

Mother of the beast

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Muscle bikes? Frank Melling takes issue with James May and drives his point home on Honda's CB1100R

Almost everything James May writes this week is correct. No one can pretend that being hunched over a hyper-sports bike in some advanced form of two-wheeled yoga is anything other than painful. Equally, anyone who claims to use more than a tiny fraction of a sports bike's performance on the public road is lying. Not bending the truth, but telling out-and-out, bare-faced porkies.

Blip, blip, blip and 150mph might well be possible on a deserted motorway at 2am, but that's not exploring the performance envelope of an R1 or a FireBlade, it's just playing about. James is 99 per cent correct - naked bikes are cool and fun.

The one per cent error is in his use of the word "muscle" as the adjective to describe the current crop of naked bikes, because these limp-wristed devices are mere parodies of the real thing.

For a true muscle bike, look at the original Suzuki GS Thou. Tons of power and rotten handling. Or take the iconic Yamaha V-Max. Shreds the tyres in third and sounds like a 1958 big-block Chevy on straight pipes. These are hairy chested machines with scars on their knuckles and a big belly hanging over their torn jeans.



Riding high: the Honda CB1100R in action

And then there's the Honda CB1100R, the greatest muscle bike of all. So good that Honda shamefully ripped off its memory to produce the current CB1300, which is slower, makes less power, handles more sloppily and has one per cent of the character of the 25-year-old original.

advertisement Today, to anyone who likes fast bikes, the CB1100R sends out mixed messages. The first thing that strikes the interested observer is its size. Parked up in the paddock, the Honda is not your lithe, toned sprinter waiting to trot out and compete in the 200m dash, more like a rugby league forward warming up for a head-crunching 90 minutes of pitched battle.

There's plenty of scar tissue and the odd lump of ear might be missing, but this is no couch potato wobbling out on to the field. Note the magnesium clutch and alternator covers, listen to the tenor wail of the 1,062cc engine, and it becomes readily apparent that beneath the bulk, the scrapes and the corrosion lurks a Super League motorbike.

In 1980, Honda took its existing 1979 CB900F and gave it a full-race makeover. The road bike frame was lightened and stiffened and the engine received even more treatment, being bored out to 70mm and a whopping capacity of 1,062cc.

A race camshaft was fitted along with forged pistons that increased the compression ratio to an eye-watering 10:1 (which has proved to be a consistent wrecker of the starter-motor clutch rings on bikes that are used on the road), and helped produce a walloping 115bhp at 9,000rpm - not that far behind the grand prix thoroughbreds.

What could be seen was, in some ways, even more sensational than what was hidden. The road bike's high bars were retained but a huge bikini fairing was wrapped around the cockpit area. Behind the fairing was an equally mammoth, six gallon, aluminium-alloy fuel tank, and the world's most comfortable race seat secured the rider as he wrestled the beast around a track.

The reality of Honda's efforts was a street-legal race bike that weighed in at an incredible 563lb

(256kg) - more than twice as heavy as its grand prix contemporaries. Big, brutal and, by the standards of the day, monstrously powerful, the CB1100R was outstanding on road and track, taking Ron Haslam to victory in both the 1981 and 1982 MCN Streetbike championships.

And the joy of riding the CB1100R is that it does exactly what it says on the box. Whack the throttle open and it positively leaps forward. Come to a corner and the bike demands real rider input to get it to turn at all.

Smack the brakes on at 120mph and you can almost feel the heat from the two front discs. This is true muscle-bike riding - a raw, honest, grin-inducing experience that captures the soul and spirit of the two-wheeled horse.

Today, EU legislation and compliant manufacturers have given us safe, biddable, reliable bikes that offer a perfectly safe, vice-free opportunity for busy executives to fit in half an hour's riding between meetings. But muscle bikes? Not a chance. Silicone implant bikes would be more accurate.

- Thanks to the Historic Endurance Racing Team for the loan of the CB1100R. For information about the team contact Peter Spowage at peterikon@aol.com.

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