

400 FOUR

BY KEN VREEKE

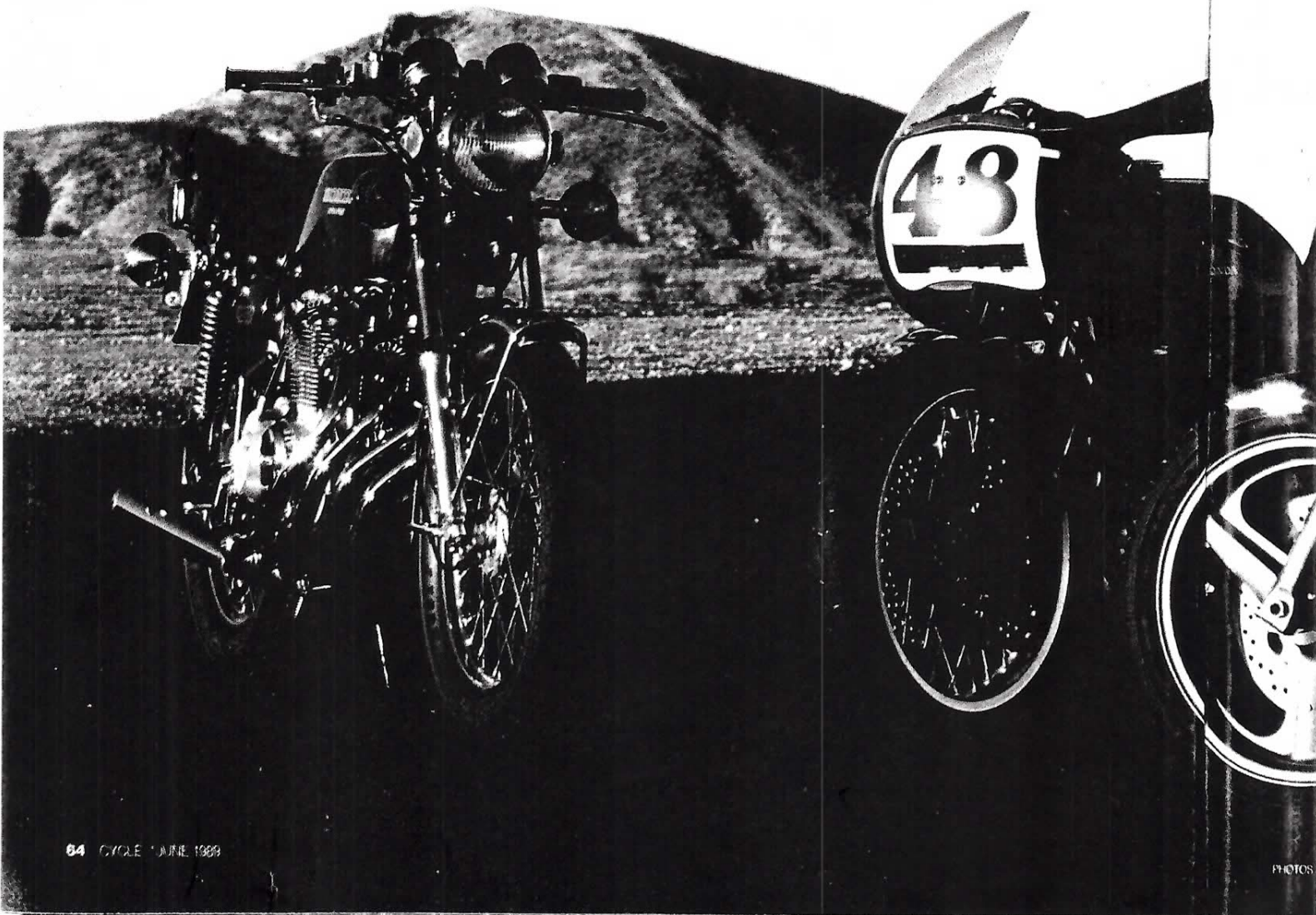
□ Think 1975. That was the year Honda introduced its first made-for-America motorcycle, the venerable Gold Wing, and launched a touring dynasty. It was also the year of the sporty CB400F, but you are forgiven if that bit of trivia slipped your mind.

Known by its more poetic appellation, the "400 Four" led many people to believe it would ignite the cafe-bike boom of the mid-seventies, but didn't. The

CB's bad-to-the-bone cafe-bike riding position, a radical departure from standard Japanese seating, got panned in Peoria, and some motorcyclists mistook the bike's elegantly understated styling for dull and dowdy. Yamaha's nickel-rocket RD350/400 two-strokes were faster and cheaper. By the winter of 1977, Honda's little zinger was a goner.

Still, the two-valve, sohc in-line 400 Four, derived from the more pedestrian CB350F, was the first Japanese motorcycle to combine European styling with multi-cylinder racing technology, and as such, had an enduring impact on a great many enthusiasts. Thanks to its short production run and the fact that Honda

has
this
has
lect
when
arou
nal \$
K
Tech
Japa
alon
with
(
arou
Onta
the l
the



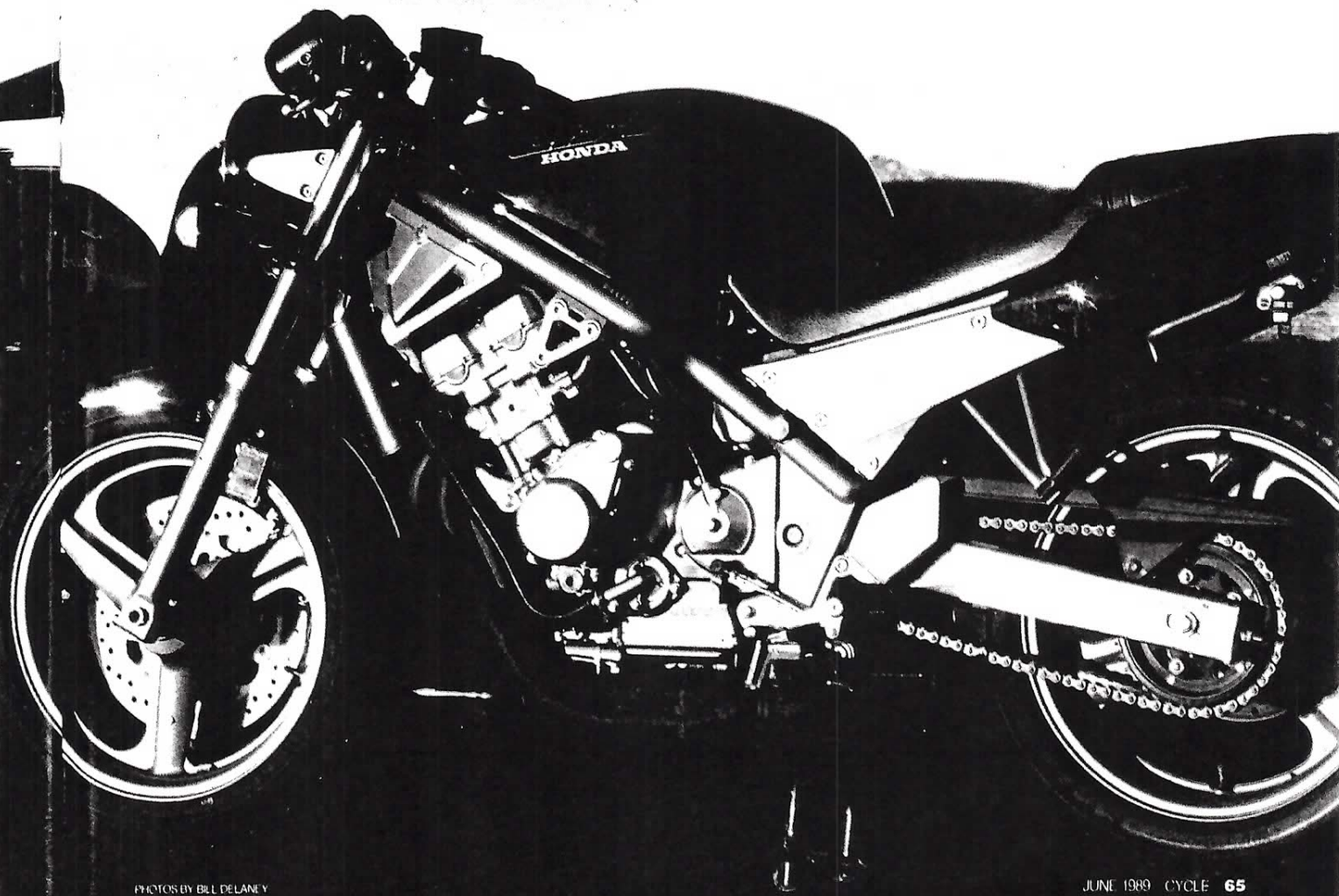
has not offered another 400cc four in this country until the CB-1, the 400 Four has attracted a cult following in the collector market—particularly in Japan, where clean, original examples fetch around \$5000, more than triple the original \$1441 sticker.

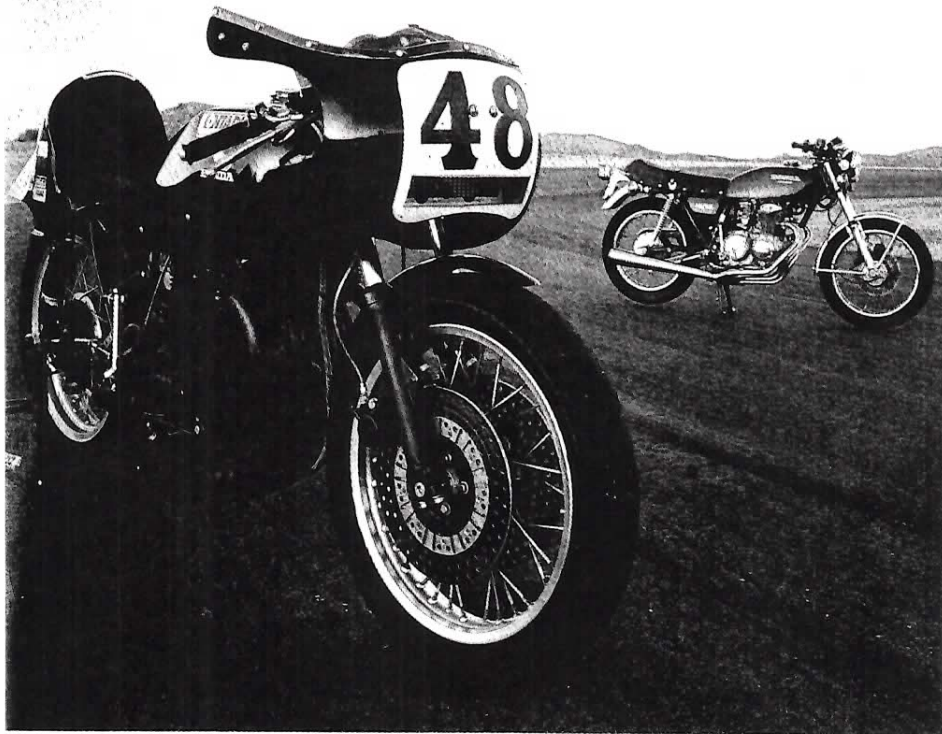
Kaz Yoshima, owner of Ontario Moto Tech, has restored 14 of these bikes for Japanese collectors in the past year alone. But Yoshima first crossed paths with the CB400 years ago.

California racing buffs who hung around such speedball race tracks as Ontario, Riverside and Willow Springs in the late seventies might well remember the unmuffled howl of several hot-rod

400 Fours. Built by Yoshima, these 492cc screamers occasionally trounced modified Z-1s and 750s to the bug-eyed amazement of spectators and racers.

While most other tuners had dismissed the 400 Four as too small and limited for serious modification, Yoshima saw it as a golden opportunity. Before emigrating from Japan to California in 1972, Yoshima had worked in the R&D department of Honda Motor Corp. He apprenticed under the same engineers who developed Honda's 13,000-rpm V-12 Formula 1 car engine and the 18,000-





rpm six-cylinder 250cc engine that dominated motorcycle GP racing in the sixties. Yoshima knew how to get power with engine speed. After saving enough money and learning enough English, he opened his own modest race shop in Burbank, California, and began attracting customers with his 13,500-rpm CB400F giant-killer.

One of Yoshima's first patrons was Steve Schrader. Yoshima found a kindred soul in Schrader, a racing new-

comer more comfortable being underestimated than overrated. From 1977 to 1980, Schrader won five club-class championships and 38 races—some of them against open-class machines—on one of Yoshima's fiery fours.

As a celebration of Honda's return to the 400 Four concept with the CB-1, *Cycle* thought it would be enlightening to look back at history through the aperture of Honda's modern technology. Schrader was kind enough to lend us his racer, stored after the 1980 season, but never ridden until this spring day at Willow Springs International Raceway. Our standard CB400 was an original 1975 model restored by Yoshima and bound for Japan.

Beneath the white-bellied clouds of the desert sky, the three 400s look like time capsules, the CB-1 all rounded, muscular and modern next to the old, blocky 400 Fours. Look at the chassis: The CB-1 uses a steel perimeter-style frame with a single shock in back, mas-

sive 41mm fork tubes in front, and wide, cast 17-inch wheels.

The CB400's single backbone frame looks positively pencil-necked by comparison. The swing arm, made from tubing with about the same diameter as a Harley handlebar, is barely smaller than the twig-like 35mm fork tubes. The 18-inch spoke wheels are skinny enough to fit into a bicycle rack. And the chrome rear shocks hold only enough oil to keep from squeaking. In 1975, damping wasn't even on the options list.

The racer's chassis looks more encouraging. Yoshima knew he couldn't run with the big-bores on power alone, so he concentrated on handling advantages as well. Topped with fuel, the 492cc racer weighs just 325 pounds, about 100 pounds less than the stocker. Welded cross-members in the swing arm area, beefed-up triple-clamps, S&W rear shocks, dual-disc front brake, and unlimited cornering clearance—thanks to Yoshima's hand-bent exhaust system—allowed the racer to easily pass machines twice its size during braking and cornering.

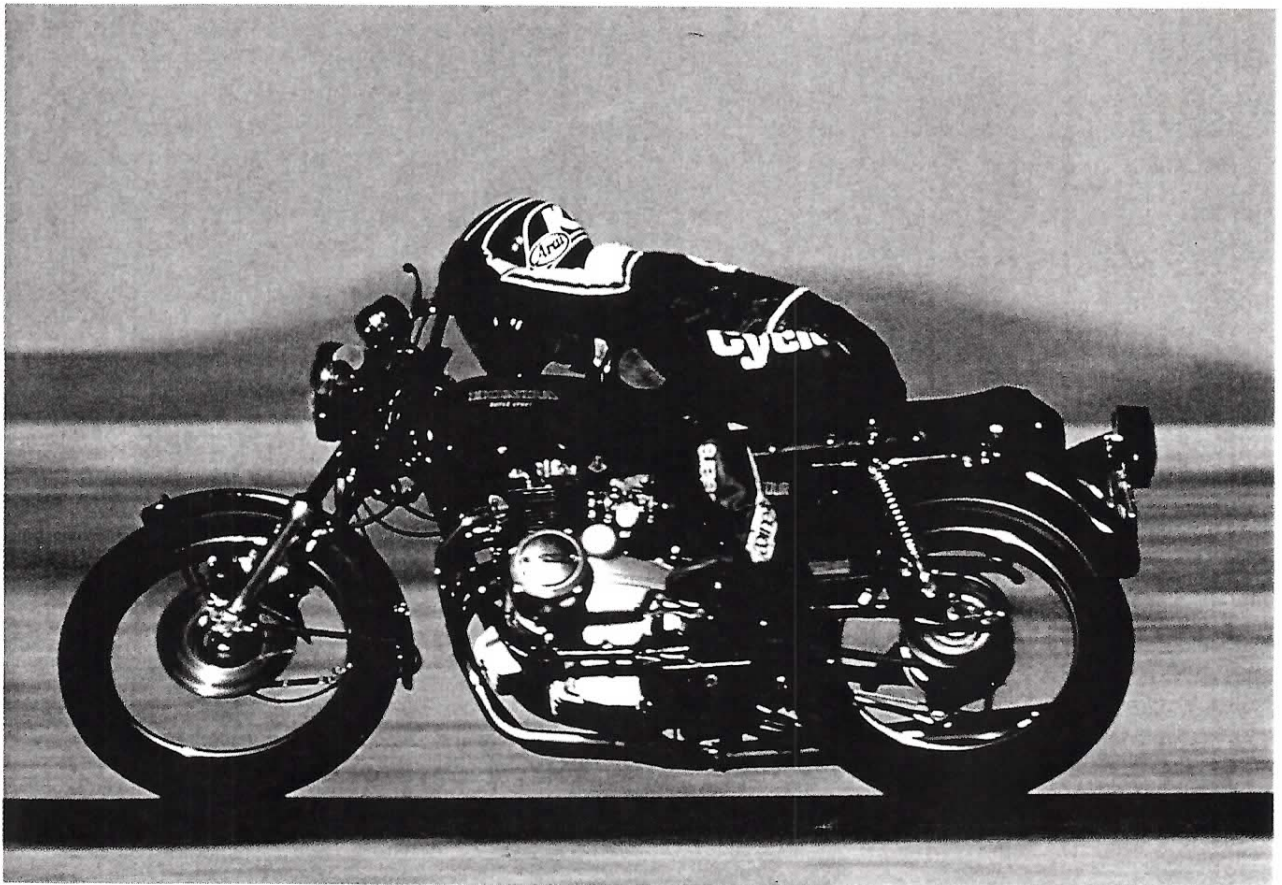
For our day at Willow, the racer wears the original 20mm carbs. "Back then we ran 31mm CRs," says Schrader. "The only other bikes running 31s were the big Z-1s. This engine responds much better with the 31s, and makes a bunch more power." Unfortunately, the racing carburetors were adapted to another machine, long since sold.

With the big mixers in place, Yoshima says the racer pumped out about 60 horsepower at its 13,500-rpm redline. Stock CB400s pumped out 32 and change. In a 1977 *Cycle* feature, a milder 458cc version of Yoshima's Four clicked off a 12.7-second quarter-mile—matching the best time posted by Honda's current 45-horsepower, four-valve, liquid-cooled CB-1.

On the new, short Streets of Willow Springs circuit, the CB-1 provides the modern perspective. Perfectly scaled to the tight 1.2-mile track, the CB-1 is a two-wheeled version of a Malibu Grand Prix car. The gearing, spot-on for the track, makes it easy to keep the engine spinning in the broad powerband from 8000 to 14,000 rpm, where the CB-1 gives a smooth, crisp flow of power, albeit accompanied by high-frequency vibration.

Fitted with Dunlop's excellent K591 race compound tires, the CB-1 sticks and sticks until first the footpegs, then the muffler and sidestand bracket grind





out a warning. Even at these lean angles, the CB-1 is a paragon of poise—utterly planted, predictable, wonderfully nimble. And although the Streets of Willow has bumps, you can't feel them through the plush suspension. Inspired by the CB-1's absolute stability, you find yourself slamming it hard into turns by the sixth lap, and wondering why you didn't push it sooner. Not so the CB400 Four.

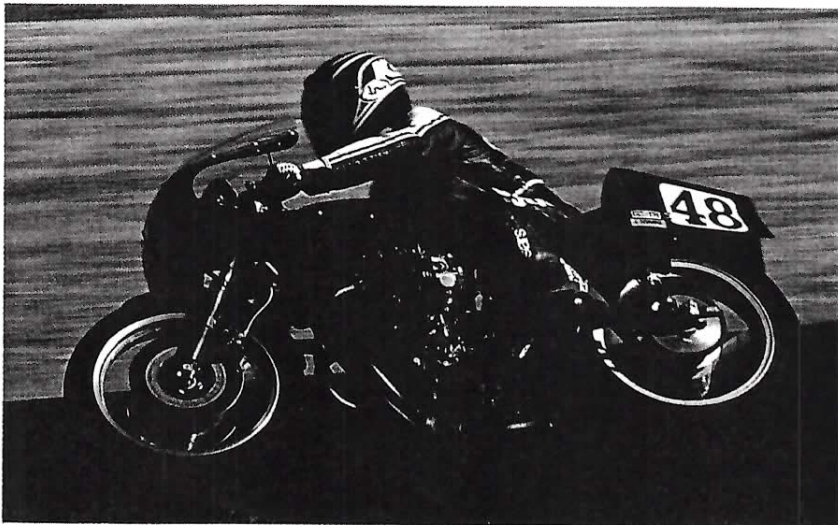
Reality can be a cruel and thorny crown to press upon a legend; and the

reality of the modern era makes the 400 Four seem like a parody of itself. Even with modern Dunlop tires, the CB400 is a handful on the track. The roadster handlebar locates the grips at an awkward, upward angle. The crude suspension makes the track surface—so smooth under the CB-1—feel like a washboard. Any attempt to increase corner speed has the front and rear wheels chattering toward doom.

With a maximum lean angle that feels

barely greater than 25 degrees, the 400 Four has a severe lack of cornering clearance. Box-stock racers of the seventies found out the hard way just how solidly the CB's four-into-one pipe could smack the ground, and how quickly the rest of the bike could follow. This lack of clearance mandates long, classic, sweeping lines on the racetrack. None of this brake, flick, zoom stuff fancied by the CB-1.

In a 1977 *Cycle* road test, the CB400





tires. Whoever said there's no such thing as too much traction was a liar. Ridden sedately on the street, the CB400 is a more accommodating piece, a fine companion for tooling to the corner store, or breezing along a mountain road on a Sunday afternoon.

Schrader's racing 400 is right at home on the track, but like many roll-your-own racers of the late seventies, this bike is a high-effort ride; extremely low clip-on bars, controls by Bullworker, and a TZ750-replica seat as comfortable as a cement slab all confront the rider.

Stiff suspension doesn't help. With its flexi-flier frame, the racer relies on ultra-firm suspension for stability; and while this archaic approach indeed makes the race bike far more stable than the stocker, it also produces a ride harsh enough to blur your vision. Between the suspension compliance (none), comfort (none), and engine vibration (plenty), the race bike makes every lap a test of rider skill and stamina.

But it is fast, despite the obvious handicap of the undersized carbs fitted for our test. Engine response is sluggish, as Schrader said it would be with the little mixers. The small carbs also knocked the clout out of the race bike's top end, limiting engine speed to 11,000 rpm rather than the usual 13,500. Yet despite the choke hold, Schrader's racer was a dead even match for the CB-1 on the short straights. With the 31s in place, it's easy to imagine this little screamer humiliating bikes twice its size.

Along with this power comes handling vastly improved over the standard CB400. Unlimited cornering clearance, real brakes, good stability, and the grip of fresh rubber give the race bike a more modern interpretation of the track, allowing the rider to use the same lines and late-braking, quick-flick riding techniques employed on the CB-1. Stiff suspension makes the race bike skittish over the rough stuff. But a racer could still experiment, probe, learn a thing or two about track speed on this bike, things he would never have an opportunity to learn on the standard 400 Four.

Yoshima's giant-killer must have been a stunner in its day. The bike, though crude and far more demanding than the CB-1, is impressive still. Compared to the CB-1 on the race track, the standard 400 Four does everything in slow motion, but proves you can be just as terrified at half the speed. Such is the march of progress. ■

loafed through the quarter-mile in 14.67 seconds at 87 mph—not bad for that year, but slow as a car in 1989. On the racetrack, the CB400 revs slowly, reluctantly, as if the crankshaft was pulling taffy rather than splashing in oil. Red-line—10,000 rpm—is a long time coming in any gear, but it signals its arrival with a heavy dose of vibration.

The 400 Four doesn't have much

power, but that's good because it doesn't stop worth a damn. Its rear brake feels more powerful than its front. Yet even with the wimpy front disc, the modern tire fitted for our track day gripped hard enough to overpower the chassis. Hard braking while turning had the fork twisting, the frame flexing as if hinged in the middle, and the whole bike hopping violently enough to chirp the

Kaz Yoshima at work on his 400-Four.



C
M
F
S
S
S
F
I
A
A
S
O
M
S
T
O
M
S
T

M
S
O
M
M
M