



HAWK

GT

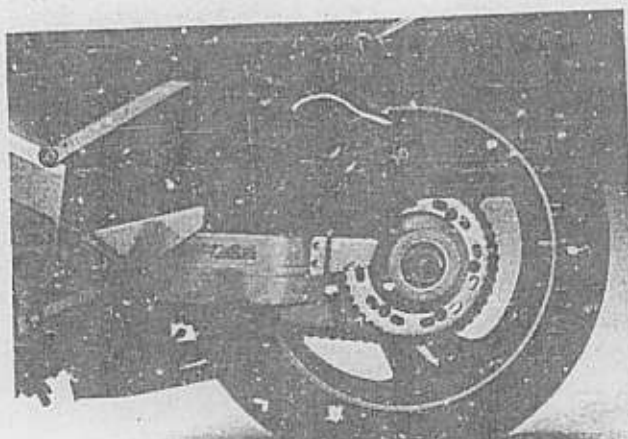
IF YOU BUY THE LINE OF THOUGHT that says bikes from Europe have character and soul, and bikes from Japan do not, Honda's 650 Hawk GT is poised to blow a small hole in your theory. As polished as any other Japanese motorcycle, the Hawk managed to maintain the edges of its personality even as it passed through the tumbling drum of Honda's development process.

Introduced in 1988 and left essentially unchanged through 1990, the Hawk

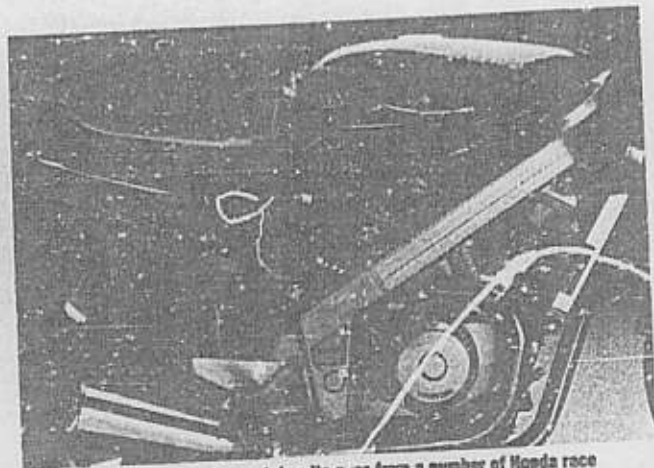
owes much to the small team of enthusiastic engineers who shepherded it through Honda R&D, intent on keeping it a motorcycle they could claim—a simple, mechanically honest V-twin in sporting standard guise. With its fairly upright seating position, and light, quick handling, the Hawk rewards its rider in town as well as on racer road.

But by reaching out to appeal to a broad range of riders, the all-purpose Hawk takes a different approach than

*Unchanged in its third year of production,
Honda's Universal Backroad Sleeper still blends
European character with Japanese polish.*



The Hawk's EM-derived, light and rigid single-sided swing arm carries all necessary rear hardware, making for positive rear wheel alignment and quick wheel removal. The rear axle rides in an eccentric chain adjuster.



This twin-spar aluminum frame takes its cues from a number of Honda race machines, and has more than enough strength to deal with the Hawk's smooth but underachieving 647cc twin.

that of most Euro-sports. Ducati's 750 Sport, for example, tested elsewhere in this issue, is a demandingly focused machine, one that requires a substantial investment in money, effort, and maintenance in return for speed. The Hawk simply asks for less of each.

It does, however, share a vital element: broad, accessible power. Like the Ducati, the Hawk is not a wheel-lifting, fire-breathing monster: Its 647cc V-twin brings its modest goods in early, emphasizing low-end snap and allowing the rider to make haste with broad-ranging torque and momentum. A smooth rider can glide the Hawk along a classic arcing line, making use of its outstanding cornering clearance. More aggressive riders can tap the Hawk's impressive agility, snapping hard into turns with an ease few Euro-twins—and not even many Japanese sport bikes—can match.

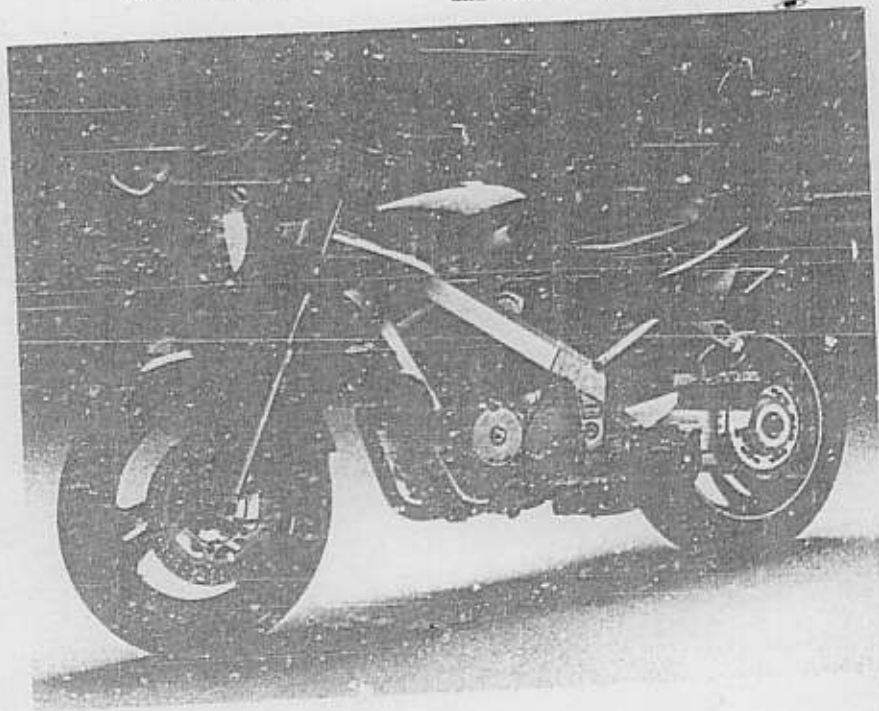
Hinging from an aluminum twin-beam frame, the Hawk's motive unit traces its heritage back to Honda's 52-degree, three-valve-per-cylinder twin introduced on the 1982 Shadow 500, and that also powered the VT500 Ascot. The small V-engine uses crankpins offset 76 degrees to eliminate primary imbalance, and while its displacement may have grown, the heart-shaped, three-valve (two intake, one exhaust) combustion chambers remain, as do the Ascot-spec pair of 34mm Keihin carbs. A digital ignition controls the fire in the dual-plug heads, while liquid-cooling keeps the engine running in the temperate zone and helps suppress noise.

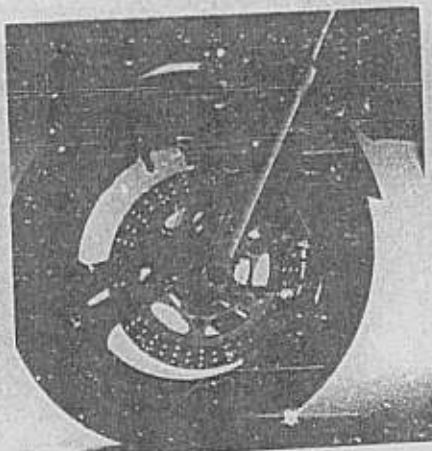
This engine, completely exposed by the Hawk's lack of bodywork, runs as slickly

Blow a downshift
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enough authority to
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momentum.

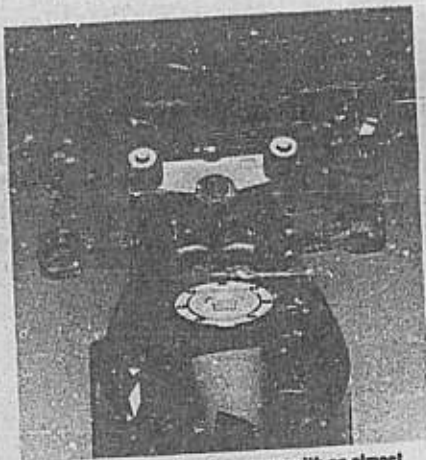
as its streamlined, finless appearance suggests. Up to 6000 rpm, the Hawk is so vibrationless and quiet that it almost disappears beneath you. Here, the Hawk differs greatly from the Ducati Sport: You feel and hear things mechanical taking place under the Sport's gas tank, but on the Hawk you just hear the air rushing by. While the Hawk suggests the small-caliber snap of a Colt M-16 fired by a draftee, the Ducati's engine is a crackling Kalashnikov in the hands of a Believer.

The Hawk's more polished approach has its advantages. The slick-shifting five-speed gearbox and light clutch make the Hawk easy to ride around town. On cold mornings, its engine wakes up quickly, and once warm it delivers crisp throttle

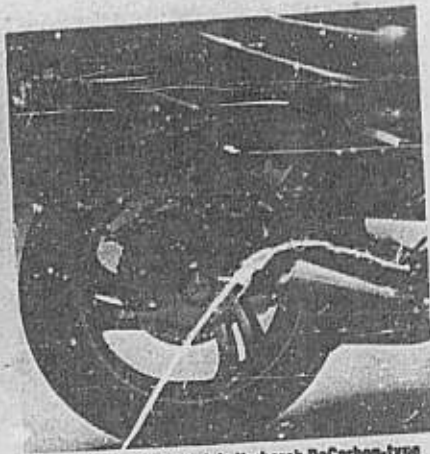




Stout, 41mm non-adjustable fork carries a large single disc and twin-piston Nissin caliper. Bridgestone Exedra tires last a long time.



The Hawk is nearly bicycle-narrow, with an almost upright seating position. Controls are easy to use, gauges easy to read.



The Hawk's weakest link is its harsh DeCarbon-type rear shock. The wide, 4.5-inch wheel welcomes (with open arm) bigger and better rubber.

response without the popping or hesitation found with the Italian twin. Light flywheels, precise carburetion, and a short-travel throttle give the Hawk engine snap-response unmatched by any Euro-twin short of a fuel-injected Ducati 851.

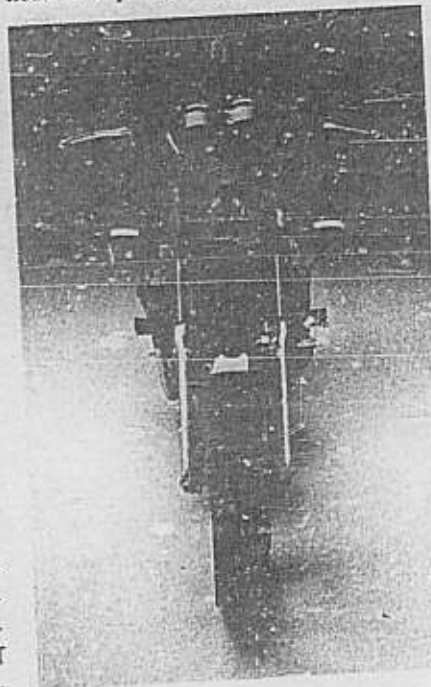
With a peak output of only 39.3 horsepower at 7000 rpm, the Hawk is no drag strip terror, but Honda has given it low and midrange power that makes it easy to ride quickly. On the Kerker dyno, the Hawk makes almost as much torque at 3500 rpm as it does at its 6000-rpm torque peak. This low-down thrust, combined with a feathery 412-pound wet weight (40 pounds less than Yamaha's FZR600), gives the Hawk formidable roll-on acceleration: Except in top gear—where Kawasaki's Ninja slips past—the Hawk flat smokes every four-cylinder middleweight sport bike in our 45-to-70-mph roll-ons.

At 60 mph, the Hawk is running right at its torque peak, so the rider has only to whack the throttle to zap past highway traffic or backroad obstacles. Blow a downshift and the bike shrugs it off, chugging out of turns anywhere from 4500 to 7500 rpm with enough authority to maintain impressive momentum. Serious 600 sport bikes may make almost twice as much peak power, and can race ahead on fast backroads, but in the tight stuff a well-ridden Hawk, with its friendly engine and outstanding chassis, can run away and hide.

The chassis combines the right ingredients for brisk backroad romps: Light, precise steering, excellent balance, hard-stopping brakes, and seemingly yards of cornering clearance. With a short, 56-

inch wheelbase and fairly quick steering geometry (27-degree rake/4.4-inch trail), the lightweight Hawk can be flicked into corners more quickly and with less effort than just about any motorcycle bigger than a 250. The brakes—a single-disc, dual-piston unit in front and single-piston caliper in back—haul the Hawk from 60 to 0 in an impressive 119 feet—a shorter stopping distance than managed by any of the triple-disc-equipped sporting middleweights.

Honda obviously intended the Hawk to be a serious backroad scratcher. Just look at the aluminum frame: Rectangular main beams, seemingly sized for a 100-horsepower motorcycle, join the steering head to a pair of complex castings that



both lock the swing-arm pivot in place and locate the top shock mount. The single-sided swing arm allows the two-into-one exhaust system to tuck in tightly for maximum corner clearance. (It also allows for quick wheel changes. The rear wheel pops off after removing a single axle nut, leaving the entire rear brake, drive sprocket, chain, hub, live axle, and eccentric chain adjuster bolted to the left-side swing arm.) The fork uses 41mm tubes, far stouter than normal for a bike of this size.

Such sophistication doesn't come cheaply, and this may have forced Honda to save in other areas—specifically the Hawk's suspension and tires. Though wide and well-profiled, the Bridgestone Exedra tires offer long life more than high grip: Expert riders can flick the bike into turns hard enough to overwhelm the front tire, and the Hawk's impressive lean angles have the tires squirming at the edge. Honda is betting that most owners prefer high mileage to maximum traction, but fully exploiting the Hawk's handling potential calls for better rubber.

Like its tires, the Hawk's suspension makes certain trade-offs. The rear shock—adjustable for spring preload only—tracks well over a broad range of surfaces, and both ends provide a compliant highway ride. When the road gets rough and fast, however, the suspension shows its shortcomings: The non-adjustable fork is slightly soft, diving excessively under hard braking. In back, too much compression damping and not enough rebound make the rear shock harsh and prone to topping out over sharp bumps. Grab a handful of throttle exiting a bumpy

Continued on page 70