HONDA V45 SABRE

gagement of the hydraulically actuated clutch is sudden; it can catch the uninitiated unaware. After a short familiarization, however, riders' clutch complaints all but disappeared.

Around town the new Honda is pleasant to ride, a result of its crisp, clean carburetion. There are none of the EPA-inspired coughs or stutters from the engine to catch the rider off guard and cause an anxious moment during low-speed maneuvers. The seat gives the impression of being considerably lower than its 30.7 inches. Because it slopes down at the sides considerably, our five-eight rider could easily put both feet flat on the ground at a stop. The steering is light, and the motorcycle shows no tendency to "turn in" at parking-lot speeds.

Open roads bring out both good and bad qualities of a motorcycle's seat and riding position; here the Sabre suffers somewhat. The low seat height, though welcomed by short riders, creates a double problem for the long-distance rider. To keep the seat low, Honda gave the seat a well-defined pocket for the pilot, and then cut the foam padding between the seat base and seat cover quite thin. These design elements treat the long-distance rider rudely. The rider-pocket commands: *Sit Here.* Then the thin underpadding compresses to the point of bottoming out, leaving the rider's buttocks burning in pain inside 90 minutes, and the rider can't move to stop the pain. Okay, low seats are nice, but a rider should be able to hold a motorcycle up safely *without* both feet flat on the ground and his two legs planted like landing struts. After all, the rider spends more time sitting *on* the motorcycle while in motion than he does balancing at a stop.

The highway ride of the air-assisted suspension brings out the "sport" characteristics built into the Sabre. Suggested fork air pressure falls between six and 14 psi. Highway riding calls for compliance, so we set the fork air pressure at eight psi, the rear shock at 40 psi and adjusted the shock's rebound damping lever to position one, which offered the least damping. At these settings, with a 150-pound rider aboard, the ride was rather firm, but usually not bothersome. Freeway-expansion joints exposed the Pro-Link's shortcoming. Over the joints it's jolt-city. Lower pressures proved to be no solution; they only caused frequent bottoming over medium-sized bumps.

Sport-riding calls for firmer adjustments. We raised fork pressure to 12 psi, rear-shock pressure to 50 psi and the damper lever to the full-boogie level, number three. This setup made the Sabre very stable and precise, but the front end was unacceptably harsh. Dropping the fork pressure to 10 psi improved the ride somewhat. We continued our search for decent fork compliance in the sporting mode and lowered the fork air pressure even further, down to our touring-tested eight pounds. At eight pounds, fork action became acceptable except for frequent bottoming—which is a major exception. That's no good. Why could Honda's 750F series offer a decent ride for sport-riding without any bottoming?

Honda claims a fork travel figure for the Sabre of 5.5 inches, considerably less than the F's 6.3 inches. That's a partial explanation, but there's more. Our Sabre never gave more than 4.75 inches of actual travel in any kind of riding we did. At a pressure of eight psi the fork would sag two inches with a 150-pound rider aboard. That makes 2.75 inches of usable fork compression when touring down a smooth road. In these days of compliant, long-travel suspensions, this is a serious compromise in order to get two feet flat on the ground at a stop.

Suspension travel limitations aside, the Sabre's backroad performance is extremely creditable indeed, especially considering it has shaft drive. The combination of wide rims and tires, the integral fork brace, TRAC, excellent ground clearance and the narrow and smooth V-four engine works to form a motorcycle that can be ridden harder and with less fatigue than the majority of sport bikes. If we were trying to make time in a 200-mile run, we'd take the Sabre.

Many bikes with shaft drive require special riding techniques to extract full sporting potential. Because shaft bikes fall on—or compress—their suspension when the throttle is closed, cornering clearance can be fleeting. Proper high-performance riding on shafties dictates that the rider finish braking somewhat early so he can roll on a bit of throttle early enough to get the bike up off its haunches. Because the Sabre has such generous ground clearance, this technique becomes largely unnecessary, even when rushing along in the biggest of hurries. The footpegs rarely touch down, and must be folded considerably before anything solid will touch down. With the suspension compressed about 65 percent, the Sabre still offers a lean angle of some 43 degrees. These limits are well beyond what is prudent.

The Sabre shows that Honda already has one technological foot firmly into tomorrow. Honda's willingness and ability to play by current rules while engineering into the future, anticipating new rules, is encouraging. The Sabre sets many new standards in production motorcycle design and technology, and the motorcycle says Honda is moving ahead, full of ideas, and there is no end in sight to the continued production and sale of technologically enlightening motorcycles.

Granted, the Sabre is not perfect. Chief complaints center around the suspension's short travel and consequent performance, and the seat's poor comfort qualities over the long haul. These problems might go by relatively unnoticed on a rehashed version of a UJM. However, the Sabre is so substantially superior to UJMs in so many areas that unsolved problems or annoyances assume the importance—though not the