

MOTOCROSS ACTION MAGAZINE 125 SHOOTOUT

SEEKING A CLEAR-



CUT WINNER

The best & worst of
the 1992 tiddlers



125 SHOOTOUT

□ When a rider scrawls his John Hancock on a personal check for \$3500 there is no such thing as a bad bike. He will defend his choice even if he is getting lapped. Human nature is a strange thing. The guy will be replacing pistons faster than a disc jockey plays records, getting blown away on short straights, left in the gate by 39 other guys and he will still try to talk his pal into buying the same brand. Funny, isn't it?

The MXA wrecking crew understands brand loyalty—we admire it, but we are not driven by it. When you line up five test riders and tell them to pick the 125 they want to race, they scratch, claw and muscle their way over to the best bike in the class. No loyalty—not even to each other. A test rider races a different bike each weekend; sometimes a different bike from one moto to the next. It does not take a savvy rider long to realize the differences between each and every bike made—MXA test riders have to take what is given to them and make the best out of it. They have to try to win with what they are handed, and make the most out of what their test iron does best (even if its only plus is that it starts on the first kick). Being a test rider is not a bowl of cherries—but it does distinguish good from bad.

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

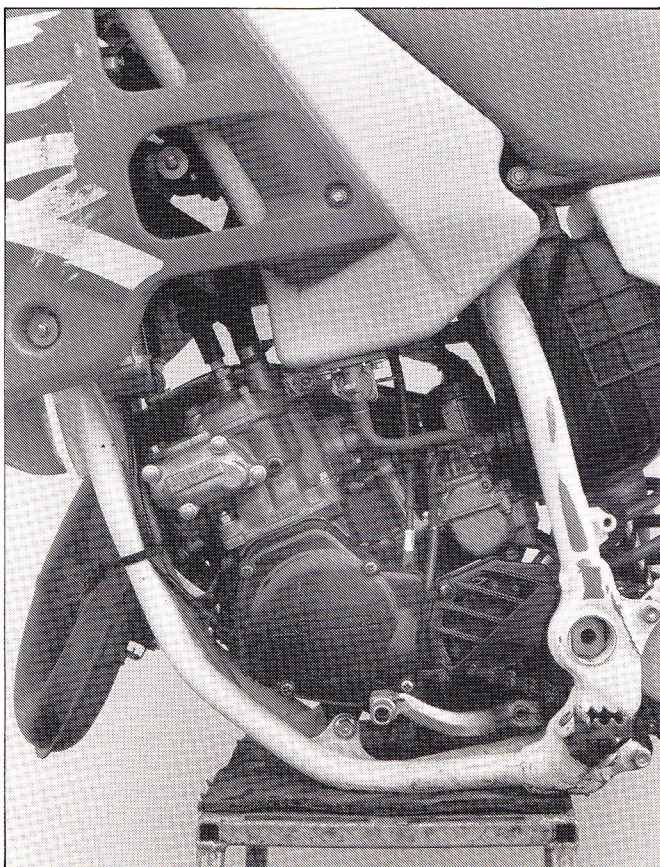
For six months the MXA wrecking crew has been riding and racing the '92 125s at Carlsbad, Perris, L.A. County, Glen Helen and Sunrise Cycle Parks. They have switched bikes, swapped parts, turned clickers, lowered oil heights, won some, lost some and some got rained out. The result is a comprehensive look at the '91 125cc motocross bikes. We were seeking a clear-cut winner!

HORSEPOWER & TORQUE WHICH 125 IS THE MOST POWERFUL?

- The fastest machine is not always the winning machine, and that is true in drag racing, hydroplaning and Formula One as well as motocross. While the fastest bike is not always the best bike, it is a heck of a lot closer to it than the slowest bike.

WHICH 125 IS THE FASTEST?

The '92 Honda CR125 is so much faster than the other 125s that it is almost embarrassing. When the Honda power kicks in the CR accelerates like it is burning nitro. It literally shrieks away from the competition with a midrange-and-up powerband that stands head and shoulders over the yellow, white and green brands. As fast as the CR125 is, it is not without disadvantages. The biggest deficit to the CR's dominance is that the little Honda is hard to ride. It has a flat spot in the powerband between the bottom-end and the midrange. This dead spot causes the CR to fall off the pipe between gears or if the rider gets lazy. To stay



CR handles: Honda's chassis is beginning to show its age (circa 1973). The front of the CR turns quicker than the rear, especially when you are going straight. Lots of headshake at speed and rear end wag under braking.

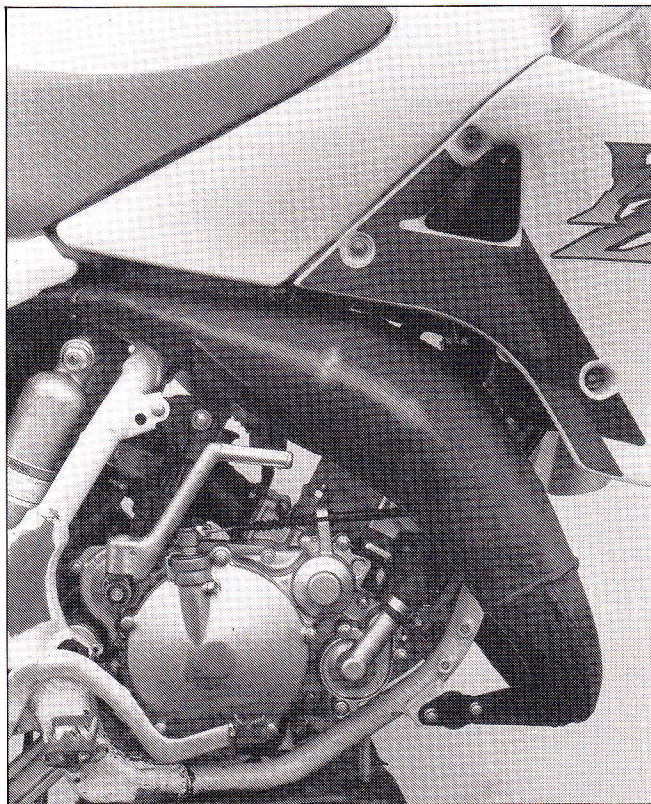
◀ The king of speed: Honda's power is hindered by a small flat spot between the bottom and mid, but its sheer quantity of horses from the mid on up glosses over this minor glitch.

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YZ figures: Without making any geometry changes Yamaha was able to improve the YZ125's handling over last year. How? Improved suspension components tame down the lanky feel of the chassis. Its biggest plus is high-speed stability.

The zinger: Yamaha has reached the end of the development line with the YZ125 motor. After five years of trying to get a top-notch power out of the old castings, Yamaha needs to re-group and re-cast. ►



off the lull in the lower-middle, a Honda rider has to keep the CR125 mill boiling. Ride it hard, keep it pegged and never back off. It is fast, but hard to ride.

WHICH 125 HAS THE BEST POWERBAND?

Selecting the best powerband is not the same as picking the fastest machine. Speed

and manageability are not the same thing.

The best 125 powerband for all of the MXA test riders was found on the Suzuki RM125. It had the best mix of usable power, horsepower spread and responsive pick-up. It was hard to fall off of the RM's nifty little powerband. While test riders complained that the RM was not as fast as the Honda,

they could use the motor in more situations than the CR.

Kawasaki has the second most usable powerband. KX power is well placed, much more flexible than in '91 and decidedly dead center. It picks up cleanly out of turns and churns through tricky off-camber sections. Again, the test riders didn't believe that the KX had the sheer grunt to run head-to-head with the CR, but then no bike in the 125 class is prepped to drag race the CR.

For riders from intermediate to pro levels, the Honda is the only bike with the kind of power they want. It hits hard in the middle and revs to the moon. Pros do not care about low-end because they do not spend any time down there. Do not think, however, that the CR is lacking in low-end power; it is just that the low-end is not mated to the top-end. It will grunt out of a corner, but the power bogs as it climbs upward. For a fast rider the bog is no problem. By keeping the throttle pegged and clutching the CR mill, a talented rider can make it sing. It is only '92 125 that wants to rev.

KTM really deserved to place higher in the powerband category, but the Austrian built motor had a few problems. It had a very nice low-end to midrange transition, and a punchy midrange, but the KTM's power was muted by poor jetting and bulky shifting. Test riders wanted more rev.

The Yamaha YZ125 had the narrowest powerband and was even harder to keep on the pipe than the CR (in fact, the YZ made the CR powerband look easy to use). YZ riders have to keep the throttle pegged in



the meat of the powerband and shift gears with a rapid-fire delivery. It can run at competitive speeds, but the rider has to work hard.

WHICH IS THE SLOWEST 125?

Yamaha has the slowest 125 on the track. No surprise. It was also the slowest 125 in '91. Which is the second slowest? The KTM, KX and RM are all about equal in speed.

WHICH 125 IS THE QUICKEST?

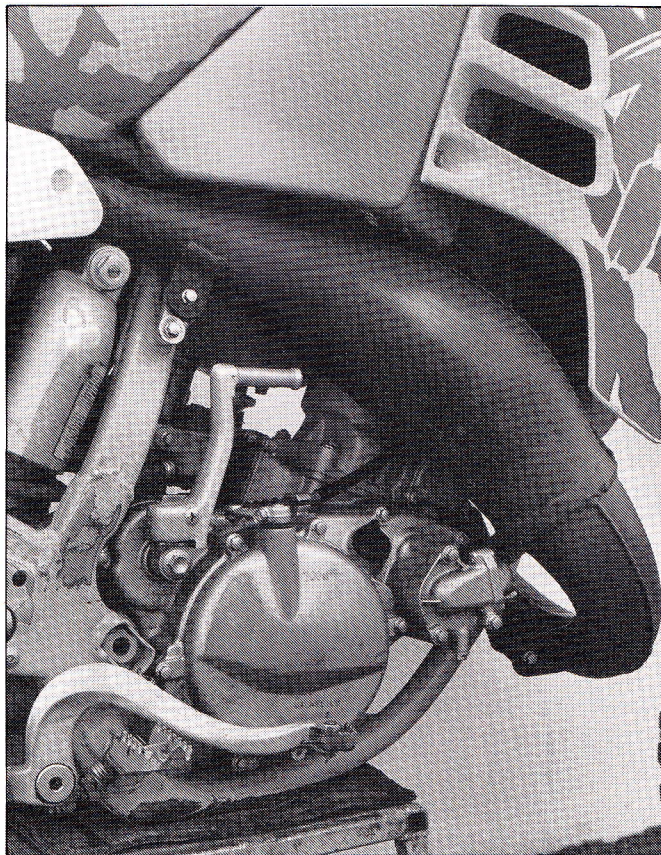
The quickest bike is the one that reponds best to throttle input. You ask it for more power and it delivers. The Suzuki RM125 is the quickest bike in the shootout. It can be made to jump out of the starting gate with a full wheel advantage almost every time. If the start is long enough the CR125 will run the RM down. The CR could be considered the quickest 125 (once the bikes are in motion) because the Honda has the hardest midrange hit. From a standing start the RM is quickest, but at a rolling speeds the CR is the jackrabbit.

WHICH 125 HAS THE BEST JETTING?

Not the KTM, Yamaha or Honda. The Suzuki had the best stock jetting. The Honda ran too rich and popped at high rpm. Yamaha never seemed to have enough fuel to make it run. KTM uses a Dellorto carburetor that was way too rich. Kawasaki was in the ballpark, but the RM was spot-on. For more info on jetting, check the "How to Jet Your Bike" article on page 151.

WHICH 125 WINS THE MOTOR CATEGORY?

The test riders only wanted to ride three of the five motors: CR, RM or KX. The first pick for the test riders, and any rational

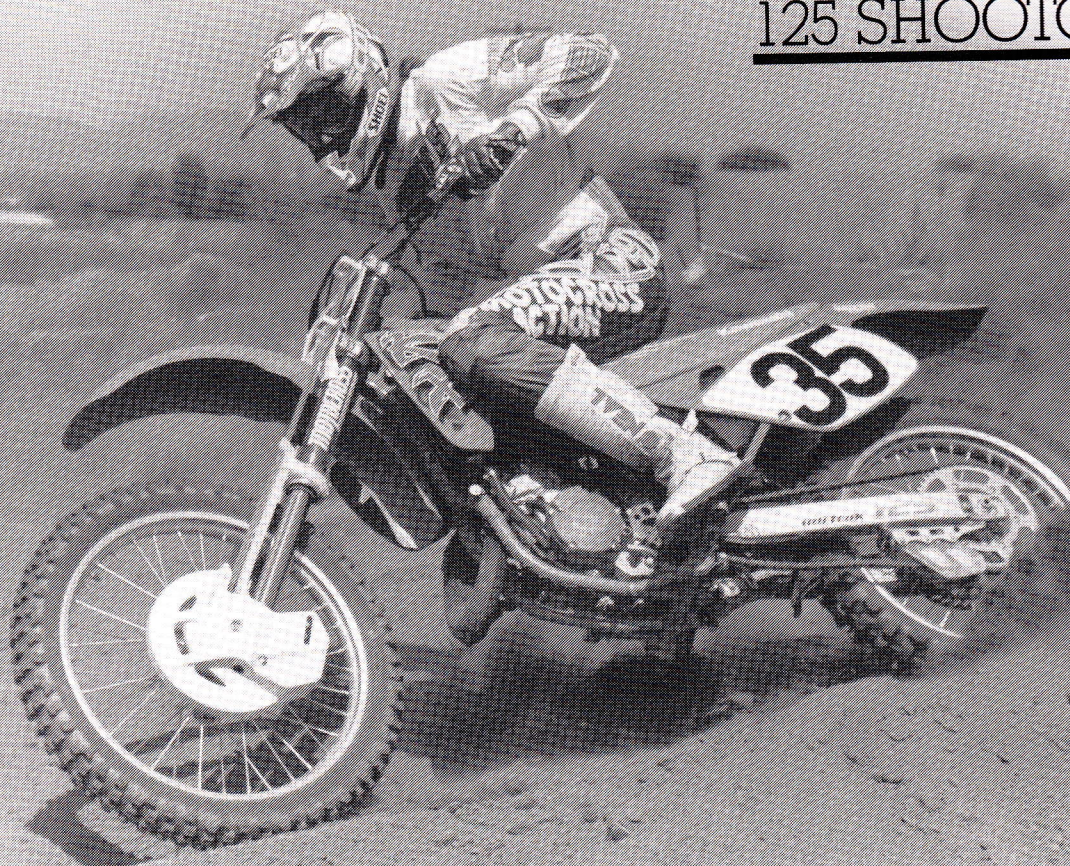


motocross racer, is the Honda CR125. Yes, it is hard to ride at slow speed, but it is so fast you would have to really flub it to go slow. Suzuki was the second choice of the test riders. It is a good, usable, well-placed and aggressive motor. Not eye-watering

RM carver: On tight, twisty, technical tracks the Suzuki RM125 shines. No bike tracks as well from turn to turn, jumps higher or feels lighter. Its only handling flaw is a serious case of St. Vitus dance at speed.

◀ *The most responsive: Suzuki doesn't make the most horsepower, but its vibes are so well placed, usable and responsive that the test riders did not demand more. That's a first.*

fast, but able to go fast by having almost perfect power placement. The Kawasaki motor was rated third by every test rider. The KX125 did everything the test riders asked of it, and if it had been faster overall it would have won overall. •



JUMPS, CORNERS & TRANSITIONS

WHICH 125 HANDLES BEST?

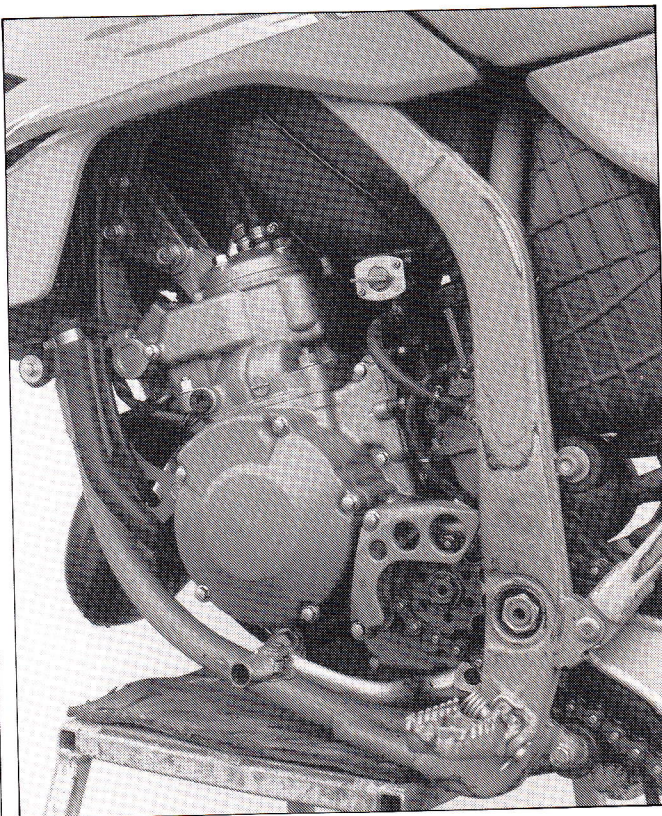
• Handling is the toughest category for an inexperienced rider to evaluate. Dirt, traction, speed, suspension and bike setup all play a major part in altering a bike's handling. The object of the handling categories is to determine the specific handling characteristics that make each brand stand out.

WHICH 125 HANDLES THE QUICKEST?

Trying to evaluate quick handling in the 125 class is like trying to judge a dog show on fleas. All dogs have them, and all 125s handle quickly—but they do not all handle the same.

In '92 the Suzuki RM125 is the quickest handling bike on the track. Thanks to a well-balanced chassis, the RM can nip inside a tight turn without any wander or drift. It is the most accurate, and that is where it shines.

Each and every one of the remaining '92 125s is able to turn tight turns, but they all have flaws. Yamaha has managed to get improved cornering out of the venerable YZ frame but it has a hinged feeling. The CR125 likes to cut inside, but its front wheel is much more accurate than the rear wheel. When you hammer the Honda out of the inside line it wants to stand up and find



traction by swinging the rear wheel outward. KTM is a steer-and-point bike. It turns tight turns in a mechanical way.

Kawasaki stands out from the pack in that it is the least adept at making tight turns. The slack head angle of the KX makes it

push the front wheel when you try to force it around a slippery inside line.

WHICH 125 IS THE MOST STABLE AT SPEED?

Kawasaki is the easiest bike to go fast on. It has minimum amount of wiggle, drift,

KX uniqueness: Kawasaki handling is different from everything else on the market. The big, stable and predictable KX favors wide-open outdoor tracks over supercross-style terrain. It turns slow, but is super stable.

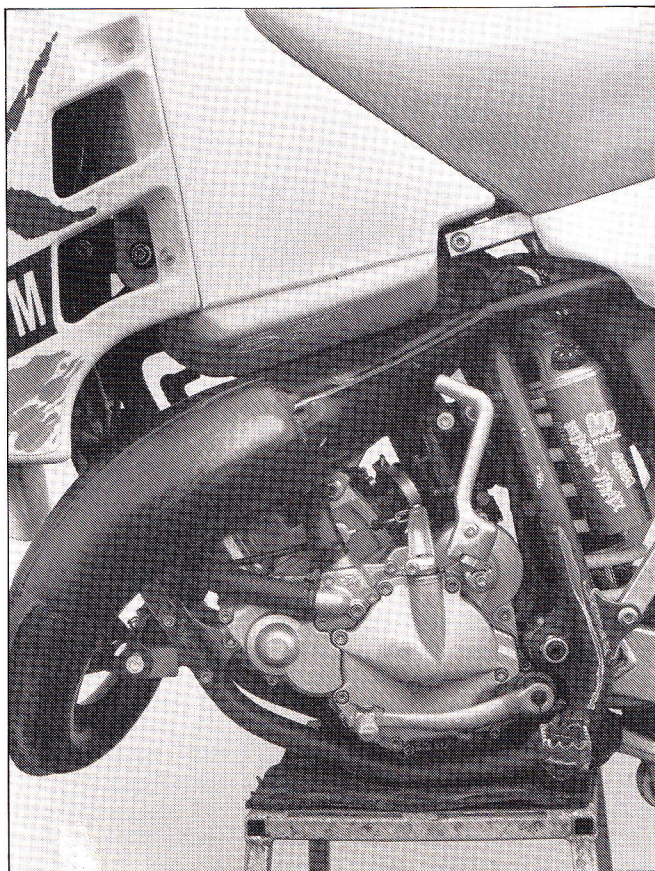
◀ **The gruntest:** Kawasaki built an extremely usable midrange powerband that works across a broad range. It gives up power to Honda and snap to Suzuki, but for the majority of riders it's almost the perfect motor.

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KTM overall: KTM is a steer-and-point motorcycle that goes where you aim it, but it's not a natural, free-flowing and fluid machine to ride. Test riders had to force the KTM to turn, jump or carve.

The bank vault: It's conceivable that the Austrian mill churns out the most mid-range of any 125 made, but with a finicky clutch and roulette wheel tranny the odds of unleashing the Katoom power are slim. ►



shake or twitch. The combination of stable geometry and top-notch suspension makes it the bike to ride if you are going to be slamming square-edged bumps at 50 mph-plus.

WHICH IS THE TWITCHIEST 125?

There are tracks where test riders wanted to get off and walk rather than ride through the bumps on the Honda and Suzuki. Honda has a reputation for headshake that is well deserved. This is a bike that looks like it is trying to shake off fleas on the fast straights. The Suzuki is a short-coupled frame that is engineered for quickness instead of stability. When the Honda starts shaking its head it is scary, but the RM's busyness is only distracting.

WHICH IS THE BEST JUMPER?

Suzuki! This bike should come with maple syrup because it can be pancaked over anything bigger than a short stack.

When asked to choose a bike to jump a tricky tabletop followed by a double jump combination, all of the test riders ranked the '92 125s in this order: 1. Suzuki; 2. Honda; 3. Kawasaki; 4. Yamaha; 5. KTM.

WHICH 125 HANDLES THE BEST?

Being the quickest is not always a true measure of which bike handles the best; after all, the toughest turns on a race track are often the high-speed sweepers, or is that deep berms? Off-cambers? Slick turns? Switchbacks? You get the picture.

So the bike that handles the quick and tight stuff the best is not necessarily the best overall bike, but in the case of the '92 125s, it is. Suzuki has the best combination of turning traits. They have designed a handling package that wants to keep the wheels under the rider. In most cases the test riders felt that the RM was the most accurate and predictable of the bikes in the turns. With the exception of tight turns, the Kawasaki KX125 was a close runner-up. Thanks to its stability, the KX is outstanding on flat corners, fast bends and bumpy turns. If it could tuck inside it would be the best.

Yamaha is third in the handling category, although as we began to get more and more power out of our hopped-up YZ motor the previously faultless YZ handling began to deteriorate. It must be true that the slower a bike is, the better it handles.

The Honda and KTM rated at the back of the group in overall handling. The Honda's poor performance may come as a surprise to riders who think that the fastest bike is the best bike—not true! The CR wags the rear end going into bumpy corners, flat-tracks the rear wheel coming out of smooth turns and dribbles the back of the bike on bumpy straights. It is a bike with too much motor for the current chassis.

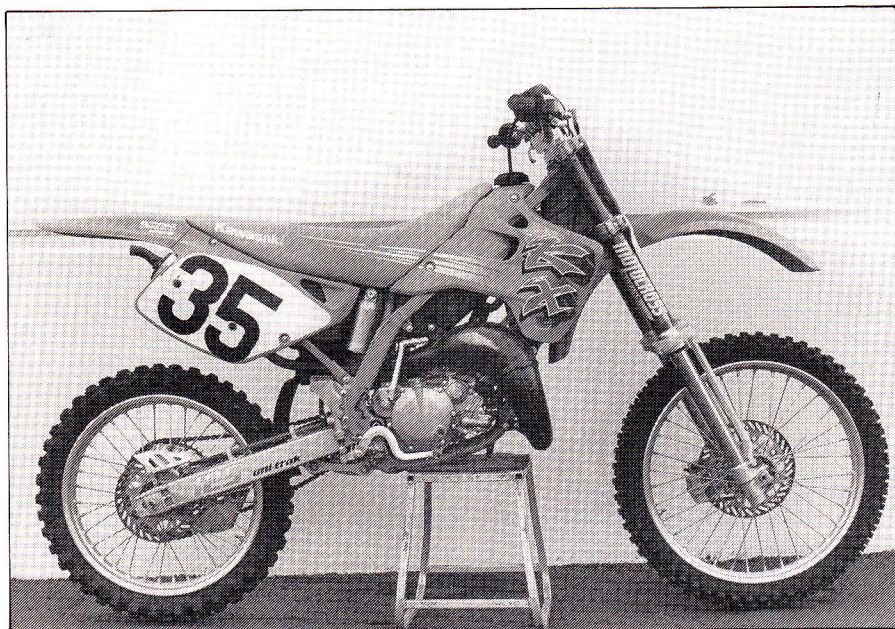
WHICH 125 HANDLES BEST?

If you are keeping a scorecard you can give the power category to Honda and the handling category to Suzuki. •

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Honda CR125: "Damn the whoops! Full speed ahead!" is the motto of 1992 Honda CR125 riders. With the strongest motor and the weakest suspension, riding the little red (make that pink) Honda is the roller coaster ride of the 125 class.



Kawasaki KX125: Every test rider felt that the KX125's superb suspension and stable chassis are pluses that are hard to ignore. There are stronger motors and quicker frames, but none are more confidence-inspiring in the rough stuff.

SHOWA, KAYABA & WHITE POWER WHICH 125 HAS THE BEST SUSPENSION?

• Suspension is where the manufacturers have begun to place the majority of their emphasis. White Power (KTM), Kayaba (Yamaha, Kawasaki and the rear of Honda) and Showa (Suzuki and the front of Honda) want to make suspension that keeps the

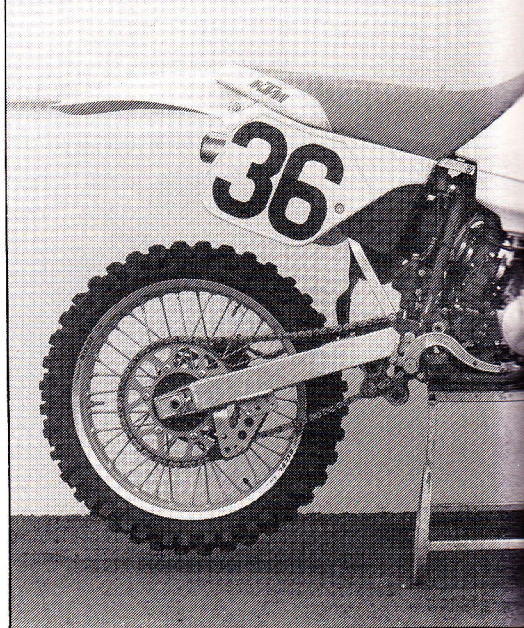
wheels on the ground. For '92 all five of the 125s have new, revised and revalved suspension components. Which ones work best?

WHICH 125 HAS THE BEST FORKS?

No contest! Kawasaki has the best combination of spring rate, damping, valving, stiffness and design. These are buy-'em-and-race-'em forks. The test riders struggled with all of the other forks, but not with the KX units. Very good front suspension.

WHICH 125 HAS THE WORST FORKS?

It is cruel to come straight out and rake the work of a fork engineer over the coals



KTM 125: There hasn't been a dominant European-built 125 in almost 20 years. There still isn't. KTM has managed to produce a competitive midrange powerband that is hampered by its chassis, brakes, suspension, shifting and clutch. What's left?

without first stating that all of the '92 forks can be made better with careful setup. The degree to which you do your own testing on spring rates and oil heights will determine how well your bike's forks work. That said, we felt that the Suzuki RM125 forks were the second best forks in the 125 shootout. Every test rider felt that they could race both the KX or RM forks without worry.

Yamaha was a decent third place. The stock spring rate is too soft, the spring preload is too much and the oil height too high, but even with these flaws the YZ forks work adequately. We would opt for the next stiffest spring and an oil height somewhere below 115mm. KTM's White Power forks were vastly improved over last season, but they still rank fourth behind the KX, RM and YZ.

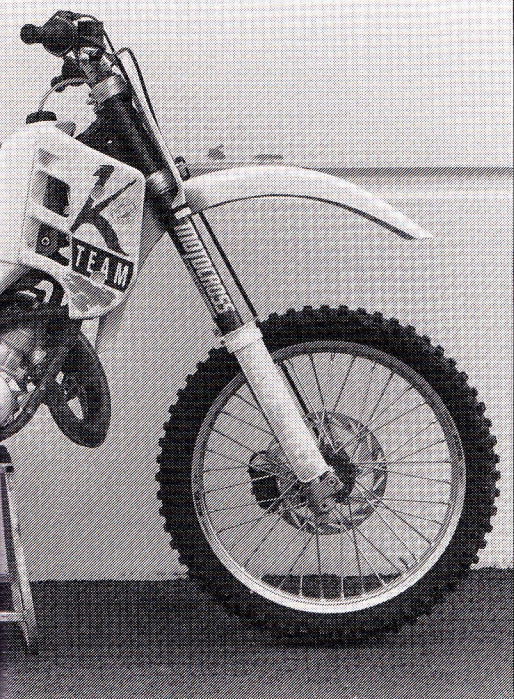
That leaves Honda. Test riders felt that they could get the CR125 forks to work by switching to the stiffer 0.38 kg/mm spring, lowering the oil height to 135mm, setting the compression on six clicks out and the rebound on 14 clicks. Even with all of these changes the CR forks still lacked the plushness of the KX's Kayabas.

WHICH 125 HAS THE BEST SHOCK?

Kawasaki wins again. How did the test riders rate rear shocks? 1. Kawasaki; 2. Suzuki; 3. Yamaha; 4. KTM; 5. Honda.

WHO HAS THE BEST OVERALL SUSPENSION?

It doesn't take creative bookkeeping to add up the results of the suspension shootout. When it comes to box-stock,



race-ready, showroom suspension, the '92 Kawasaki KX125 is the king of the tiddlers. The KX has the best forks, shock, spring rates and damping. Kawasaki also has the best suspension in the 250 class, which is a surprise because they were poorly rated in the 250 suspension category. Yamaha is third, with KTM and Honda following.

ARE YOU KEEPING SCORE?

Let us see: Honda won the "Power Category." Suzuki won the "Handling Category." Kawasaki won the "Suspension Category." That is three different test areas and three different winners. •

BRAKES, CLUTCH & TRANNY

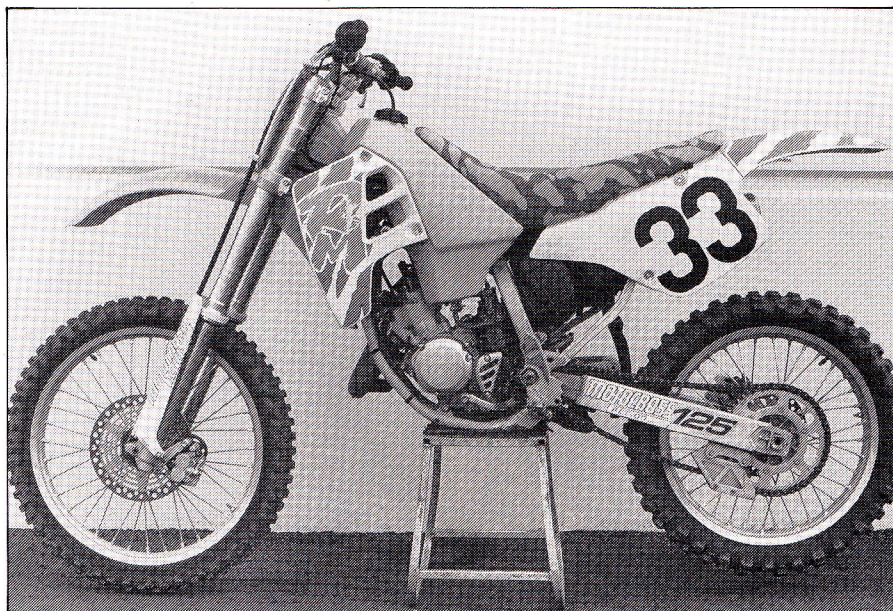
WHICH 125 GOES & STOPS BEST?

• A bike is more than just horsepower, handling and suspension. It is a combination of the working relationship of 12,000 individual part numbers. That means that a fast bike cannot possibly win if the clutch does not work. A great-handling bike will be at the back of the pack if it will not stop and the best-suspended chassis is a waste without a predictable transmission.

WHICH 250 HAS THE BEST BRAKES?

Honda is so far ahead of the competition in the brake department that the other manufacturers should be embarrassed. Honda not only stops on a dime, but it never needs anything more than once-a-year maintenance. Foolproof and trouble-free.

In second place in the brake department is Suzuki—and it is far below Honda in overall feel and modulation, with Yamaha close behind in third.



Suzuki RM125: What word best describes the 1992 RM125? How about "wiry?" It's lean, strong, quick and agile. It depends on fast hands more than the big punch. No matter how you cut it, the Suzook delivers a knockout to the competition.



Yamaha YZ125: Yamaha has built a bike that demands the rider's full attention. Handling, suspension and layout are first-rate, but to go fast on the Why-Zed you have to go-for-broke and concentrate on keeping the narrow powerband on the bubble.

Kawasaki and KTM have passable brakes, but they really need to learn a lesson from Honda's powerful, aggressive, easy-to-use, fingertip pucker power.

WHICH 125 HAS THE BEST CLUTCH?

KTM has the worst clutch, so bad that it would be overstressed handling the power of a minicycle. Yamaha has a spongy feel, and because of the tricky power delivery of the YZ125 motor the YZ clutch tends to lose modulation during the heat of battle. The KX and RM clutches have very light lever pull, but they tend to get vague during a long moto.

Which one is left? The winner! The Honda CR125 clutch not only has a light pull, but the lever effort is consistent, the clutch release predictable and the CR's durability top-notch.

WHO HAS THE BEST SHIFTING?

If you think we are going to slay Honda, you are right. Honda has the best shifting. Suzuki and Kawasaki are second and third. Yamaha, which used to have the worst shifting in the 125 class, has been eclipsed by the reluctant KTM gearbox. While the Yamaha misses the upshift to third on occasion, the KTM only makes it on occasion. •

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VOTES, BALLOTS & QUORUMS

HOW DO THE 1992 125s RATE?

• Every one of these five bikes can be turned into a winner in the right hands. If you are a loyal Honda, Suzuki, Yamaha, Kawasaki or KTM rider you can buy one with a clear conscience. The *MXA* test crew does not want to tell you what bike to buy. Test riders spend most of their time racing bikes that are not their favorites—they do not just roll over and lose the race because they are not on their personal pick. They ride hard, use the bike's best traits, cover up its worst and, surprisingly, sometimes the bike the test riders hate the most is the one they win on. That is racing.

No one is satisfied with a shootout unless it takes names and hands out citations. We have no qualms about rating the '92 125s.

RATING THE 1992 125s

At regular intervals during the test session the five *MXA* test riders were asked to fill out evaluation forms. The test riders had to give 100 points to the bike that won a category (there are 14 categories) and rate each bike below the category winner with less points. There could be no ties on the evaluation forms. These are the cumulative results of all of the test rider score cards.

Horsepower	Yamaha 90	Cornering	Honda 90
Honda 100	KTM 65	Suzuki 100	Yamaha 85
Suzuki 94		Honda 95	KTM 80
Kawasaki 92	Brakes	Yamaha 90	
KTM 90	Honda 100	KTM 88	Lightness
Yamaha 85	Suzuki 92	Kawasaki 85	Suzuki 100
Powerband	Yamaha 90		Yamaha 95
Suzuki 100	Kawasaki 88	Jumping	Honda 92
Kawasaki 97	KTM 85	Suzuki 100	KTM 82
Honda 95		Honda 98	Kawasaki 80
KTM 88	Supercross	Kawasaki 92	
Yamaha 80	handling	Yamaha 90	Fork action
	Suzuki 100	KTM 85	Kawasaki 100
Shifting	Honda 90		Suzuki 96
Honda 100	Yamaha 88	Straight-line	Yamaha 95
Suzuki 99	Kawasaki 85	stability	KTM 88
Kawasaki 92	KTM 80	Kawasaki 100	Honda 82
Yamaha 85		Yamaha 95	
KTM 70	Outdoor	KTM 94	Shock action
	handling	Suzuki 80	Kawasaki 100
Clutch	Suzuki 100	Honda 78	Suzuki 95
Honda 100	Kawasaki 95		Yamaha 92
Suzuki 95	Yamaha 90	Fit & feel	KTM 90
Kawasaki 92	Honda 88	Suzuki 100	Honda 85
	KTM 85	Kawasaki 94	



The stable: Keeping the MXA test bikes in perfect order is a full-time job, but this year's stable was the most reliable and trouble-free in the history of shootouts (and that's a long time).

That said, the *MXA* test riders want to give you three choices for the '92 season. Take note: There is only one winner, but for specific riders or extraordinary conditions there are two other bikes that deserve attention.

FAST IS AS FAST DOES

No *MXA* test rider believed that the '92 Honda CR125 was the best 125 in the shootout—it is not! Yet every test rider knew that it was the fastest 125, by a large mar-

gin. There are tracks where the CR speed rush makes a big difference, and in those circumstances the test riders felt that giving up first-class suspension and stable handling was worth it.

The '92 Honda CR125 is the perfect bike for a rider who wants to hang on and hammer. You will not finesse anyone in the S-turns, gobble them up through the whoops or blow by them on the rough parts of the track, but when the track is high-speed and

relatively smooth you will vacuum their shorts off on your way past. If you want the fastest bike on the track—ride a CR125.

SMOOTH AS SILK

The '92 Kawasaki KX125 did not win the *MXA* shootout, although there are test riders who believed that it should have. Why did it not win? It was a big, slow-turning tiddler that produced a decent amount of power, but was not at the head of the class in quickness, brakes, speed or clutch. On the other hand, the KX was the easiest bike to ride in the test, and its suspension prowess meant that you could put it places that most of the other 125s did not want to go.

The '92 Kawasaki KX125 is the perfect bike for beginner, novice and intermediate-level riders who are tired of struggling with twitchy, poorly suspended bikes with narrow powerbands. It is easier to make the KX motor into a rocket ship than it is to make the other bikes' suspension as good as the KX's. Kawasaki's suspension and stability make it the bike to ride when the going is rough.

KING OF THE 1992 125s

So who wins? That's obvious. The best 125 in 1992 is the Suzuki RM125. True, it's not the fastest, but every test rider believed that the all-around usability of the RM125 more than made up for that.

The 1992 Suzuki RM125 is the best-balanced package on the track. We were impressed with its reliability (a Suzuki bugaboo in the past), overall handling (only its twitchiness was disconcerting), pleasant power (although it's not a Top Fuel dragster), quality suspension (there's no shame in finishing second to Kawasaki in 1992) and lightness (the RM feels feathery). The RM125 wins because it does what a motocross bike is supposed to do—everything! □