

November 1985

\$2.50* NZ \$3.25*

Registered by Australia Post — Publication No. NBF57M

Two Wheels

BIG RED

Reborn Bol D'Or

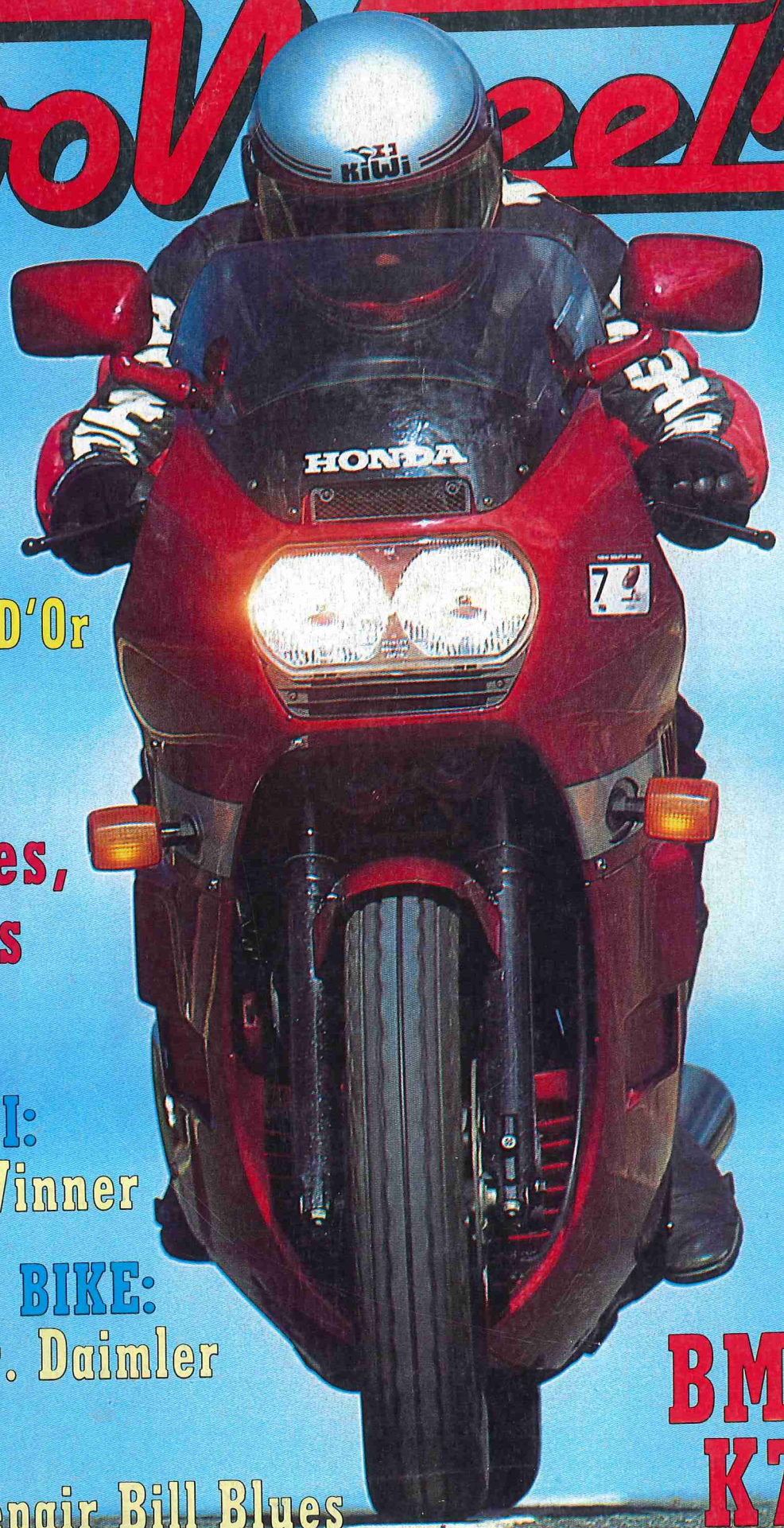
AJAY

Good Times,
Bad Times

GRAND
TOURERS II:
Picking a Winner

THE FIRST BIKE:
Thanks, Mr. Daimler

TOOLS:
Beat the Repair Bill Blues



BMW K75

ROAD TEST: HONDA VF1000FII BOL D'OR

LIFE gets better

Since its inception, the Honda V series has come in for plenty of criticism, much of it deserved. But the big H invested a fortune in the V four, so it has had to persevere. The VF1000FII Bol D'Or (and its sporty brother the FF) is a just reward for Honda's efforts. It's an excellent sports/tourer, right up there with the best, and suits Australian conditions far more than any V series machine to date.

Photos by Greg McBean



WITH the arrival of the VF1000F-II, Honda has given the market the bike the original VF1000F deserved to be when it was released last year. While the 1984 VF1000FE proved a fairly competent all-rounder, it was let down by several minor deficiencies, most of which were attributable to its heritage. Born out of the VF750FD, the 1000 cm³ bike's styling and specifications were dictated by the 750's success. While that undoubtedly gave the FE the market appeal Honda was looking for,

it also carried with it an unfortunate legacy: the VF750's faults were accentuated by the bigger bike's extra power, weight and sheer bulk, with the result that the 1000 left a fair bit to be desired with its poor front end suspension/handling package, drivetrain slop, and inadequate fuel efficiency. That old adage, "a bigger sportster is a better sportster", just didn't hold with the VF1000.

The VF1000F-II Bol d'Or (gasp) makes several large strides towards overcoming these deficiencies and,

although by no means perfect, it's certainly a far more sound proposition than the '84 FE. The most important and obvious improvement is the F-II's 18-inch front wheel and its 100/90-18 tyre, which replaces the FE's 16-inch front wheel and its fat 120/80 tyre. The bigger wheel, combined with greater rake and trail have steadied the bike's steering to the point of being pretty neutral — quite an improvement over the FE's flop-it-down and pull-it-up oversteer.

Other changes are numerous, if not

always as obvious, with the motor coming in for its fair share of internal attention, while the cosmetic appeal of the bike is enhanced by a full sports/touring fairing (the base model FF is also modified along FI lines, but offers only a half fairing).

While the performance of the V-four motors has generally been one of the best aspects of the entire VF series, these engines have not been without problems, mainly of the premature camshaft bearing and lobe wear variety. Most such



problems are probably attributable to underestimating the close tolerances which are a feature of the liquid-cooled donk. These appear to have been largely cured by in-production modifications, but, just to make sure, Honda has done a bit more work, particularly in the cylinder head. Lubrication is the key to most of the alterations, with the revised camshafts set up with more lobe-to-tappet clearance, redesigned cam boxes to give greater oil depth, and, exclusive to the F-II is a twin-rotor oil pump to ensure the lubricant is circulated through the motor and to the oil cooler with more than sufficient pressure and haste. Alongside these changes, oil capacity has been increased from the 3.2 litres of the FE to 3.7 litres, while a few of the other figures have taken a drop. The compression ratio is down by three points to 10.2:1, and although claimed maximum power remains at 85.4 kW at 10,000 rpm, peak torque is down 5.0 Nm to 86.2 Nm at 8000 rpm. Fortunately, on the road, the drop in torque is imperceptible, and the VF retains the superb grunt and smooth, progressive powerband that has been the V-four's trademark since its introduction. To make better use of that grunt, the F-II Bol d'Or also gets a reduction in overall gearing via a drop in the primary drive ratio, giving top gear a more useful 24.5 km/h per 1000 rpm (the FE felt undergeared at only 23.4 km/h per 1000).

Unfortunately, one thing Honda hasn't been able to rectify is the bike's poor fuel economy. From a worst of 11.5 km/litre when ridden hard to a best of only 15.8 km/litre at a gentle cruise the VF cannot be described as frugal, and is only able to offer a decent cruising range by virtue of its reasonably large 23-litre tank. Aside from this, however, there's very little about the performance of the powerplant which would warrant complaint. Rolling on the throttle in almost any gear brings a rush of acceleration that few bikes can match, while full-on, through the gears runs see the VF travelling at highly illegal speeds in very short distances. Just for the record, it should pass through the standing 400-metre test in 11.4 seconds, 0.1 seconds behind the FE due to the new bike's extra weight and taller gearing.

Snatch

The transmission is again a little disappointing. The drivetrain slop that the VF1000FE (and most other VFs) were criticised for is still there and just as annoying. The one-way clutch appears to be the primary cause, soaking up slack on a lagging throttle and dishing it back out again the minute the throttle is opened. While this slop is not a problem on the open road, it's fairly irritating around town or in traffic, where it hinders smooth progress. This problem aside, there seems little justification for the one-way

clutch, since the usual blip of the throttle on downchanges invariably delivers the same smooth result that the Honda arrangement is supposed to guarantee, and without the complexity and hassles. But the news isn't all bad. At the lever the hydraulically actuated clutch is light and progressive, and while the gearchange is a little notchy and heavy, it's certainly positive if given a solid stab with the boot.

Returning to the more positive aspects of the bike, a few well placed modifications have made the chassis better able to set the V-four's power to the road. With about an extra inch (sorry, 25.4 mm) added to the swingarm and a revamped Pro-Link rear end, the VF1000F-II seems less prone to the squirm under power that the FE exhibited when gassed hard out of corners. Apart from this, the rear end feels little different to the FE, and the single shock does a reasonable job of controlling the big bike's mass over bumps without any drama. Like most, the shock has its fair share of adjustments for load and road conditions. Preload is adjusted by a valve under the left sidecover with a range of 0 kPa (limp) to 40 kPa (fairly hard and harsh) while damping is controlled by a three-position push-pull knob just below the right sidecover. For most of the test the third (hardest) of these positions was deemed necessary — even for solo riding, and therein lies the major complaint of the rear

end. Although rear wheel control is fairly good, the suspension transmits a bit of road shock, and tends to be harsh rather than firm.

Precise

But as stated earlier, things at the front are greatly improved. The eighteen-inch (45.72 cm?) front wheel and responsively narrow 100/90 V-18 tyre alter the nature of the bike completely compared with the oversized 120/80-16 tyre and low inertia 16-inch wheel of the FE. Combined with this is the F-II's revised and Ducati-esque steering geometry of 29 degrees rake, 116 mm trail and 1550 mm wheelbase. Altogether, a much more reassuring steering/handling set-up than last year's offering. And although the steering is definitely heavier, it's also far more precise and a lot better behaved. In addition, the bike actually feels lighter than the FE when hustling it through tight stuff despite its hefty 245 kg dry weight (up 12 kg on the FE), and lacks the top-heaviness that made the '84 model feel as if it would fall over unless you really pushed it through tight corners. Front suspension also rates fairly highly, giving a better combination of performance, control and comfort than the rear. Travel is up from 125 mm to a more useful 140 mm while the excess wheel patter of the FE under brakes and on

rough surfaces seems to have disappeared (probably more the result of the larger wheel than the revised suspension). Like the rear, the front end also gets its share of fine adjustments with linked aircaps, three-position rebound damping and four-way adjustable mechanical antidive offering heaps of fiddling and some degree of alteration.

Despite the fairly good specification and performance, however, there's no denying that the VF1000F-II is a very large motorcycle and as a result its handling is not in the pure sportster league like, for example, the GSX-R750 and RG500 Suzukis or the FZ750 Yamaha; and it's not hard to see why Honda opted the bike out of that market segment by dressing it in a tuxedo rather than a sports suit. Pushed hard through sportster terrain the Bol d'Or starts to display its need for a serious diet, and when you consider that it gives away a full 90 kg to the RG500 for a power gain of only 15 kW it's not surprising that the little Suzuki will leave it for dead in anything but tight, uphill territory.

Pressure required

Also slightly out of the top league these days are the Bol d'Or's brakes. Its dual-piston floating calipers first saw the light of day on the CB900F2C nearly four years ago, and although they've had

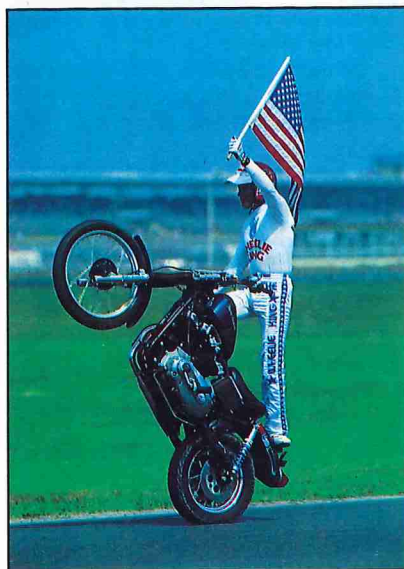
some uprating since, they lack the sheer power and feel of systems such as Yamaha's twin opposed fixed-piston calipers and Suzuki's excellent decapiston braking system. While initial front brake lever pressure required is fairly low, it needs a good heave to offer high retardation, and tends to become spongy and lose feel towards the limit. The rear unit gives much the same story with feel, but if anything, is a little savage and is locked-up easily. In this respect, the underslung rear caliper of the VF1000R is certainly better.

Other comparisons with the VF1000R are not unwarranted. Although the styling of the Bol d'Or appears a lot more touring biased than the sporty look of the R, that impression is as much a result of the artist's brush as it is of differences in equipment. The F-II's fairing is in fact a very close copy of the VF-R's, with the major differences being a little extra width to the upper regions of the F-II's unit and different venting. Apart from these the new model's fairing has larger cutaways near the foot controls and a slightly different profile to match the larger front wheel. Inside the fairing things are a little more varied. Whereas the R's fairing has limited venting aimed more at extracting the motor's heat than keeping the rider's legs cool, the Bol d'Or's includes adjustable vents to direct fresh air to the



BIG CHOICE ART UNION

NO. 132



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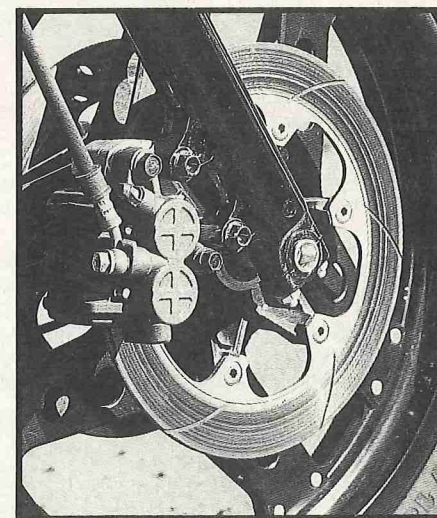
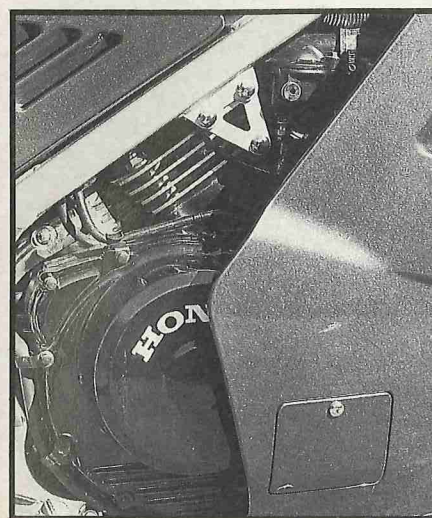
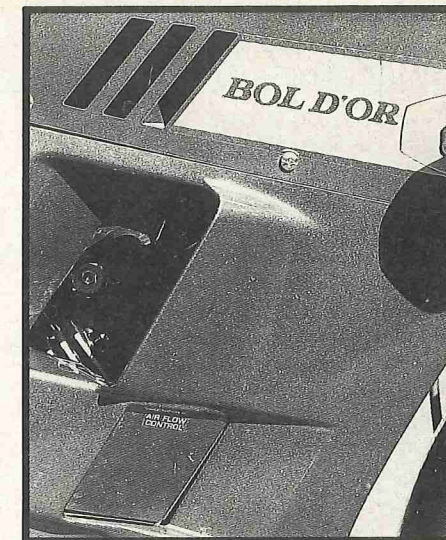
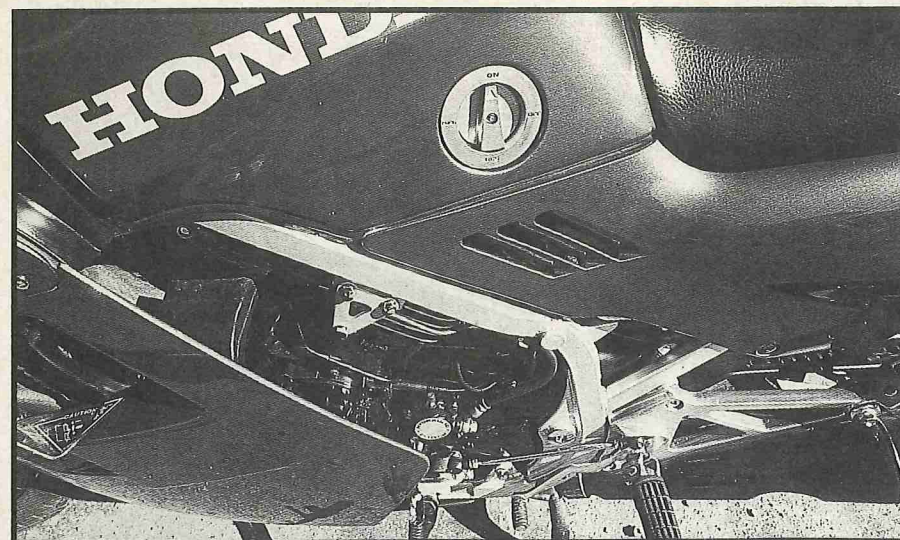
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Clockwise from left: Front stoppers aren't as good as the competition's; panel in fairing conceals oil filler hole; you beaut, easy to use fuel tap is retained; air vents are best left in the open position.

lower legs. While the principle is fine, the vents seem too small and flush with the fairing to really catch much air, and are a bit flimsy in their adjustment. If I owned the bike I'd almost certainly take the adjustable panels out and leave them that way. There's no way your legs are going to get cold on this bike even in winter — the proximity of the engine sees to that.

From the rider's position, the bike looks a lot more like a car than a bike. Extra vents at either side of the instrument nacelle give a steady breeze of air to the hands and upper body, while the instruments themselves would not look out of place in a Honda Civic. Mounted behind a flat sheet of glare-resistant plastic is a full complement of gauges and warning lights. To the left the large speedo is fairly accurate (about two percent optimistic) but the cramped dial and the 280 km/h upper limit are a bit unnecessary. On the right the tachometer is far more legible and sensible with 500 rpm graduations and a clearly marked redline at 10,500 rpm. Between the two main gauges are small wedge-shaped gauges for fuel level and coolant temperature.

The fuel gauge is the usual pessimistic type, and although this is not a problem in itself it makes us wonder just how accurate the temperature gauge is, particularly since it seems to remain fairly low even when the motor has been working hard. Apart from these, warning lights for indicators, high beam, neutral, oil pressure and tail light condition flank the main binnacle, and give plenty of light especially at night when the reflection off the fairing screen can be a bit annoying. Like the VF-R, the F-II gets fairing-mounted mirrors, but they have been moved higher and have longer stalks so that the shoulders rather than the elbows tend to infringe on an otherwise clear view.

Dazzling

Moulded into the inside flanks of the fairing, just aft of the air vents, are two handy storage compartments. While not particularly large, they are useful for storing maps and the other bits and pieces that tend to build up in your pockets when touring. The right compartment has a lockable cover, while

the left uses a vinyl cover secured by press studs, making it a bit more flexible in the size and shape of goods that can be stored within it. Behind these, two-piece handlebars protrude from the top of the triple clamps at a level that puts just enough weight on the wrists without becoming tiresome around the city, while switchgear is the same as the FE and, as such, is a bit fiddly particularly in the arrangement of the horn, indicator and high-beam controls on the left switchblock. A useful change is the addition of adjustable brake and clutch levers, à la VF1000R, making adjustments a snack even when on the move. Further back, the 23-litre tank is the same as that fitted to the FE but looks different thanks to the different paintwork and the adjoining sidecovers which are cut a lot deeper. The rear ducktail continues this theme and now houses a larger tail light than the rather undersized 1984 unit. The tail and the other ancillary lights are all bright and well located, but they are all overshadowed (no pun) by the excellent twin headlights. Unlike the Suzuki items, the F-II uses 60/55-watt globes rather than 35/35s, and as a result offers excellent spread and penetrative power. Let's hope styling continues to allow the use of twin lamps, for they're certainly a worthwhile innovation.

Long way, Jose

Other items proved a mixed bag. While the riding position is good, long-range comfort is a bit disappointing. Although Honda claims the seat is new for this year, it certainly looks and feels the same as the FE and as such lacks a bit of support and is less than ideal for a

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HONDA VF1000 FI BOL D'OR

ENGINE

Liquid-cooled 90-degree V-four four stroke. Double overhead chain-driven camshafts operating four valves per cylinder via rocker arms. One-piece forged crankshaft with plain main and big-end bearings. Wet sump lubrication and remote oil cooler.

Claimed maximum power 85.4 kW at 10,000 rpm
 Claimed maximum torque 86.2 Nm at 8000 rpm
 Bore x stroke 77.0 x 53.6 mm
 Displacement 998 cm³
 Compression ratio 10.2:1
 Maximum engine speed 10,500 rpm
 Carburation 4 x 36 mm CV
 Air filtration Pleated paper
 Starting system Electric only
 Ignition Transistorised with electronic advance

Fuel consumption

Touring 15.8 km/l
 City 14.1 km/l
 Hard riding 11.5 km/l
 Average on test 13.4 km/l

TRANSMISSION

Gear primary drive through one-way wet, multiplate clutch to five-speed constant mesh gearbox. Final drive by O-ring chain.

FRAME AND BRAKES

Welded box-section steel frame with removable lower sections for engine access. Telescopic forks with linked air preload adjustment, three-way damping on right leg and four-way TRAC antitive on left leg. Rear suspension by rising-rate monoshock, with air preload and three-way adjustable rebound damping. Twin front and single rear disc brakes with floating dual piston calipers and sintered metal brake pads.

Front suspension travel 140 mm
 Rear suspension travel 120 mm
 Front brake diameter 270 mm
 Rear brake diameter 270 mm
 Front tyre Dunlop K500 100/90-V18
 Rear tyre Dunlop K500 140/80-V17

DIMENSIONS

Dry weight 245 kg
 Seat height 815 mm
 Wheelbase 1550 mm
 Fuel capacity (incl. reserve) 23 litres
 Reserve 4.3 litres
 Fork rake 29 degrees
 Trail 116 mm

TEST MACHINE

Manufacturer Honda Motor Co., Tokyo, Japan
 Test Machine Bennett Honda, Wetherill Pk, NSW
 Price \$6370

Best points: The bike has most of the virtues of previous VFs with few of the vices. Strong power at all rpm and excellent responsiveness characterise the motor. Handling, thanks to the slower steering geometry and 18-inch front wheel, is now good on a wide variety of road surfaces. Riding position well suited to long blasts, and headlights are powerful enough for similar rides at night. Quality of finish is outstanding. Price is reasonable.

Worst points: Poor fuel economy. Harsh rear suspension, and brakes which don't have the power or feel of the latest from the competition. Excessive transmission slop. Considering the size of the fairing, protection offered isn't great.

SUMMARY

RATINGS	Poor	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Outstanding
ENGINE					
Responsiveness					●
Smoothness				●	
Bottom end power					●
Mid range power					●
Top end power				●	
Fuel economy		●			
Starting			●		
Ease of maintenance		●			
Quietness			●		
Engine braking				●	
TRANSMISSION					
Clutch operation		●			
Gearbox operation			●		
Ratio suitability				●	
Drivetrain freerplay		●			
HANDLING					
Steering					●
Cornering clearance					●
Ability to forgive rider error			●		
High speed cornering					●
Medium speed cornering				●	
Bumpy bends					●
Tossing side to side			●		
Changing line in corners			●		
Braking in corners					●
Manoeuvring			●		
Top speed stability					●
SUSPENSION					
Front				●	
Rear			●		
Front/rear match					●
BRAKES					
Resistance to fading			●		
Stopping power					●
Braking stability					●
Feel at controls			●		
CONTROLS					
Location of major controls			●		
Switches			●		
Instruments					●
TWO-UP SUITABILITY					
Passenger comfort			●		
Stability with pillion					●
Cornering clearance two-up					●
GENERAL					
Quality of finish					●
Engine appearance					●
Overall styling					●
Seat comfort			●		
Riding position					●
Touring range			●		
Headlight					●
Other lights					●
Stands			●		
Rearview mirrors					●
Horn					●
Toolkit			●		
VALUE FOR MONEY					
					●

Continued from page 9

passenger. Apart from this, despite looking the full sports/touring item, the fairing allows a fair bit of wind over the top of the screen and doesn't offer sufficient protection to the rider's hands for wet weather. Why is it that touring-orientated bikes often come out behind some of the purist sportsters when it comes to rider protection? Other items like the twin horns and centre and sidestands are good enough, while the bike's overall quality and finish also rate very highly.

The VF1000-FI Bol d'Or still has its faults as a sportster, but as an open-road high-speed blaster, to which its motor is best suited, it comes out a

long way ahead of the VF1000FE or, for that matter the VF-R, with styling, handling and equipment changes that enhance its abilities in this area. And at \$6370 it's not unreasonably priced by today's standards. If Honda could do something about the bike's severe drivetrain slop and too-healthy fuel appetite, then it would certainly have one of the nicest bikes around to cruise into work on, take on an interstate blast or most things in between. As it is, it still makes a fairly good fist of most things despite those deficiencies. The VF1000FE was, as mentioned earlier, a good all-rounder. The re-born Bol d'Or is that and then some.

— Steve McEvoy

