of the reason the Honda pulled easy holeshots at the racetrack, we feel, is because of the superior straightforward traction of that new tire.

Unfortunately, we feel that it also lent to the woes in handling, too. With a flexible carcass wall, the claw action tire rolls badly under a side load.



**Part of the problem: extremely long swingarm flexed when under side loads. Poor shocks didn't help any either. On the bright side, the countershaft center and the swingarm pivot are very close together.**



**Here's the new "claw action" tire Honda's so proud of. Staggered short knobs are perched on a very flexible tire carcass, giving great forward traction, but marginal side load effectiveness.**

Exactly the kind of load encountered in corners. This can be partially cured by raising the pressure. But, when you do this, the flexing action disappears and the tire skitters across the track if the traction is less than perfect.

We were told, by a reliable source, that the prime reason Honda chose the claw action tire was because it was so very light. Their concern with unsprung weight was at the top of their list. Indeed, it is a light tire. But, we feel that it's too limited in where it works. . . and where it doesn't. Again, we plan to experiment with the Honda, and will slip some conventional tires on to check out the difference, if any, in mannerisms.

### Where does this leave the potential buyer?

Probably at the finance company. To get the '79 Elsinore up to suspension and handling standards, it is going to cost some bucks. Forks, shocks, swingarm and tires can approach the \$500 level with alarming ease. This means that the normal price of \$1800 — in reality — should be upped to \$2300 or so.

However, if the rider does choose the Honda and takes the time and money to dial it in, he should end up with a bike capable of winning a National. With the motor left in stone-stock trim. That awesome motor makes the above proposition definitely worth considering if you make your living at the track. For sportsman riders, there are better choices. □