



HONDA XR500R ENDURO

IS BIG RED TUFF E'NUFF?

A Hundred Miles Later, We Find Out

By Rick Sieman

Two years ago, Gary Woodling took a stone stock XR500 Honda and tied for the overall win at the Greenhorn Enduro, losing out by a few cruel seconds on a tie-breaker. Still, an A Open win is nothing to be ashamed of. Gary felt that the big, lumbering XR could be made to do the job in enduros, in spite of the common thought that it "was nothing more than a fun trail bike."

After entering Big Red in a handful of western-type enduros, Gary found the limitations of the big bike in a real woods run. End of experiment. Thoughts? Great bike, OK under normal conditions, but tough to handle on a really rough enduro.

Two years have passed, one shock has been removed, and the Honda XR-500 is now a completely different bike. Of all the important statistics, the new Honda shares only one with the old Honda: it's still heavy, tipping the scales at nearly 300 pounds, full of gas, oil and tools.

In fact, we almost dismissed the XR-500 as a serious enduro bike because of the heavy 277.7 pounds, dry listing in the advance spec sheets. Then, we had a chance to sling an editorial leg over the bike at a Honda press function and found that the new XR500 was worlds different from the old version. The thing turned like a hawk!

Naturally, we had immediate visions of trophies. You see, District 37 has a new four-stroke class for enduros in 1981. Kicking off the year would be the Tuff E'Nuff Enduro, a hundred-miler held in the high desert around the Randsburg area.

Now then, some background is in order. You see, the Tuff E'Nuff gets its name because it *is* tough enough. In fact, *more* than tough enough, if you ask the usual refugee stream of finishers. It has the reputation of being one of *the* killer enduros, with murderous downhills, impossible uphill, endless rock fields and silt-lined whoopers.



Here's the way the Pro-Link XR500 looked before we got it all filthy in the dirt. Yes, it's nice. No, the Countdown clock does not come stock on the bike.

Visions of carrying a 300-pound XR up sand hills come readily to mind. Hmmm. Still, nothing ventured, nothing lost. A rolling stone gathers no lime. A stitch in time saves the air filter. And so forth.

The entry was mailed in along with the correct ransom and, in due time, we received a route sheet schedule and number 46B. Webb ran his beady eyes over the schedule, slapped his thighs and giggled uncontrollably: "Man, you are gonna die if you ride that heavy beast in *this* enduro. I know that area and I know the guys who are laying out the course. It's *death* downhills, straight down... lined with giant rocks the size of aircraft carriers... and that's just to the speedo check. Wait'll you get on the course itself..." He roared again.

I casually flicked some cigar ashes in his coffee when he wasn't looking, just to get even. Double A enduro riders are a bizarre group, at best.

We picked up the Honda and put some break-in time on it a few days before the enduro. First impressions gave us mixed feelings. Power was good, smooth and predictable. While

the XR was a very heavy bike, we didn't notice the weight most of the time. What did surprise us was how plush the suspension was. Both the front and the rear gave a marshmallow ride at low-to-medium speeds over even the choppiest ground.

Only when we subjected the XR to abrupt changes, such as a short, sharp-lipped jump, did we notice the pitching of all that weight. Steering was very accurate, even on baked-dry, narrow trails. Rocks left us with mixed feelings. Sometimes the Big Honda would ignore them; other times the front end would dart to one side with a violent shudder. We needed more time on the bike.

One thing did drive us nuts; at very low rpms when the throttle was snapped open, the engine would hiccup and stall. This drove us nuts, especially on one tight, rocky uphill section. Roooooaaaaaaar... burp... stall... aaaaaarrrrgh! Wham, thud, tumble, crash and burn. After a few of these painful get-offs, we set the idle up way high to avoid the unwanted stalling. Fiddling with the air screw did little to help the problem.



Super strong front brake took some getting used to. One finger was all it took. It's a double-leading shoe unit. This simply means that there are two cams spreading the shoes open, rather than the single-cam method.

The next day we received a trick White Brothers pipe to try on the XR. It was a 1980-model pipe, but the engine was mostly the same, and we wanted to shed a few pounds and possibly pick up some more horsepower in the process. With only a few minor modifications, we were able to slip the WB pipe in place. There's no problem with tire clearance. The White Brothers setup uses the stock head pipes, as dyno testing has shown them to be the most effective across a wider set of conditions than any other dimension tubing. A Super Trapp silencer/spark arrestor comes with the WB kit and is tunable. We left it stock and were pleased with the obvious gain in performance.

One side benefit was noted. That hitch directly off the bottom was al-

most entirely eliminated. This made the XR500 much more rideable in tight and tricky goings. One more short practice session; we added six pounds of air to the forks and cranked up the preload on the Pro-Link shock. Our ride was still on the plush side, but now the XR resisted bottoming on severe bumps in a much more satisfactory manner.

Oh yes...the sound of the WB exhaust was music to the ears. Noise is a subjective thing. Personally, the DB staff likes the sound of a four-stroke, while a two-stroke putting out the same decibels hurts the ear. It's an easy taste to acquire.

At first we had a great deal of trouble starting the Honda. This was odd, since the previous XR500s were a snap to get lit. Just don't touch the throttle and give it a decent boot. This one drove us nuts. When cold, it seemed to take forever to get things started. And, once the engine was hot, the bike would start erratically—one kick or forty kicks, there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the method.

It was Clipper who came to the rescue. He said you could not depress the kickstarter even the slightest bit before booting it through. It seems that the kickstarter is linked to a compres-



Chain adjustment was a snap; snail adjusters simplified the process. Rear wheel was quick-disconnect. Six-ply IRC Vulcanduro was a real rock eater but didn't hook up well in deep sand. We eventually used a Terraflex 4.10 x 17 close-knob for improved traction.

sion release and that the first inch of kickstarter travel lifts a valve and lets the charge drift out.

Here's the drill: Prop the XR up on the kickstand, bring the kickstarter all the way to the top, making sure the piston is right at top dead center, then sharply slap the lever through without resting your foot on it before you kick. Using this method, the XR became a first-kick starter very often. Without it, lottsa luck.

Prepping for the enduro was more or less basic procedure. A decent selection of tools was stored in the nifty Honda tool bag mounted on the rear fender and some extra goodies were taped here and there on spare frame tubes.

We blanked the speedo face over with duct tape, leaving only the odometer showing. No sense searching for the numbers you need. By the way, those numbers on the Honda odometer are plenty big and easy to read while you're riding. The front brake cable was rerouted to the outside of the throttle cables and the top cable guide was bent out to keep the cable from crossing the odometer face and obscuring vision.

A Countdown Combo was slipped on the crossbars. This nifty unit has the route sheet and the digital clock in the same housing. All the DB staff uses them.

We decided to run the stock IRC Vulcanduro tires, mostly because they are six-ply rated and have very stiff side walls. We've found they resist flats from rocks very well. To play it safe, we ran the tire pressure on the high side and sacrificed some handling for anti-flat insurance: fifteen pounds in the front and 14 pounds in the new, 17-inch rear.

The chain guide was removed, as it looked too vulnerable to rock hits. We

drilled some holes in the air box; the standard openings looked smallish and we wanted the bike to breath as well as possible. Some Yamaha hand guards were slipped over the hand controls. These great little items come standard on the TT250 and IT models and every enduro/trail rider should have a set laying around. They fit just about anything made and offer decent protection from branches and bushes.

We beat on the sidestand a bit to get it tucked in closer. Stock, it's a real ankle snagger. This had to be done several times during the test period, for the sidestand bent easily. At the end of one month's worth of riding, the sidestand had more bends in it than Iranian logic.

All too quickly, the *Day of Judgment* arrived.

Key time: 9:05. Team DIRT BIKE gleamed in the morning sunlight. We had enough instrumentation between us to land a '47 Studebaker on the moon. Tanks were topped up. Kidneys drained. "10-9-8-7-..." Kidneys somehow mysteriously refilled. "...4-3-2-1-GO!" Numbers 46A, 46C and 46D all fired up and blazed off. Number 46B kicked like a lunatic until the drill was remembered.

Whup. Easy now. Top dead center. No pressure on the kickstarter. Then slap at it once, hard, and Big Red lights off. Two hundred yards later, the wind rushing through the foam clears the last of the perspiration from the inside of the goggles.

After a very few minutes of open desert, the course dropped down into a dry river bed. White, soft, mushy, squiggly sand laced with slab-sided rocks and boulders. Nothing handled here. The only hope was to get up on top of the sand, get some speed up and plane. But how do you get speed up when you're snaking around rocks the size of a console TV set?

Shortly after, I learned a brief but bitter lesson. Never, I repeat, *never* try to ride off a four-foot ledge. Always jump. Even if there's a pile of broken glass and old flaming mattresses down there. Because, unless your name is Bernie Schreiber, chances are bad news and grim times await you.

Big Red was OK until the forks tucked under, letting all 300 pounds teeter straight up and down for one endlessly long moment. Then, the rear end came over center and drove me into the ground like a tent peg. How miserable!! Here I was, less than a quarter of a mile from the start, lying under a three-hundred-pound bike, pinned like the loser in an Australian Tag Team Match. Now I knew how that ski jumper on the *Wide World of Sports* must have felt when he blew it on the end of the ramp.

Somehow I extracted myself from underneath the still-idling XR500 and stood up, though somewhat shakily. I closed my eyes for just a moment to try and gather my composure back, only to hear a loud roar and a yell. Jeez! I was still in the middle of the course and the next minute was on the way!! I picked up the idling Honda and it promptly stalled. Oh great! A few kicks later—and ducking my head for a few bikes—got the XR running. I straightened out the levers and such as I was riding and tried to get some sort of rhythm going. Concentrate now. Aha! There... a rhythm: sweat drips in right eye, deep racking breath, side throbs with pain, sweat drips in left eye, another breath and more pain.

I arrived at the three-mile speedo check to find Clipper sitting there on his Kawasaki 175, goggles off, munching on a Necco wafer. "What kept you? I've been here for two or three minutes. Jeez! What happened to your bike? It looks like a train backed over it."

Sometimes I just hate him.

Anyway, things settled down and the course wandered its merry way over horrendous rock farms, mighty mountains, cavernous ravines and shifting side hills. Then, we got to the rough stuff.

No one can say that the United Enduro Association puts on a cake-walk ride. It was tough, but imaginative. Fast sections were broken up with short, hard-to-ride parts. They'd get you late, then let you catch up. You'd zero a check, then beat your brains out and be happy to arrive six minutes late at the next one.

Through it all, I learned about the Honda. That mighty engine took me up hills that left Open Class, two-stroke racers floundering. Second gear did the job up almost anything. If you had to go to low, most of the other riders on the hill were pushing alongside their bikes.

A few times the power got me into trouble. The XR would rear up wildly and loop out when it got some unexpected traction on a hill. But, for every time it put me in an awkward situation, there were ten times the fabulous motor got me out of trouble. A typical instance: Twisting through a narrow canyon, the arrows suddenly pointed straight up. No run at the hill. Just nail it hard second, get your weight forward and chug right to the top. No sweat with the XR. Maybe a dab or two near the crest as the rear end squirrels around.

A few times forward motion ceased on some bad uphill. Here, you paid the price for riding a 300-pound bike. Maybe a rock stopped the front wheel cold, or another rider would get in your line. Then, you had to bull the XR500 around. Pick it up and heft the rear wheel into a fresh line. Hard, hard work. Heaving lungs. Burning arms. Aching back.



Here's what our bike looked like all set up for the Tough E'Nuff Enduro. A White Bros. pipe, lots of tools and a Countdown Combo clock were used. Yamaha hand protectors helped keep the heavy brush from whacking knuckles. At the end of the 100-miler, the Honda was running just fine.

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Honda XR500R

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|-------------------------------------|--|
| NAME AND MODEL | Honda XR500R |
| ENGINE TYPE | Four-stroke, air-cooled reed-valved, single |
| BORE AND STROKE | 89mm x 80mm |
| DISPLACEMENT | 498cc |
| HORSEPOWER | N/A |
| | Actual 30.4 at rear wheel |
| CARBURETION | 34mm Keihin |
| FACTORY RECOMMENDED JETTING: | |
| MAIN JET | 148 |
| NEEDLE JET | N/A |
| JET NEEDLE | N/A |
| PILOT JET | 55 |
| SLIDE NUMBER | N/A |
| RECOMMENDED GASOLINE | Premium |
| FUEL TANK CAPACITY | 9 liters (2.4 gal.) |
| FUEL TANK MATERIAL | Plastic |
| LUBRICATION | Wet sump |
| RECOMMENDED OIL | Hondaline 20-50 or equivalent |
| OIL CAPACITY | 2 liters (2.1 qt.) |
| AIR FILTRATION | Oiled foam in air box |
| CLUTCH TYPE | Wet, multi-disc |
| TRANSMISSION | Five-speed, constant mesh |
| GEAR BOX RATIOS: | |
| 1 | 2.462:1 |
| 2 | 1.647:1 |
| 3 | 1.250:1 |
| 4 | 1.000:1 |
| 5 | 0.840:1 |
| GEARING, FRONT/REAR | 14/46 |
| IGNITION | CDI |
| PRIMARY KICK SYSTEM? | Yes |
| RECOMMENDED SPARK PLUG: | NGK D8EA - NDX24ES-U |
| SILENCER/SPARK ARRESTOR/ | |
| QUALITY | Both, and both first-rate |
| EXHAUST SYSTEM | High-pipe, right side |
| FRAME TYPE | Single, downtube integral engine |
| WHEELBASE | 1420mm (55.9 in.) |

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|-------------------------------------|---|
| GROUND CLEARANCE | 320mm (12.6 in.) |
| SEAT HEIGHT | 945mm (37.2 in.) |
| STEERING HEAD ANGLE | 28 degrees |
| TRAIL | 112mm (4.4 in.) |
| WEIGHT WITH ONE GAL. GAS | 288.7 lbs. (277.7 dry) |
| RIM MATERIAL | Aluminum alloy |
| TIRE SIZE AND TYPE: | |
| FRONT | 3.00 x 21 6-ply rating IRC Vulcanduro |
| REAR | 5.10 x 17 6-ply rating IRC Vulcanduro |
| SUSPENSION, TYPE AND TRAVEL: | |
| FRONT | Telescopic, air/oil 254mm (10.0 in.) 37mm tubes |
| REAR | Pro-Link, single shock 254mm (10.0 in.) |
| INTENDED USE | Enduro, trail riding |
| COUNTRY OF ORIGIN | Japan |
| RETAIL PRICE, APPROX. | \$2098 |
| DISTRIBUTOR: | American Honda 100 West Alondra Blvd. Gardena, CA 90247 |

| | |
|---|---------|
| PARTS PRICES, HIGH WEAR ITEMS: | |
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| FRONT SPROCKET | \$11.10 |
| OVERALL RATING, 0 TO 100, VARIOUS CATEGORIES, KEEPING INTENDED USE OF MACHINE IN MIND: | |
| HANDLING | 97 |
| SUSPENSION | 97 |
| POWER | 90 |
| COST | 95 |
| ATTENTION TO DETAIL | 96 |
| EFFECTIVENESS, STONE STOCK | 97 |

XR500R

Then you get to the top of the hill, and you're in a fast section filled with small rocks. In two minutes, you've forgotten about that hill back there. The Honda can wail through stuff like this—while you're sitting down. It ignores rocks as well as any bike we've ridden. Just hit 'em, keep your arms loose and keep the power steadily on in a tall gear. No wheel spin. A steady, lugging moan from the engine tells you it's working just right.

After a few hours of hard riding, the Honda earns your respect. That suspension is all right. Not perfect, but very, very good. There's 10 inches front and rear. Ten, correct inches. Those Showa forks are perhaps the best ever to come from that particular factory. Some flex can be felt when whacking into rocks and turning in deep sand, but nothing that you can't live with. The rear end will suck up just about anything. Rebound is a bit too quick, but that can be adjusted. Later.

At the end of the first loop, the XR-500 had zeroed four checks and dropped six minutes on one, particularly grueling section.

A check at the gas tank showed that we were getting good mileage; maybe as much as 65 to 70 miles per tank—under tough conditions. For trail riding, surely a lot more.

Spokes were still tight and nothing had come loose.

The second loop promised to be much tougher. Traditionally, the UEA saves the best for last. We remembered what Jerry Counts had told us a few days earlier: "You like hills? Well then, that last loop ought to make you very happy indeed."

As promised, the last loop delivered. Maybe 40 or more vicious downhills, with an equal number of snotty uphills. Here, I started to wish for a little less front brake. The XR has the same double-leading shoe setup as the MX-ers, and one finger is all it takes to stop that wheel cold. Sometimes, as you're dropping off the side of the world, you tend to tighten up and squeeze a bit too hard. Zango! Over the bars in a graceful arc. Pick it up and go again.

Eventually, the XR500 sniffed a path home and got our tired body to the finish line; battered, dusty, one side panel missing, a few bent controls, but otherwise running as clean and strong as before the event.

(continued on page 67)

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| <input type="checkbox"/> XL/XR 185, 200, 250 Super Trapp | 57.50 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> XL/XR 500 Super Trapp (New 4" model) | 79.95 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> XL/XR 185, 200 2 3/4-gal. plastic tank | 49.50 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> XL/XR 250, 500 4-gal. plastic tank | 59.95 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Terry Fork Kit | 44.95 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> XL/XR 185, 200 air fork caps | 12.95 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> XL/XR 250, 500 air fork caps | 20.95 |
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HONDA XR500R

(continued from page 20)

My riding partners pressed for details: "Waddaya think? Would you do it again? Is it a pig? Too heavy? Trouble in the rocks?" And so forth.

Tell you what. Yes, I would do it again. I loved the bike. Yes, it was too heavy. But, I'm already making plans to carve a few pounds off of Big Red. The suspension? I'm going to leave it alone. Maybe bump up the preload in the Pro-Link a bit and dial in some more rebound damping. But that's it. There's no need to spend big bucks on this bike for forks and shocks.

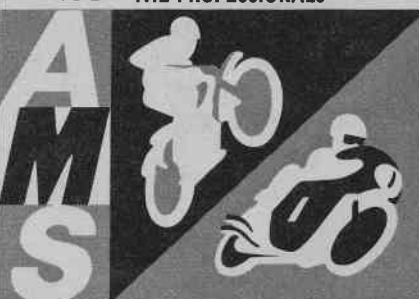
I'm definitely going to change the bars. The sit-up-and-beg position got tiring after a few hours. Something lower and flatter will be better. I might try another carb.

The front tire will stay for enduros. A rock kissed that IRC real hard about 30 miles from the end, and I had to limp home on a flat. The rubber never even broke loose from the bead and I was able to keep up a reasonable pace.

At the rear, something else will get mounted. Maybe one of those new, 17-inch, extra firm Terra Flexes. Something big and wide and deep. I might even read the manual and learn how to

(continued on page 68)

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| 4.10x14 | 35.70 | 28.95 |
| 5.10x17 | 58.84 | \$46.95 |
| 4.10x18 | 45.69 | \$37.95 |
| 4.50x18 | 53.50 | 42.95 |
| 4.60x18 | 60.99 | 48.95 |
| 3.00x21 | 42.57 | \$33.95 |

Cheng Shin Tires

| | |
|----------------|---------|
| 3.00x14 C-183A | \$16.95 |
| 3.50x14 | 19.45 |
| 3.00x18 | \$21.45 |
| 3.50x18 | 24.95 |
| 4.00x18 | 32.95 |

| | |
|----------------|---------|
| 4.50x18 | 37.95 |
| 3.00x21 | \$22.95 |
| 3.85x14 C-183D | \$21.95 |
| 3.60x18 | 26.95 |
| 4.10x18 | 33.95 |
| 4.60x18 | 39.95 |



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| | | | |
|-----------|---------|-----------|-------|
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HONDA XR500R

(continued from page 67)

soften the adjustment on the front brake. And, like I said earlier, take some weight off here and there.

But that's it.

Bits and Pieces

Believe it or not, the XR500 has a reed-valve (just like a two-stroke) in the intake manifold. This is supposed to smooth out the power at low rpms. We're going to play with this and see what we learn.

At 55.9 inches, the wheelbase is a bit short for higher speeds over rough ground. Unless someone comes out with an accessory arm, we'll live with 55-point-nine.

The air filter is small and the air box a bit restrictive.

Folding shift and brake levers are stock. That brake pedal could be out a bit more.

O-ring chain comes stock on the bike. Good stuff. Both wheels are quick-detach.

One minor source of irritation. There was a noise coming from the engine that sounded a great deal like a gear going bad, or a spun bearing. It drove us nuts until we figured out that it was merely the sound of the chain

(continued on page 70)

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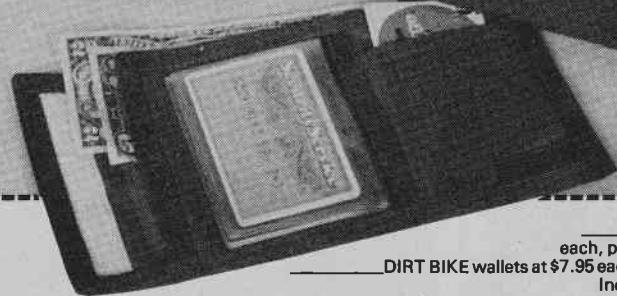
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HONDA XR500R (continued from page 68)

rubbing against the protective guide on top of the swingarm. The huge, aluminum arm is hollow, and the sound reverberated through it causing us worry, but no damage. After the chain carved a nice groove in the protector, the sound diminished.

Split perch mounts on the hand controls make changing easy. Everywhere you look on the bike, thoughtful detailing abounds.

The Big Picture

No mistake about it, the XR500 is a thoroughly delightful, truly desirable and unmistakably wonderful bike. During our test period, we let a number of folks have a brief ride on the machine. They all immediately fell in love with Big Red. Some of them are placing orders as you read this. The smart ones are already out on their new bike.

Sure, it's heavy and there are areas for improvement. But, by and large, the 1981 Honda XR500R is *light years* better than any other four-stroke production dirt bike ever built. There simply will not be enough of them to go around this year. Grab one. If you can. ☐



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| 500 x 17 | N/A | 83 05 |

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