

## RACE TEST

# HONDA CR125R

Crowning the new Monarch

□ Nobody makes a bad motorcycle nowadays. And even if they did, some local hot-shoe could take the thing and smoke our shorts off. The new CR125R is not the best 125 motocrosser on the market, but that is incidental to the fact that it will be packing the starting lines, and knocking down wins before the spring snow melts.

Several years ago, before the release of the first CR125, the omnipotent 125 MXer was a shopping-list-constructed Swedish machine called Monarch. The Monarch 125 had a cult following, a \$1200 ownership fee, wimpy shocks, an elusive Sachs transmission and an unbelievable string of victories. They even had a young San Diego kid on the payroll named Marty Smith!

Fans, followers and enthusiasts make motorcycles into winners. The flaws of the Monarch were overlooked, just as the faux pas of the CR125R will be.

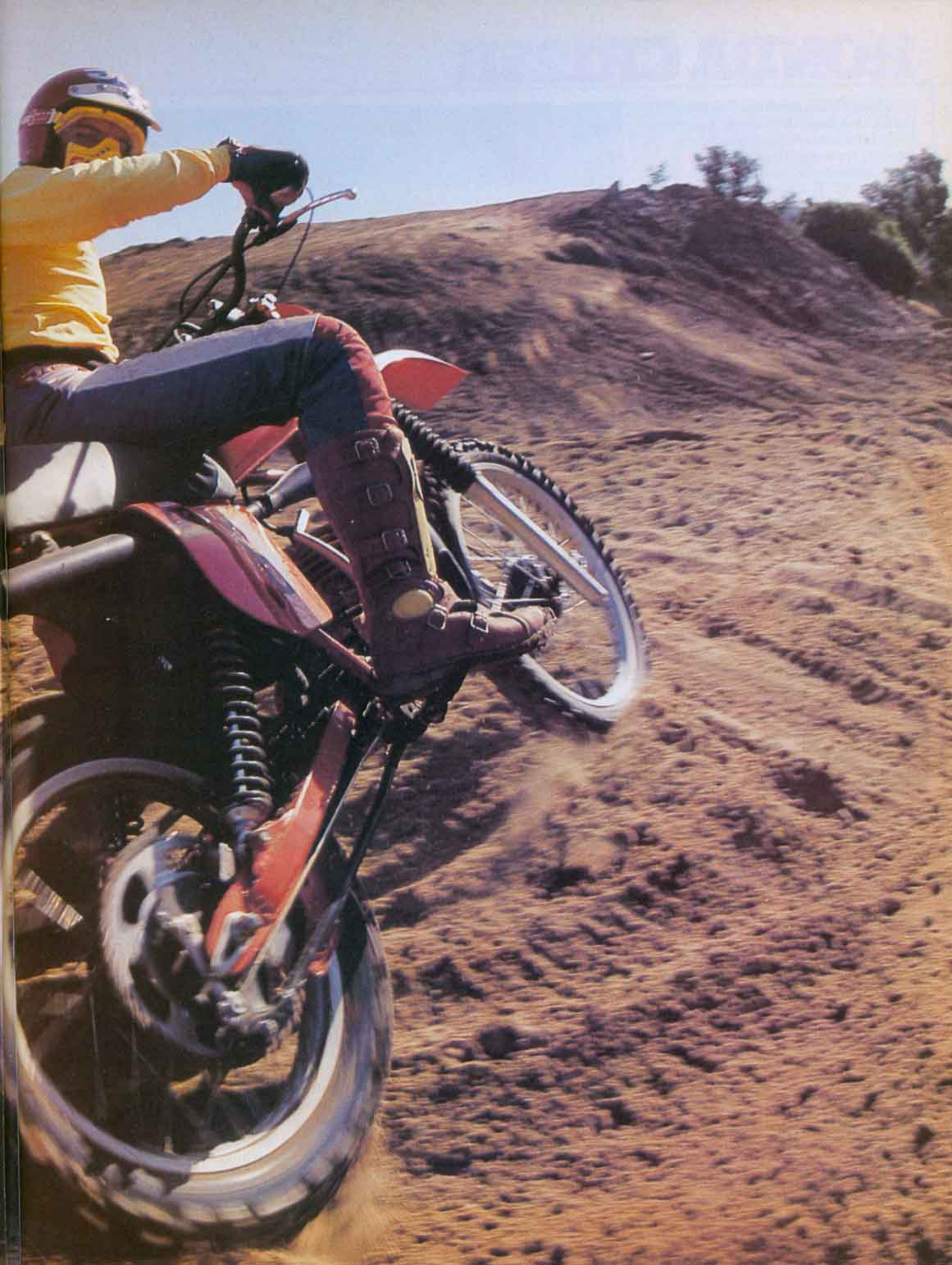
### THE MACHINE IS LEAN

Standing off by itself, it could be another CR250R, but as you get a close look the front wheel is 23 inches in diameter, the gas tank has a glandular swelling and the engine is a compact, red-painted package.

The motor is an engineering marvel. Honda's human wave of mechanical engineers made every nuance and angle a thing of stark function. The transmission and kickstart shafts are aligned in a vertical arrangement that makes the cases several inches shorter than the competition's. The bearing races and shaft ends have cast-in half-moon covers that sling oil back into the working mechanisms. The crankcase halves fit in such close proximity to the large crank halves that it makes the ancient art of crank stuffing an antiquity. The thin, chrome-lined cylinder has casting so smooth that



The front end is hoisted up on a 23-inch front wheel that gives the CR125R a skyscraper look.



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polishing makes no sense. The reed petals have been corrugated to increase their durability and strength. All the internal apparatus has been swiss-cheesed, bridged, strengthened and fortified. The coat of red paint is a gaudy waste on a thing of beauty.

The frame, when stripped to its red bones, is quite similar to a 125 Husqvarna frame in triangulation and shape, but the geometries are radically different. The 23-inch front wheel requires a high-ride steering neck, while the 11 inches of suspension call for heavy hydraulic jacking of the rear end, and a steep rake angle on the front. The overall workmanship is first-rate. The amount of effort required to work on the bike is gratefully less than on either the Yamaha or the Suzuki. This sparseness of accouterments, bolts and nuts makes the owner's task one of riding, not wrenching.

The suspension is straightforward. It was lifted, with dimensional changes, from the CR250R. The forks require no air and are almost identical to the 250 Honda's in feel and action. The shocks are red-bodied Showas with a soft single spring.

In the miscellany department there are even more highlights. The swingarm pivot and countershaft sprocket are only 64mm apart. This eliminates the need for a chain tensioner. The air filter is dual-staged foam. The front forks ride on tapered bearings above and below, while the swingarm is levered by needle bearings. The chain guide rollers are made out of aluminum and supported by needle bearings. The rear motor mount bolt doubles as the swingarm pivot bolt.

## WHAT'S IT LIKE

The Honda CR125R isn't fast. The Suzuki RM125N should make Honda riders cry exiting short straights where snappy power and high horse do the most work. The Honda has a broad, smooth and torquey powerband that makes the 125R so easy to ride that it ought to be either fattening or illegal. Because it hooks up at low rpm and hangs in through a rev range that normally only Open class mounts can lay claim to, it is competitive. Competitive in the Junior and Intermediate classes! To run with the pros, the CR125R is going to need a heavy dose of hop-up.

Because the red engine has no burst of roosting power at any specific rpm, the impulses are easy to control. The extremely long, flat torque range means that inexperienced riders will be able to stay in the hunt longer, even with the normal amount of mistakes. Fast riders



will have to ride like wild men to compete against equal riders on a Suzuki.

When you throw your leg over the Honda CR125R you will notice immediately that it isn't as tall as it looked. The large front wheel and rising angle of the gas tank make it appear akin to the Jolly Red Giant. The seat height is 35.8 inches. The levers aren't power levers or shorties, and they mount to the handlebars with Phillips screws that will deform after a few adjustments. We prefer lever brackets that use a 10mm hex head. The chrome moly bars seem to fall very well at hand, and they are capped off with Honda's personal grips. The brake pedal is well-placed, although the steel loop boot-guard has been known to interfere with some test riders' boots. We hit it

twice with a Harley tool (hammer) to locate the loop closer to the frame. The gearshift lever was too short, and very limited in upward adjustment.

## GETTING IT ON

Because of the widely spaced gears and solid torque, we found that first-gear starts were the most effective, although the pros still favor the standard second-gear launch. The CR125R shifts very well, much better than the CR250R, but this is to be expected from an engine that doesn't make extremely high horsepower at excessive rpm.

Nailing it off the line, you can grab each gear without backing off the throttle or touching the clutch. The brakes will haul it in without trouble. But as you approach that first gnarly section of whoops, it is best to get your



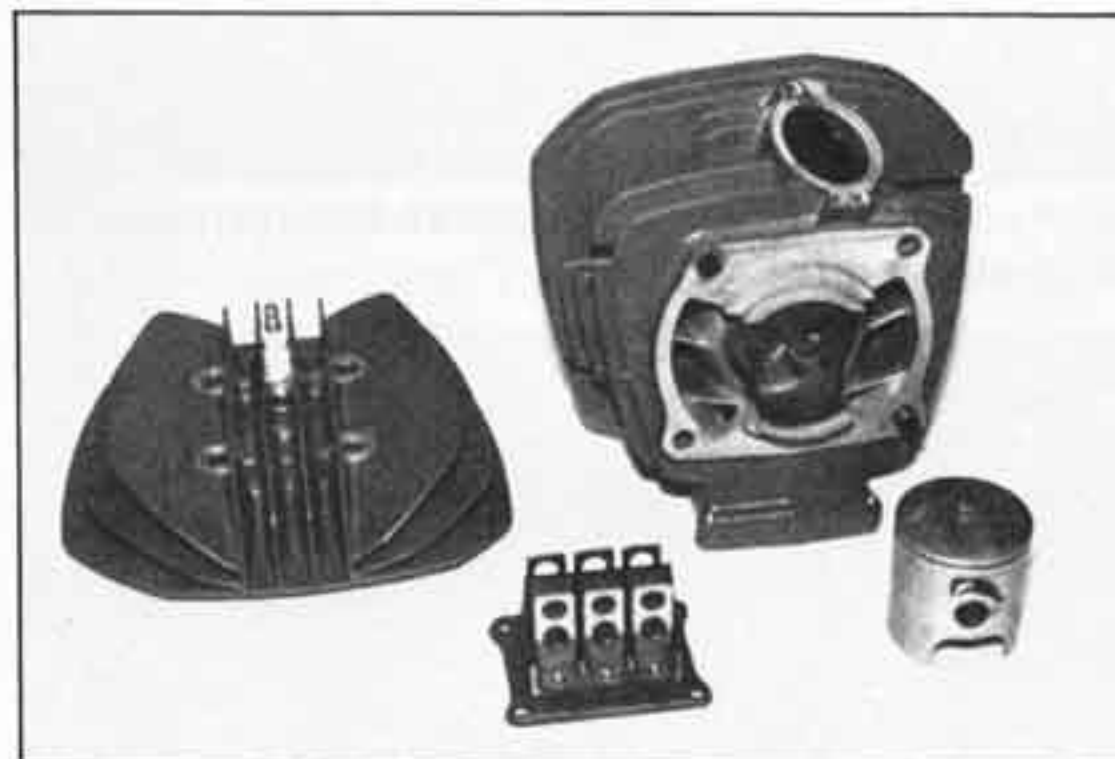
In the soft stuff the 23-incher far surpasses the feel of a normal front wheel. In the hard-packed turns it isn't as good.



In the air the bike feels so light that you could crank it almost 180 degrees. With gas in the tank it weighs 212 pounds.



The gas tank is aluminum, so the decals won't be falling off like you know who. The reed-valved red engine has an abundance of torque and a broad, mellow powerband.



The chrome-lined cylinder should last forever, barring a major internal catastrophe. The cylinder head has all of the fins originating out of the combustion area.

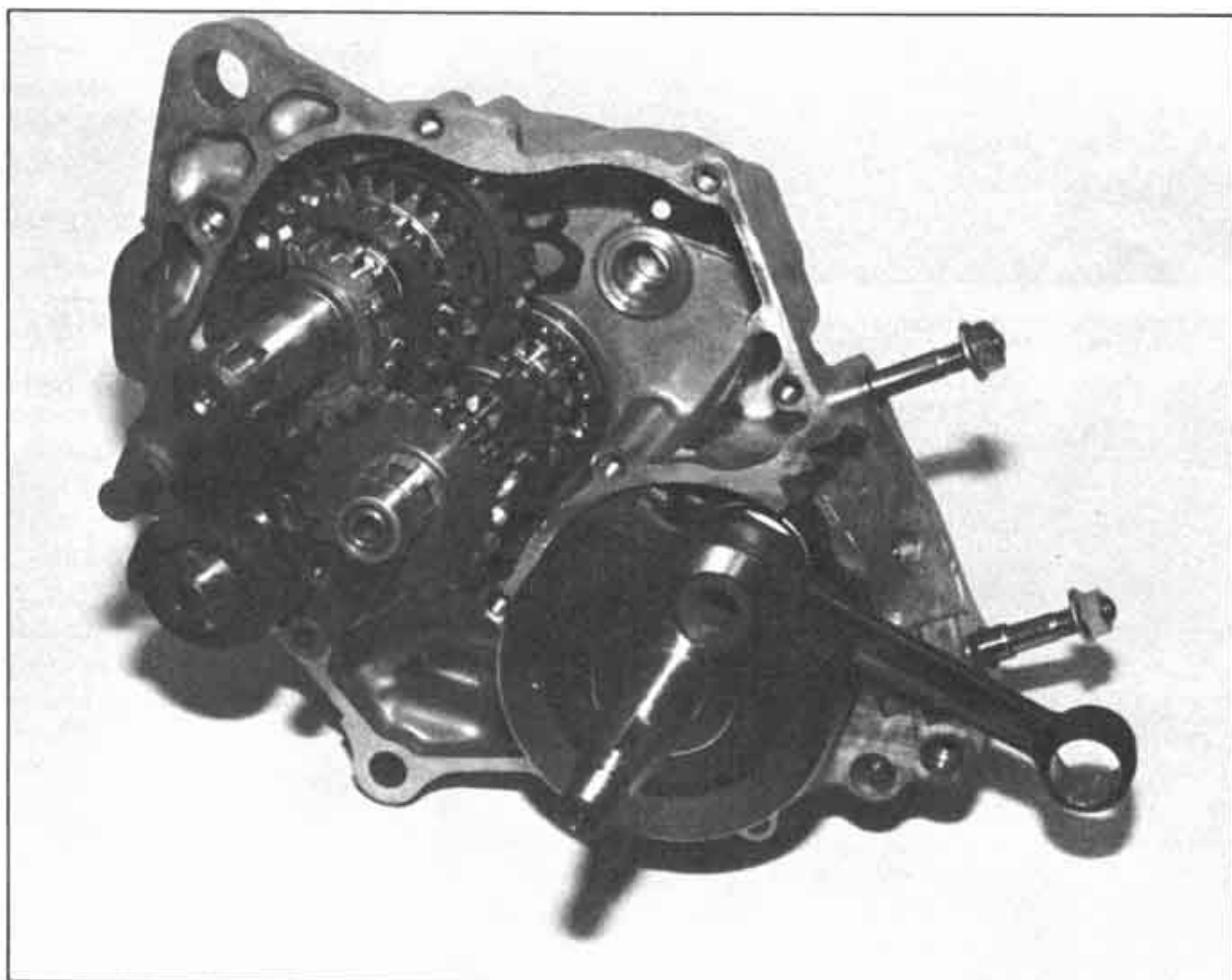


The footpegs are wimpy and will bend rearward. The coat hanger-type boot guard works best when it is tapped closer to the frame.

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Get used to the looks, because the starting lines are going to be packed with thousands of red bikes.



The crank is not rebuildable, so when it eventually goes, you will be buying a whole unit from your Honda dealer.

weight back and keep the front end up. The 23-inch front wheel easily lofts off the smallest bump into a light wheelie. If you hit the whoops with your weight forward, the steep rake and heavy 23-inch Bridgestone will go into a wild, tank-slapping gyration that will give you that old-time religion. The most disconcerting part of riding the Honda CR125R was its constant tendency to shake its head violently. Without the rider remaining calm and powering through, it could almost be construed as a major handling flaw.

The 23-inch front wheel *should* eliminate that shaking problem. The larger rotating mass *should* produce a gyroscopic effect that would stabilize the front end. It doesn't! The 23 will handle a tacky corner like a slot car. The larger contact patch and increased

## SPECIFICATIONS

**MAKE:** ..... Honda  
**MODEL:** ..... CR125R-'79  
**COUNTRY OF MANUFACTURE:** ..  
 ..... Japan  
**RETAIL PRICE:** ..... N/A

### ENGINE:

Type: ..... Air-cooled, two-stroke,  
 ..... reed valve  
 Bore & Stroke: ..... 56mm x 50.7mm  
 Displacement: ..... 124cc  
 Compression Ratio: ..... 8.4:1  
 Cylinder: ..... Single cylinder  
 Carburetion: ..... Keihin 32mm  
 Ignition: ..... CDI internal rotor  
 Lubrication: ..... Pre-mix  
 Air Filter: ..... Dual foam

### TRANSMISSION:

Type: ..... Six-speed constant mesh  
 Ratios: ..... 3.158, 2.538, 1.875, 1.556,  
 ..... 3.923, 1.300, 1.136, 1.000  
 Primary: ..... 3.158  
 Drive Chain: ..... 520

### SUSPENSION:

Front: ..... 280mm — 11 inches  
 Rear: ..... 280mm — 11 inches

### DIMENSIONS:

Wheelbase: ... 1420mm — 55.9 inches  
 Ground clearance: 355mm — 14 inches  
 Seat height: ... 935mm — 36.8 inches  
 Track weight: ... 91 kg — 200.6 pounds  
 Weight bias: 42 kg/ 92.6 pounds front,  
 ..... 49 kg/ 108 pounds rear

### CAPACITIES:

Transmission: .... 0.7 liters/0.74 U.S.  
 ..... quarts  
 Forks: ..... 295cc

feel make it work like a charm. When the track dries out to a hard, concrete-like parchment, the 23 gives a feeling of over-steer. The front end continually wanders off and on the intended line.

The suspension is good on one end and bad on the other. The good Showa front forks are a little harsh on compression damping, but a lighter oil will bring them around. The rear shocks are similar to the CR250R shocks, but seem to work even worse. The problem is compounded by a light spring that makes the bike wallow around fast, hard bends. Upping the preload to the max will stop most of the rear end acceleration wiggle, but not the bottoming out.

Taking all these minor annoyances together, the bike really shouldn't perform as well as it does. Compared

straight across to the Suzuki RM125N, the Honda isn't as fast, as good-handling or as well-suspended. In a match-up against the Yamaha YZ125F, it is about equal in speed and handling and ahead in suspension.

But the Honda works. The smooth power and good gearbox make it the kind of machine that allows the rider to concentrate on doing the job. The long-travel suspension and limited handling are aided in their task by an ultra-light feeling. The 200-pound (dry) CR feels like it weighs about 170 pounds when it is in flight. The balance is very good and this moves the handling up an unexplainable notch.

The aim of the Honda is different from that of its Suzuki and Yamaha enemies. Where the RM and YZ strive for a high peak horsepower reading and a decent

mid-range, Honda went for a strong mid-range at the expense of that potent kick in the pants.

#### **BITS AND PIECES OF FLUFF**


The paint wears off the 1.7-gallon gas tank, but you don't lose the paint, it just moves from the tank to your leathers. Get some clear plastic vinyl and cover the sides quickly. The gas cap is too small for the sixth straight year. But, as an added feature, it is also hard to get on and off.

The front number plates and side panels are red plastic. They don't look very attractive with either white or black numbers on them. The bikes should come with black panels painted onto the plates to facilitate the rules of racing.

The footpegs bend under the day-to-day pressures of racing and crashing. Our left peg took a rearward tilt the first day. The spokes held up better than on any previous Honda. After the initial tightening (30 minutes) they stayed in place. The chain is a good 520 that will hold up to the rigors of racing very well.

The silencer and stinger are one unit. They join the exhaust pipe directly above the kickstarter. The silencer/stinger combo is 26 inches long.

The air box is a slightly improved version of last year's nightmare. This year the cover under the side panel is held on with rubber straps instead of duct tape. The reason the air box is so



Thanks to a generous amount of torque, the CR125R can do mono-wheels with ease. The CR lacks that abrupt burst of power that 125s have made famous.



On both the CR250R and CR125R the axle plate is now a four-bolt cast aluminum bracket.

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difficult to get to is to eliminate the possibility of any dirt getting into the system. This is a dual-edged sword. Because it is so time-consuming to clean the filter, many hurried riders will neglect this needed maintenance.

## IN ORDER TO RACE

In order to race the CR125R at the upper ranks, the hop-up shops are going to be having a field day. The port timing is very similar to the 1973 and 1974 models, only milder. The reed valve is very efficient, although high-volume reeds will find a ready market. The cylinder head is really not as large or heat-sink efficient as it could be. Expect larger heads to be on the market immediately. The cylinder porting is very mild, and since the similarities between this engine and the old, hot, '73 are so great, you can expect a port job to liven it up considerably. Remember, the cylinder is chrome-plated, so you had best get your porting done by someone who knows his stuff, and will stand behind it.

For the Junior or Intermediate rider who always had trouble with that downhill section on the back of the course, or in maintaining speed through

that tricky off-camber, the Honda is an answer to your problems. It is by far the easiest-to-ride 125 racer on the market. It will probably make you faster. The Expert will be the first to buy one, and the first to pay the piper. The piper in this case will be LOP, DG, CH and Moto-X Fox.

We think it is going to sell like hotcakes. And to think it doesn't cost much more than a 1972 Monarch.



You will probably be buying a replacement set of shocks. The new Honda claw tire has such a weak sidewall casing that we had to run a couple of pounds more pressure than normal.

**The only funky piece on the complete control board is the shift lever. It is a little too short for the gunboats found attached to most Americans' feet.**

