

# MARKS OF SPENCER

## John Cutts has a wazz on Honda's biggest street stroker, the Spencer replica NS400

**P**eter 'P.K.' Davies tells an amusing story about Joey Dunlop riding the NS400 during the Production TT. P.K., who it's safe to say knows the TT course intimately since he nearly died there in '81, is out on a NSP2900 in the big bike class while Joey is riding the smallest capacity machine in the 251-750cc division. P.K. starts over a minute in front of Dunlop and obviously has a considerable advantage in top speed along the relatively straight run down to Ballacraine. He is more than surprised therefore when Joey comes past him before Kirk Michael and disappears into the distance.

Over the mountain, P.K. again must have at least 20mph top end advantage and as he comes steaming down Glencrutchery Road he notes Joey in the pits taking on fuel. Right, thinks P.K., getting his head down, let's see how far I can get in front of him this time. Some three miles later at Union Mills, Joey Dunlop is back in front.

For the record Joey almost made a 100mph lap on the NS400 during Friday's practice. This says a lot for the bike's adaptability and excellent suspension. Its natural home is the kind of smoother racetrack where Freddie Spencer won his '83 World Championship on the NS500, of which the 400 is supposed to be a road-going replica.

Accordingly Honda UK flew a party of British hacks to Rijeka to watch the Yugoslavian GP and then test the bike around the fabulous circuit. Unfortunately the test day was washed out by heavy rains and winds strong enough to lift you off the racetrack, so the whole party was reassembled at Snetterton for some serious thrashing.

I can't say I really know my way around Snetterton though I certainly knew it a bit better after some 40 laps aboard the NS. What I do know is that the NS400 is an incredible handling motorcycle and neither the hard-chargers or the leadfoots like myself could find any limit to its handling/roadholding ability.

Honda's first high-performance stroker for the road is a darling little motorbike and a whole bunch of fun. The layout of the 90-degree V3, two forward with a vertical middle cylinder is exactly opposite to the 500 racer but because you have to pack in more ancillaries on a road bike, an exact replica layout would've proved impractical, leaving no fuel tank space cos you'd have two exhausts running under the tank close to your legs.

As is, the liquid-cooled, reed valve triple is compact, neat and works just dandy. It kicks over nice 'n' easy but sounds dreadfully innocuous at idle. It's as flat as a fart below 5000rpm much as you'd expect and really only begins to sing at 6500/7000rpm whereupon it accelerates very quickly,

bouncing the 11,000 mark on the tach. It isn't the sort of power step at seven grand that pulls you out of the seat, it isn't an on-off switch but it's definitely where the real stomp lives.

Peak power is at 10,000 and it falls away very sharply much beyond it. Keep it sweet between 7000 and 10,000rpm, balancing revs through the six well-placed gears and there's no shortage of excitement or speed. Along the Revett Straight it was indicating 125mph in fifth and I wasn't quick enough out of Sear to make it worthwhile hooking sixth. Wayne Gardner and Ron Haslam, who were present at the test, confirmed it was reaching 130mph but wasn't redlining. Add say another 5mph and you've got a realistic top speed of about 135mph. Not bad for a 400 eh?

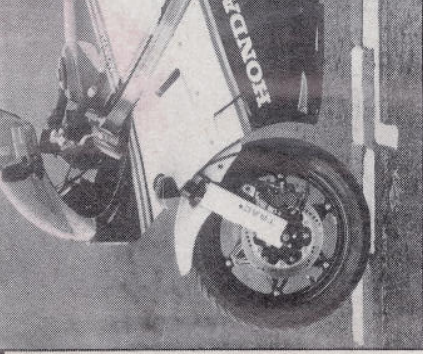
The motor bristles with trick bits which we'll detail more fully when we get one on full road test. Lightweight aluminium cylinders, nikasil coated, with ATAC (Auto-controlled Torque Amplification Chambers) on the front two pots to improve power output throughout the rev range and elec-

tronically linked to activate at 7500rpm are just part of the new Honda technology the NS sports.

Making a claimed 72bhp at 10,000rpm, the NS is significantly quicker and less peaky than Yamaha's 350YPVS and would even give their 500 a good run for its money (making up through the turns what it was losing in sheer poke).

It's deceptively quick too, you just wind it up and it flies. Rubber-mounted and fairly smooth for a two-stroke, the only time you ever notice the engine is when you choose the wrong gear and let it bog down; the rest of the time it's just hauling along making horsepower.

The motor's good, no doubt about it, but the rolling chassis is bloody brilliant. The aluminium box-section frame weighs but 21lb and carries the 103lb V3 lump low and forward. Fully anodised, the double cradle layout uses cast aluminium parts for the steering head, swing-arm pivot and arm itself, which reduces the amount of overall welding. The rest is in aluminium pipe, fairly respectably



finished for a mass-production line. The suspension is Showa all round. Unlinked, air-assisted 37mm forks up front with TRAC anti-dive plus a rear Pro-link with five-way pre-load adjustment but no damping control. Wheelbase is a tight 54.6in.

The steering is effortless and quick with comfy bars and a good riding

position. Sit upright or hang off, the bike accommodates all styles of riding. The roadholding and handling are uncommonly good. Nothing seems to get this bike out of shape. It knows nothing of weaves, wobbles, knot-tying or evil shakes. Some modern two-strokes display hesitant handling, unnerving rather than un-

wildly, whereas the Honda has a really confident and balanced feel to it. Ground clearance at 5.3in isn't generous enough to keep the footpegs from touching down occasionally but nothing digs in. The brakes are triple drilled discs (256mm front, 220mm rear) with dual piston callipers pushing on semi-metallic pads. They don't fade and the bike doesn't jump about even with the anchors smoking the tyre. Braking hard while cranked over isn't part of my cowardly repertoire but Gardner said the bike behaved excellently banked and braked hard into a turn. He and Ronnie gave pillion rides at cruising speeds (effortlessly overtaking everybody) and had a wheelie competition down the pit straight. They could get them up all right but had trouble monowheeling for any distance. Then, against the odds, Ron pulled one out of the bag for the entire distance of the pit wall.

The OE tyres will be either new-pattern Bridgestones or Dunlops — 100/90V16 and 110/90V17. The Bridgestones ran nicely hot and sticky

but certainly wouldn't last more than a day if all your riding was around Snettens. Some riders mentioned long but controllable slides but all I noticed was a slight stepping out hard on the power around Corams, balancing tyre against throttle. The edge of this bike's handling really does seem synonymous with the edge of the tyres.

At just over 400lb fully gassed, the NS400 is a delightful little bike to drive hard. Honda's designers and engineers have struck a perfect, integrated balance between engine performance and a chassis capable of nailing that output to the ground. Neither the excesses of the power or the racetrack got the bike out of shape. Judging by Joey's TT ride it should be as good on the road.

Even for a heavy, six-foot rider the NS feels comfy and adequately sized. The bike's aerodynamics are good too. From the main full fairing and shrouded fork legs through the large side covers back to the rear seat cowl, the design does its best to eliminate drag and increase speed. The seat wears a removable rear cover for pillion use, and each bike comes with a trick racing stand that you can operate one-handed (though gawd knows what you're supposed to do with it when you're riding). Petrol consumption around Snetterton was atrocious, estimated to be low 20s, obviously you'd expect a lot more in general use.

To fully evaluate it both as a road bike and a track tool we're hoping to run an NS against a 500LC which should prove very interesting. Honda are only bringing in 300 of them this year, 200 in HRC's red, white and blue livery and 100 in Rothmans blue and white; both are really smart and sharp paint jobs. Although most of this year's batch have already been ordered by wise investors ready to lay down £2899 for a bike they've never seen, next year Honda hope to bring in lots more. It's a lot of money for a little 'un but the NS has no competitor in its class (sub-500). It's a serious motorcycle but its main business is fun. Serious fun. Everybody who rides it will fall in love with it.

### HONDA NS400R-F £2899 including all taxes

#### PERFORMANCE

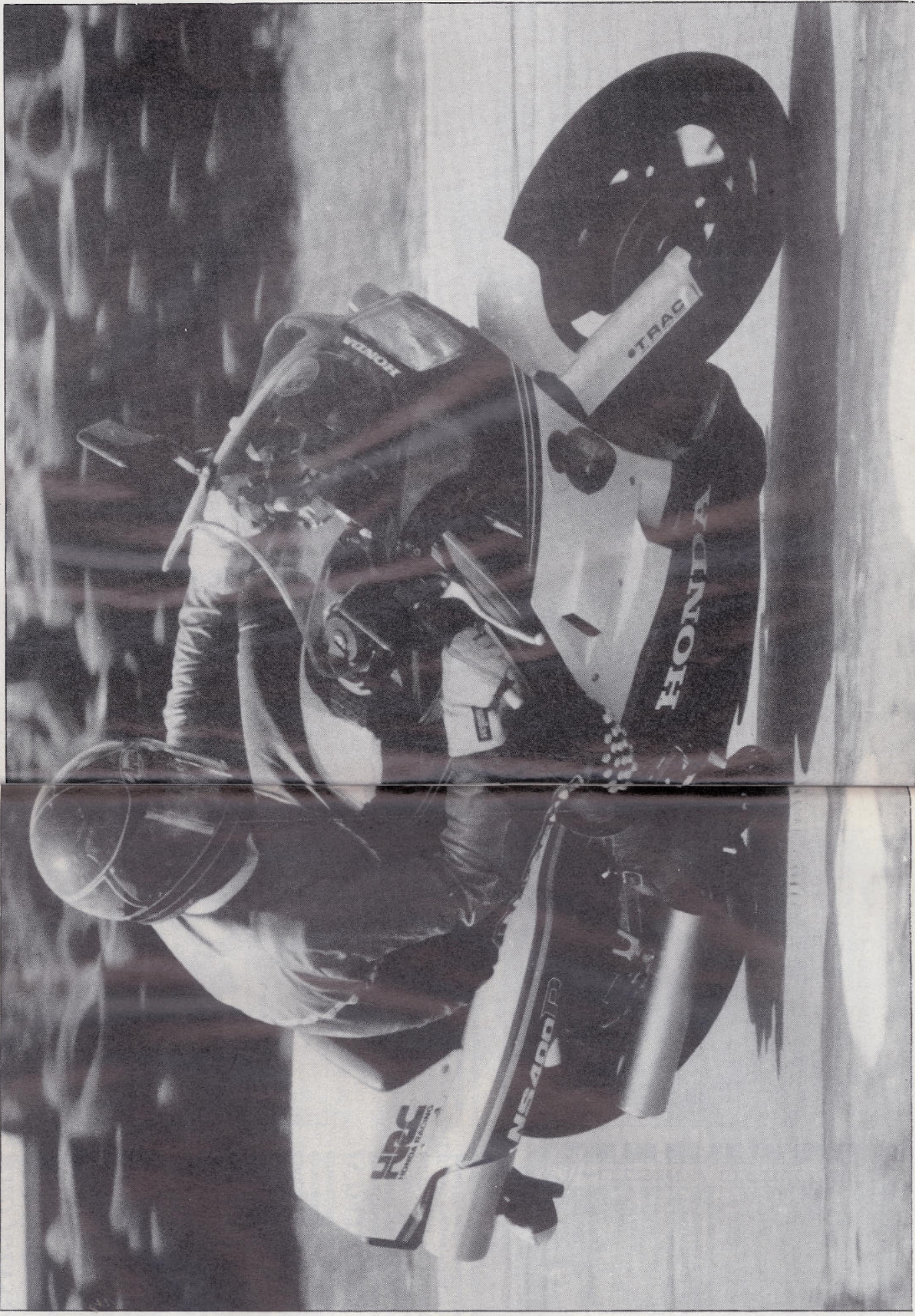
Maximum Speed — 135mph  
Fuel Consumption — tba.  
Estimated high

#### POWERTRAIN

Liquid-cooled, two-stroke V3.  
Capacity 387cc. Bore x stroke 57 x 50.6mm. Compression ratio 6.7:1. Maximum claimed power 72bhp at 10,000rpm. Induction by reed valve and three 26mm flat slide Keihin with power jets. Oil injection lubrication. Transistorised ignition. Wet multi-plate clutch, six-speed transmission. Primary drive by gear. Final drive by sealed chain.

#### CHASSIS

Aluminium double cradle frame. Showa suspension: air assisted front forks with TRAC anti-dive, Pro-link rear swing-arm with single shock, hydraulically adjustable for pre-load. Wheelbase 54.5in. Seat height 31.1in. Dry weight 359lb. Tank capacity 19litres (4.2gal). Triple disc brakes with dual-piston callipers. Tyres: Bridgestones 100/90V16 (front) and 110/90V17 (rear).



SUPERBIKE

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