

RACE TEST

HONDA CR125R

Mr. Inside and Mr. Outside

□ It is no secret that the 125 class has been the sole domain of Suzuki for the past five years. The best efforts of the European manufacturers and Yamaha have been stifled by the incredible technological lead that the RM series built up. Last year Honda took a shot at producing an RM-beater and went home with their tails between their legs. The 1979 CR125R was slow, poorly suspended and bad-handling. Honda swallowed their pride, and ad copy, and re-tooled. The result is a competitive motocrosser for one-two-fivers. In fact, the best 125!

Very little of last year's CR125R remains on the 1980 skeleton. Honda took a blank paper approach and did the deed right.

WILL IT BEAT A YELLOW BIKE?

The question on everyone's lips is whether or not the Honda can handle an RM or YZ. The answer is yes. The CR125R has one of the best motors on the starting line. The power is immediate and lush. The abruptness of the red burst makes the Honda the quickest 125 out of the hole every time. The RM125 engine can't match the CR's bottom, but they are closely matched in the mid-range. The Yamaha YZ125 can't sniff the CR125R's low or mid-range but guns it down on top. The outcome of all of these analyses is that the Honda 125 pulls harder off the bottom, holds its own through the mid-range, and can be short-shifted back into bliss five more times. The motor is the best part of the whole package. It is the most usable, flexible and potent unit of all the 1980 125s



The class of the class. Honda's CR125R makes the starting line a prerequisite for the trophy presentation.

The motor is strong enough to do business against the best in the class because the Honda CR125R motor is the best in the class. It is good.

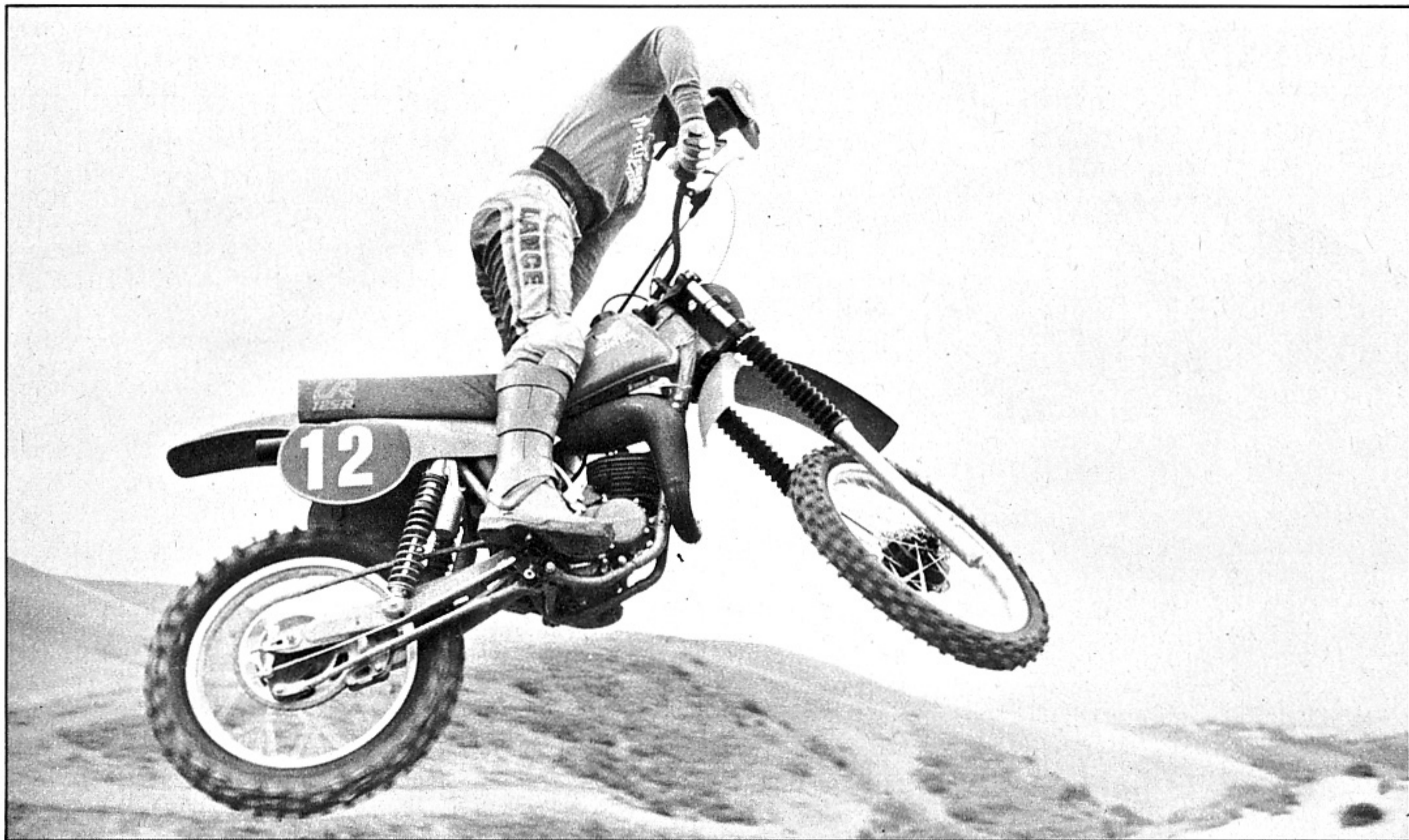
The suspension is undoubtedly the worst in the class. The ultra-trick, aluminum-bodied Showa reservoir shocks are passable. An average rider can live with them until he saves up the bucks for more sophisticated boingers. Fast shoes can whip them into a frenzy in about 15

minutes. The spring rates are a touch soft on the rear end, and the springs suffer from endless sag. We had our best results by setting the stockers on the heavy damping setting. While we were doing this, we found out that the bike came from Japan with the right shock on light damping, and the left shock set on heavy. Beyond a doubt the YZ rear suspension is superior, as are the RM Kayaba shocks.

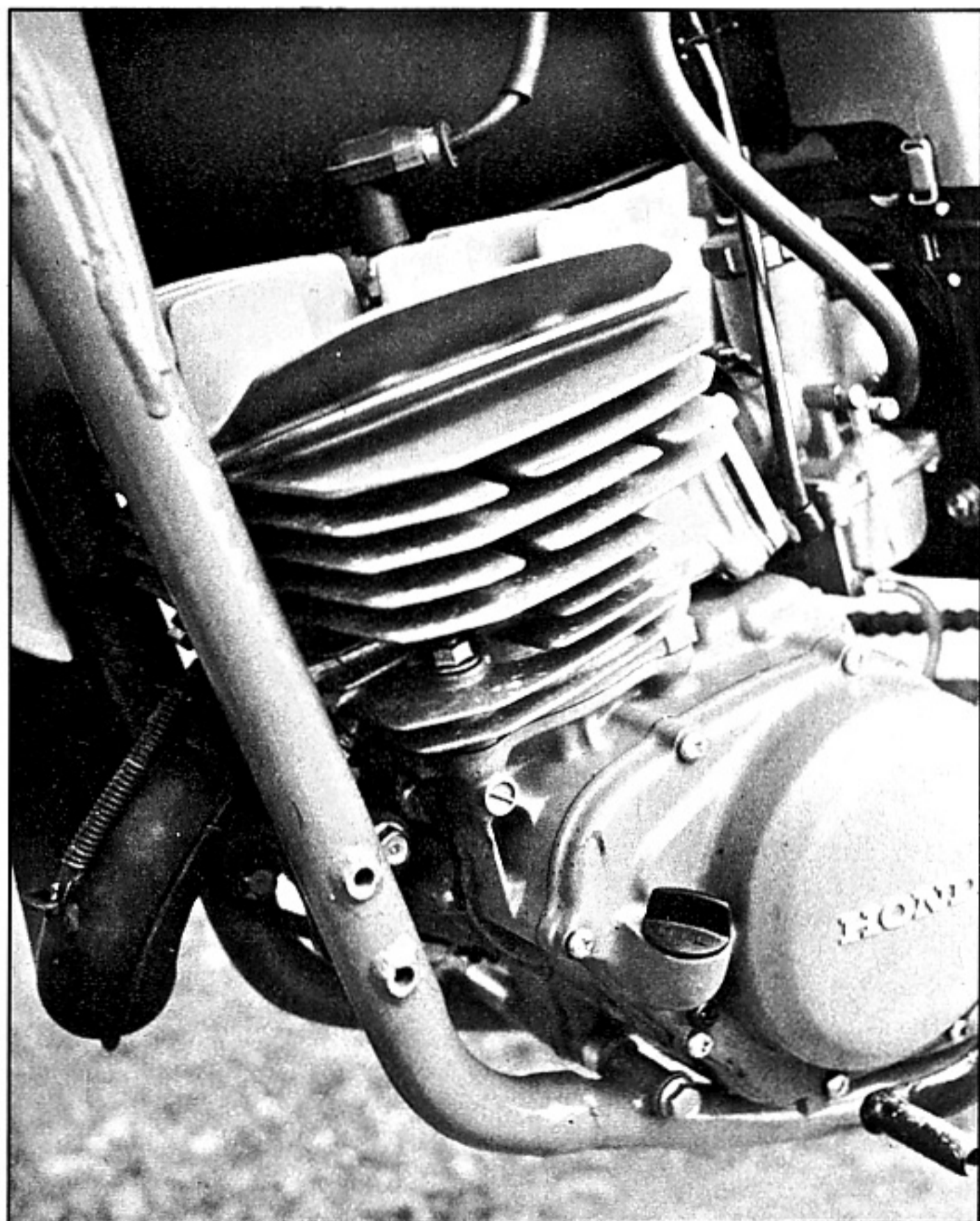
The front forks are too soft in the stock



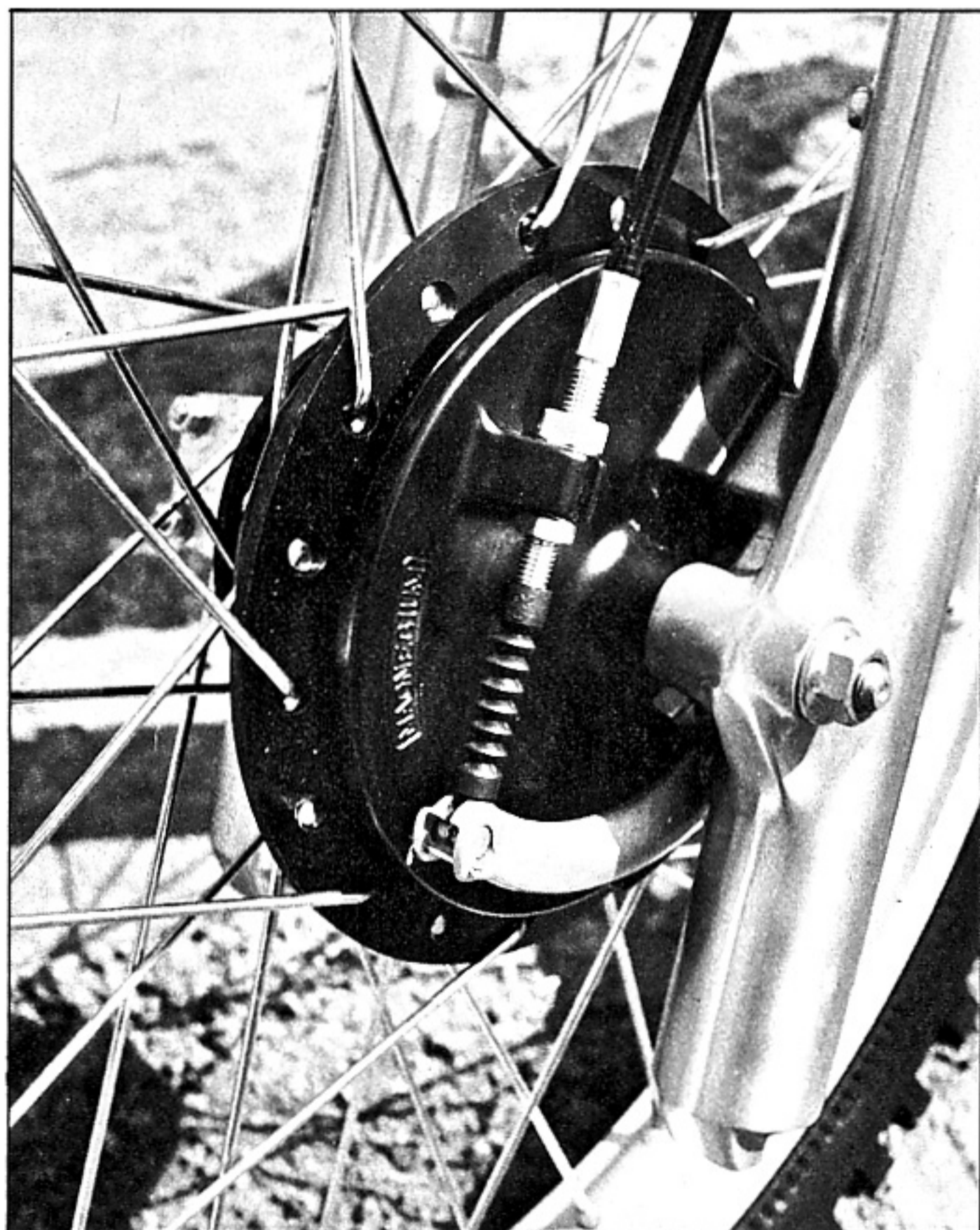
HONDA CR125R



Honda should put a gun sight on the front fender so that 125 riders can shoot down the competition.



The exhaust has been moved to the center to fit the double downtube frame, and the horses have been increased over last year.



Honda's front brake is among the best in the business. It doesn't grab, fade or ruin your underwear when you need it. It is an ideal stopper.

setting, but the damping rate is in the ballpark. The biggest problem with the front forks is that Honda, in a repeat of last year, went for the steepest rake possible. The Honda CR125R wiggles its handlebars like crazy going into bumpy turns. The handlebar-rattling is disconcerting, but not death-defying like last year. Mostly it is irritating. We slid the forks down into the triple clamps until the air valve was just visible down in the triple clamps. The bite of the triple clamps was greatly reduced, but the front end was raised an inch, and the slight increase in rake stabilized the handling.

Honda CR125R riders will become known as Mr. Inside at their local tracks. The steep rake, good turning and punchy low end make the inside line the hot ticket. Diving the CR125R inside of all the yellow bikes and roosting out is great fun, but attacking the outside line requires a bit of caution. The geometry that makes Mr. Inside so good, makes Mr. Outside hit or miss. The stubby, tall Honda has to be totally committed to the berms, and have unwavering (especially the throttle hand) faith in blasting through it.

The Honda handles well, but it rewards a cut-and-thrust tactic better than a high-speed sweep.

One of Honda's greatest traits, from the inception of the CR line in 1973, is its flight-time maneuverability. The Honda feels at least ten pounds lighter than it is, and can be tossed around in the air with total immunity from pre-flight fright. The light weight, quick handling and retro-rocket low end make the CR125R the most fun of all the 125s.

Jetting is critical with Honda's Keihin carb. Our CR125R snapped and popped off the bottom. It still hit hard, but it crackled twice before it got on the pipe. We ran 20:1 Castrol R, which is a fairly heavy mix, and had to drop the needle a notch. The problem was cleaned up instantly.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT

Honda threw away last year's frame, cylinder, pipe, front wheel, gas tank, side panels, swingarm and shocks. It was all to the good. The new double-downtube frame and center-port cylinder are the most noticeable changes, aside from the plastic gas tank. The frame has been designed to accommodate a 21-inch front wheel. Last year's 23-inch front wheel experiment was a failure in both geometry and rubber selection. Nineteen eighty brings about *slightly* better front geometry (still too steep) and a vastly improved front tire (goodbye Claw).

Sitting on the CR125R rewards the rider a view of the front of his bike. The short, pudgy little gas tank, upright handlebars and steep rake give the rider a shocking

view of his front wheel.

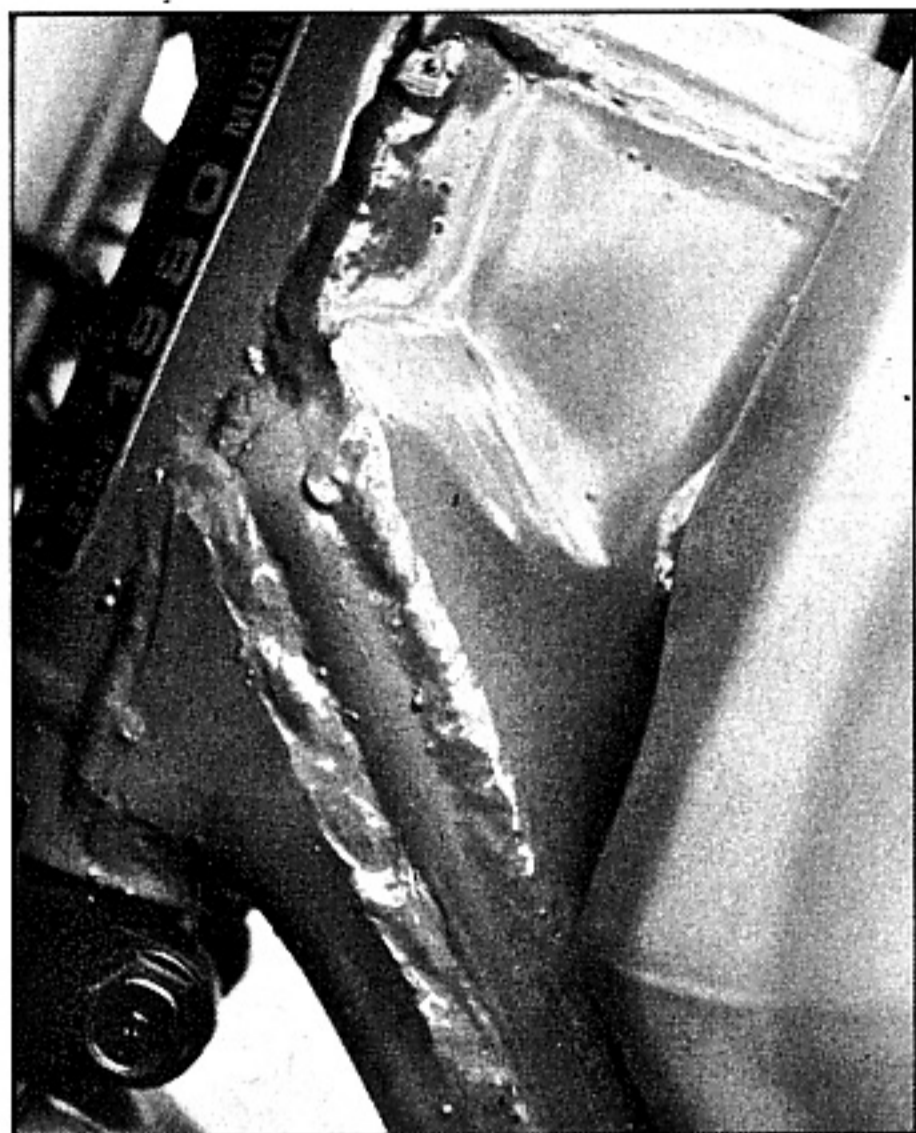
Another shocking view is the swingarm from behind. The swingarm looks like a road map to Granny's house. There is a bend in the right side of the road. The strange bend is there to clear the right side brake and chain drive. Not only is the swingarm strange-looking, but it is a fairly

crude example of Honda craftsmanship. The box-structure swingarm is covered with a large, crimped-over gusset that was MIG-welded by someone who learned his trade in a bubble gum factory. The swingarm weighs several pounds more than necessary, and for all its overkill gussetting isn't very strong. Most of the welds on the

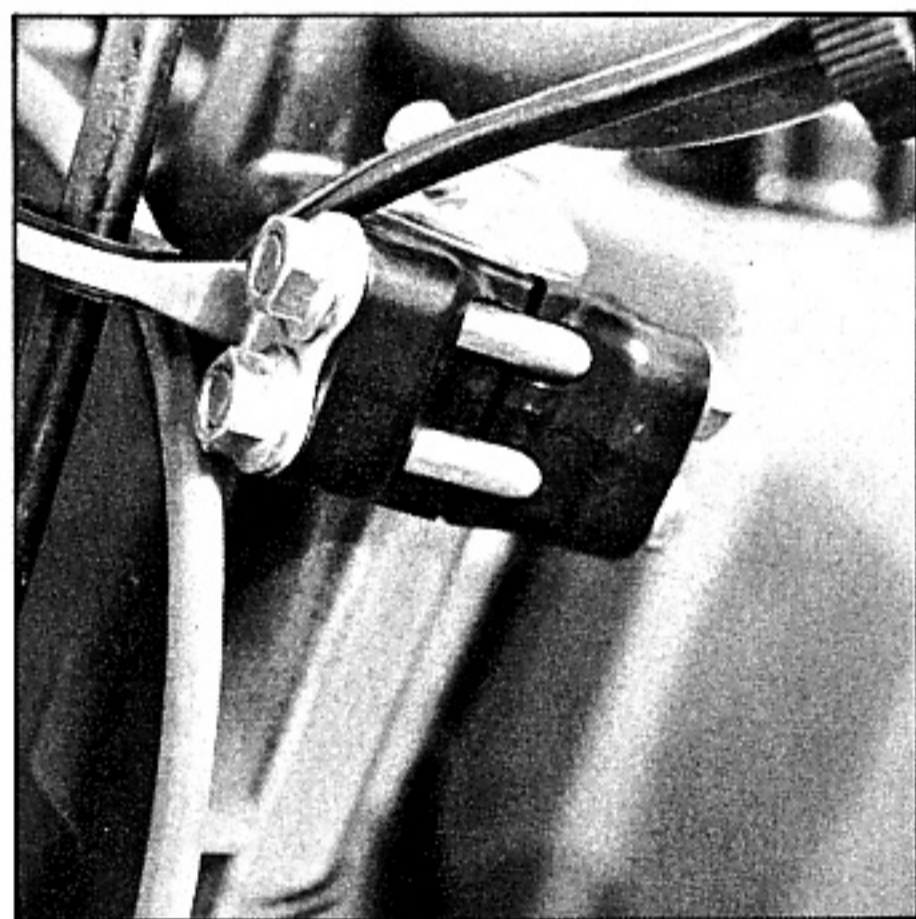


Short bursts of power make the Honda easy and fun to ride. It hits hard and fast.

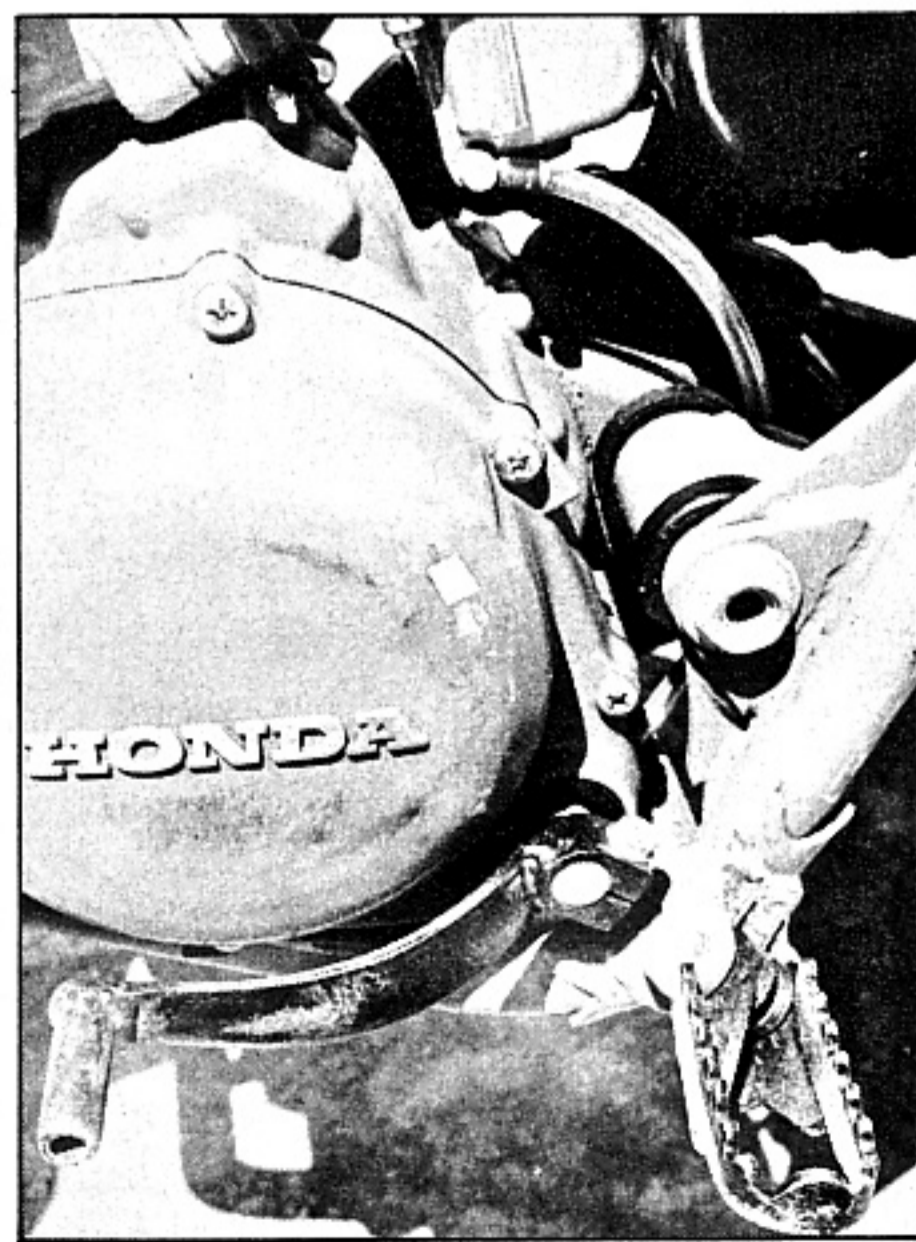
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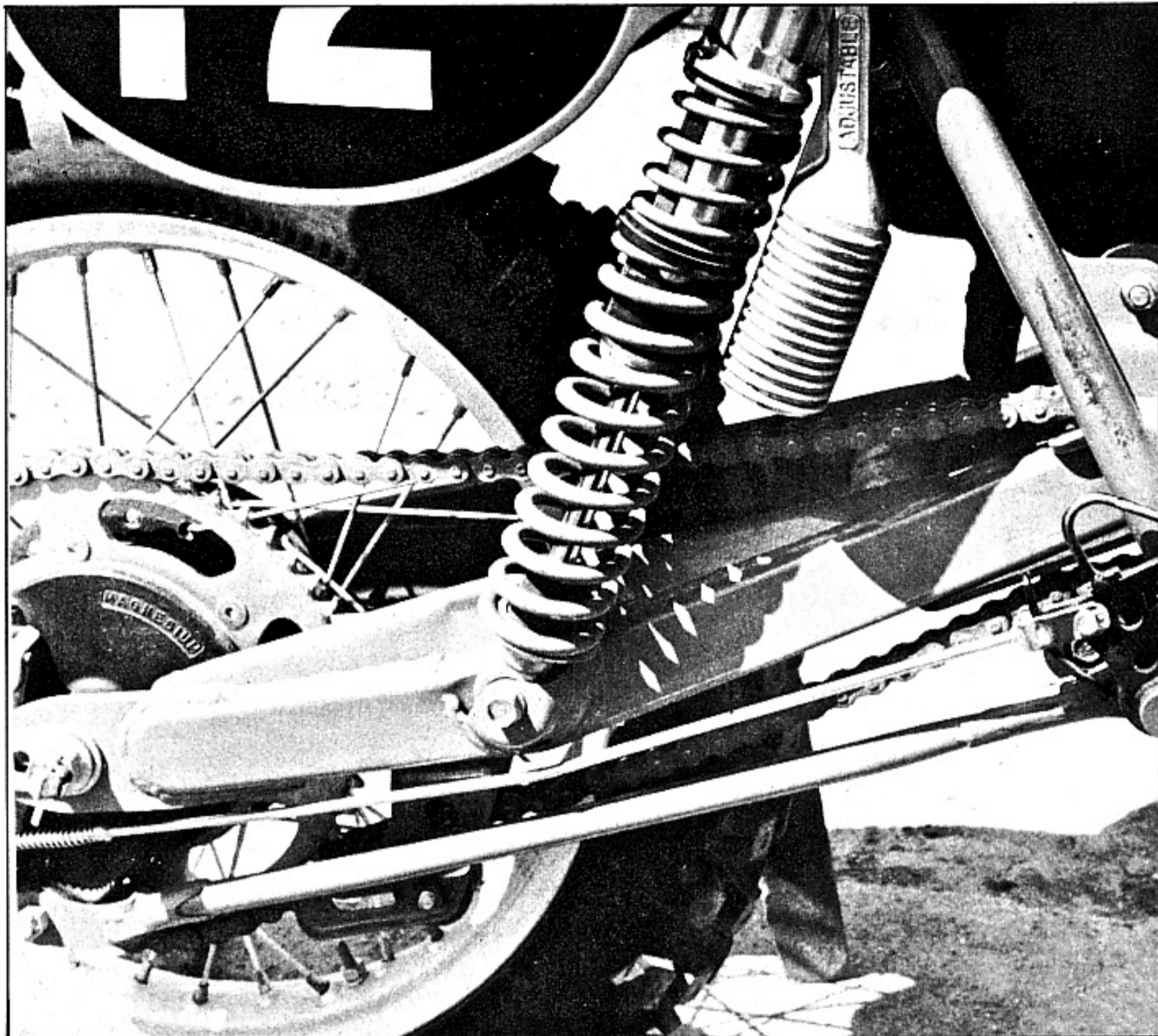
Honda should be embarrassed to try to pass this off as welding.



We slid the fork leg down into the triple clamp until only the Schraeder valve stuck up.



The shift lever can be pretzeled easily. Get a folder.



The shocks are clunkers after ten minutes, and the swingarm is ultra-heavy and crudely made.

frame are among the worst-looking on any Japanese bike we have ever seen. Machine welding (MIG) is quick, but it is also prone to covering up its own mistakes with gobs of melted metal. The steering head gusseting has welds that look like runny paint.

Getting the job done and looking good while at work are a couple of the Honda's highlights. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the Honda is the best 125 in an extremely competitive group. Its red and black styling makes it stand out from the run-of-the-mill yellow cosmetics that have dominated the starting lines for the past couple of years.

BITS AND PIECES

Honda has finally put a big gas cap opening on their bikes. The big opening is more a function of the requirements of plastic molding than Honda's concern for those of us holding the 30-pound Jerry Jug. Either way, the opening is large enough to work with.

The shift lever is made out of steel. In the past, Honda has mounted expensive cast aluminum shift levers. The steel is better, because it is cheaper to replace, and since it is exposed to danger you should replace it with a folding lever right away.

The piston on the 55.5mm by 50.7mm bore and stroke engine has two rings this year. The liner is steel! Last year the liner

was chrome. Honda felt that the chrome liner was better, but that the boreable steel unit made more sense in terms of engine life.

The air box is still one of the most difficult to get into. The filter is bolted, hose-clamped and wedged into place. The filter itself is a dual-layer foam model, but the two layers can't be taken apart. It would be better if the separate foam pieces could be washed individually.

Honda uses its special grid pattern reed valves on the CR125R, and local tuners are having good luck with Boyesen reeds and 36mm Mikunis. The power is so good stock that hopping the motor up isn't first priority.

The brakes are great. Only the double leading shoe brake on the YZ465 comes as close to perfection as the Honda's brakes. The feel and power are about ideal for a motocross bike.

The forks have benefitted this year from a special Teflon/Dacron-type bushing that lowers fork stiction, drag and bind by providing a supportive, but friction-free, contact area at two points on each leg. The forks are definitely better than last year's Honda units.

The rear brake pedal has a loop welded on it to keep your boot off of the frame. Our test riders would occasionally catch their Scott boot hinges on this loop. We tapped it with a hammer to make it fit

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closer to the frame. The gas tank has a rubber mounting strap, but it is backed up by a safety wire. If the rubber strap breaks, the safety wire keeps the tank from falling off. The fork air caps are angled so that the air valve faces outward at a better position for filling or checking.

Watch the front motor mount bolt. The engine is held in place by two bolts and the swingarm pivot. The front bolt had a tendency to loosen up. The spokes joined in and came loose at regular intervals. When the CR125R is new, the front wheel should be checked constantly. The tank decals loosen up also, but don't fall completely off. They just fray around the edges.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The Honda CR125R needs new rear shocks, a stronger swingarm and better tires. Once it has those three items, it is ready for the starting line at the USGP. The CR125R works within the standardized scope to 125 motocross. It is a torquey, hard-hitting, mid-range engine paired with a quick-handling, Mr. Inside frame. The incredibly agile-feeling motorcycle makes you want to ride it harder and harder every lap. Honda has vastly improved the CR125R for 1980, and has taken the title of *Best 125* away from Suzuki. □