

# COUNTER REVOLUTION

Has Kawasaki's green meanie KR-1 the means to topple Yamaha's white knight TZR from its production pedestal? Jamie McIlwraith assesses armaments







**C**resting the spur, the road ahead unfolded full of promise. It arced away to the right, only to swap direction with the change in the lay of the land, darting left for a long, long time.

Choosing a point on the road some distance ahead and under full acceleration through third, fourth, then fifth, the little green road racer flew across the precise point, unerringly committed now to the rest of a very, very high speed sweeper.

From there a quick change of direction and the realisation that the long left hander was a much tighter corner than it appeared from the rise.

With little time to make amends for the error in judgement, the KR-1 was then asked to wash off all that giant killing speed it had only recently accelerated into action; and to change direction for a wider approach. More competent than I, it again obeyed, handling the assignment as if to say "You goofed, you didn't have to wash off that speed at all."

And so it went on the first outing. Like early days with a Ducati F1, the Kawasaki KR-1 is a bike that continually tells you that it can go faster and harder than you are riding it. Not many bikes are that capable – most are in an almost indecent hurry to inform you of their limitations.

Like the F1, the KR-1 isn't the neutral steering, perfectly balanced, easy to ride sort of wonder bike some people expect. Instead, the KR-1 is a bike that takes some time to

master, but nevertheless is a bike with such reserves of handling, braking and useful power that its limitations are only found in the deepest reaches of rider ability.

Sit on the thing for the first time and this one-off feeling is immediately apparent. This is a race bike that has been civilized for the road. Well civilized, too. The firmness of the suspension and the uncompromisingly quick steering tell you the same story. The first time you throw the thing down a more typically rugged piece of highway and you bang your balls on the tank you know that the KR-1 is only a passable road bike. It is a production racer par excellence, one of the best instant race bikes a budding Wayne Gardner could buy.

The former holder of the top value instant racer title is the Yamaha TZR250, a slower and more normal machine than the Kawasaki. It sounds hardly attractive when described like that, yet as a bike for the road the Yamaha is clearly a better thing.

Unlike the racey Kawasaki, the Yamaha is a user-friendly road bike, with more neutral steering, better engine tractability, and a ride position and suspension much more suited to road use.

If it sounds like last year's production racing special is this year's favourite practical dunger, well the irony is noted. But as we are talking in comparative terms, the Yamaha is a far more practical bike. However, it isn't heartwarming news for Yamaha, as last year around half of TZRs sold went straight to the racetrack. If this holds true, then Kawasaki should have a couple of order books full of KR-1s by year's end, with the bulk of those, too, headed for Cadwell, Brands or wherever.



The Yamaha has been with us for nearly two years and the Kawasaki is only a recent arrival. This shows in both engine and chassis development, where the Kawasaki is, well, more advanced.

Both bikes use the latest crankcase reed induction motors, plus power valves, which give not only more horsepower but improve the power spread as well. The Kawasaki also employs an extra exhaust resonance chamber (like the Honda ATAC bizzo), which improves its bottom-end power. The KR-1 also features a side-loading gearbox, which makes access to the gearbox during race meetings a far easier task. There's even a balance shaft in the thing. Its parallel twin cylinders are also inclined more towards horizontal, lowering the centre of gravity. Both bikes use aluminium frames and 17 inch front wheels, but the Kawasaki uses wider rims and lower, wider radial type tyres, which in turn means lots more potential trick rubber for the Kawasaki on the racetrack, too.

The KR-1's speed advantage isn't hard to measure, it immediately feels hornier and quicker than the Yamaha, first ride. If the Yamaha just nudges the underside of 125mph, the Kawasaki is the same amount over the top, with an approximate six mph speed advantage overall. The Kawasaki, although burdened with hopelessly tall gearing (courtesy of Oz noise laws) that prevents it from ever reaching the redline in top, still marginally beats the Yamaha in acceleration through the gears.

Change the gearing from the Australian model's 15/40 tooth sprockets to the more sensible 14/41 set-up likely in the U.K. and you've got a real giant-killer. Once that happens, I think the TZR's days as proddy racing prince are numbered.

Both of these bikes represent a high point of roadgoing two-strokes. Only a few years ago, the prospect of emission control legislation heralded the end of the smoker, yet here we are with two little oil burners whose on-road performance is enough to shame virtually anything, if you are rider enough to use their potential.

Both bikes are weapon enough to do the job on any of the racer roads on the outskirts of major cities. It's up to rider ability to determine



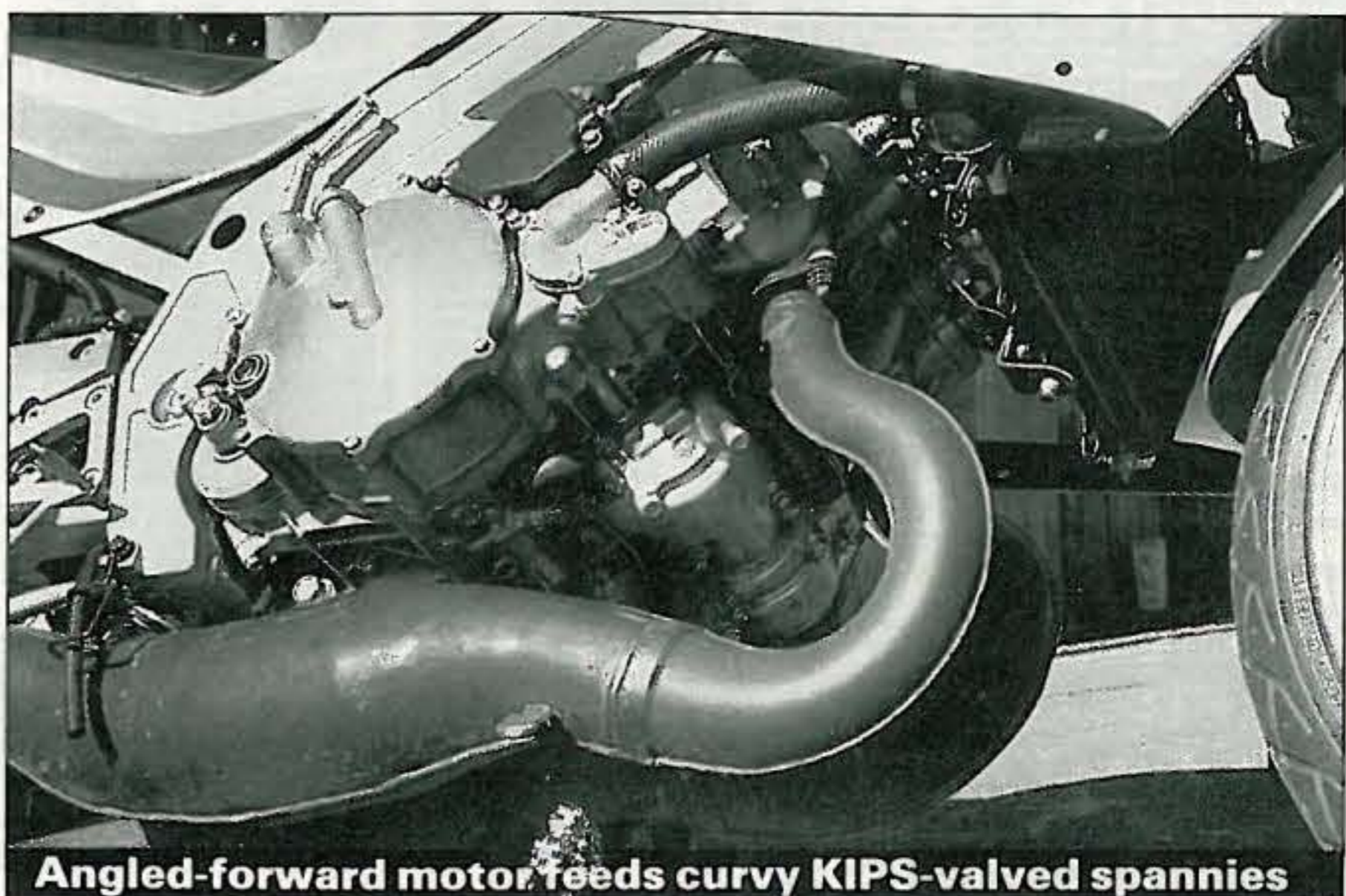
**"Handling's ripper, mate, and she steers like a beaut."**

the outcome of any contest between a KR-1 and a GSX-R. Sure, you need a better performance from the 250, and it would probably help if you didn't weigh too much either, but a good little bloke on a KR-1 should have a belt-full of scalps every weekend. His career is bound to be short, however. The law frowns on this sort of stuff, which is why they invented road-racing.

Hard scratching on a smooth road is the KR1's forte. Rougher roads upset its suspension a bit too much. The Yamaha is more at home on a scoot through less smooth roads. Its suspension is more compliant, and its steering is easier to learn and more forgiving when you don't know the road well. The KR-1 enjoys not only a horsepower advantage coming out of corners, but its twin disc brakes and firmer suspension combine to deliver better braking power and braking stability than the Yamaha. That's no shame to the excellent Yamaha brakes, because the KR-1 is my number one best braking road bike so far. These little things each weigh only a few kilos either side of 125kg, and their ability to throw out the anchors is breathtaking.

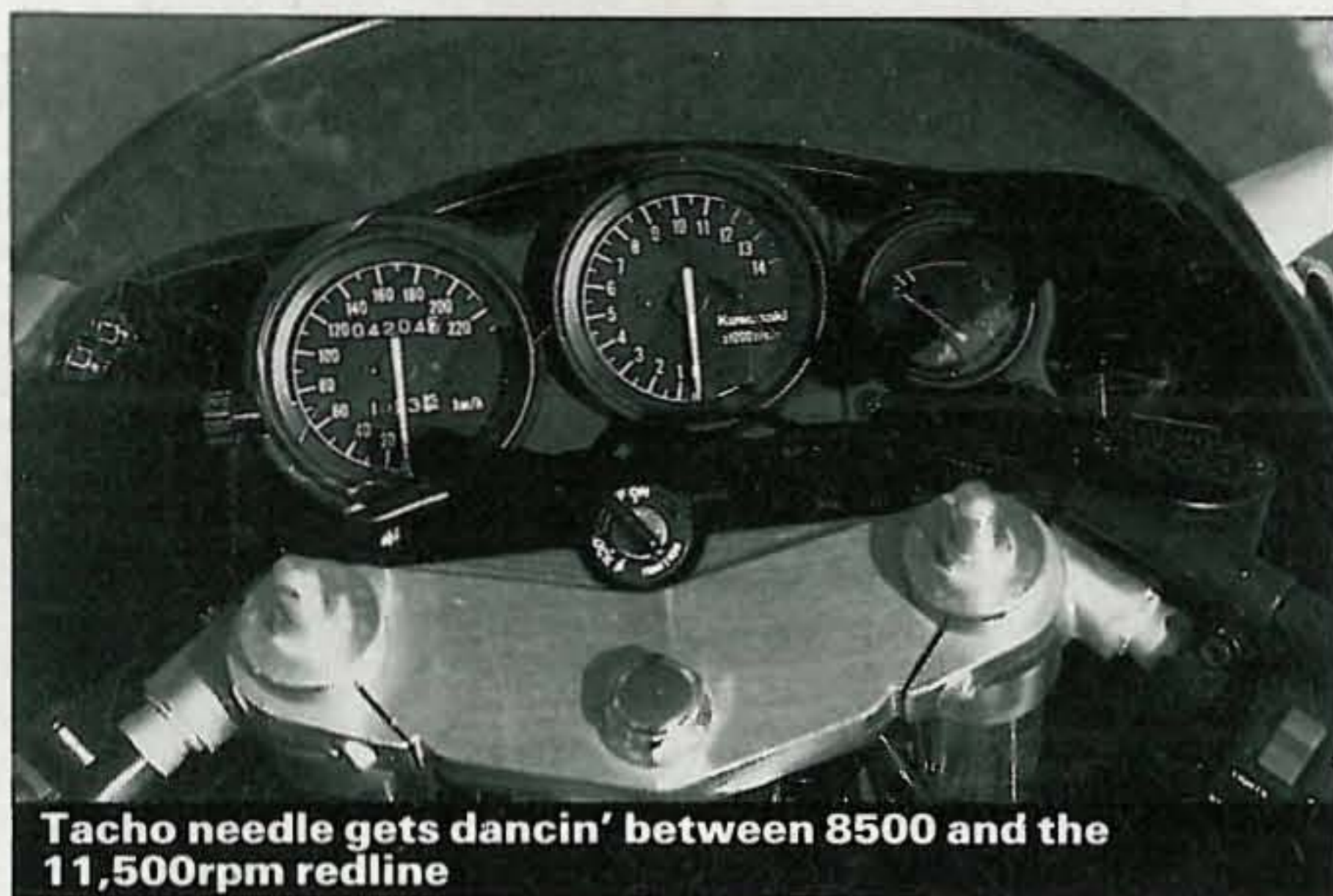


**Eighteen-inch rear radial puts plenty of rubber on the road**



**Angled-forward motor feeds curvy KIPS-valved spannies**





Tacho needle gets dancin' between 8500 and the 11,500rpm redline

Of the two, the Yamaha enjoys more tractable power, with the first burst of joy starting at 6000rpm, and charging progressively harder to the 10,000rpm redline. The Kawasaki comes in later, at 6500rpm, surges a little frustratingly through to 8500, then kicks in with a wallop until the 11,500rpm redline. While the differences seem slight, the effect of the two engines is that the Yamaha copes with the odd road boo-boo a lot more gracefully, while the Kawasaki is more sensitive to any sudden losses of revs.

If you are unfamiliar with two-strokes, and talk of 125mph speeds, power surges at 6000, and five figure redlines implies constant, frantic work on the six-speed gear lever to keep things moving, then you're forgiven, but wrong. You need full concentration on revs and gears when you're going for it, but for normal highway cruising at 60-75mph, both are pleasantly capable. The Yamaha is a lot better as a 'tourer' than the KR-1, whose tall gearing means that even 75mph is off the bottom of the powerband. When you consider the extra comfort of the Yamaha's ride position, better gear carrying ability and softer suspension, the Kawasaki isn't in the hunt as a highway bike.

Surprisingly enough, these little racers are both sweet, and civilised. Both use kickstarters, starting with the barest prod of the lever, first time. Indeed, you can hand start them, so easy is the kickstarter to use. Both commute quite well, although getting under way from traffic lights requires normal two-stroke clutch slipping. For both bikes the power in the lower 3000 to 6000rpm range is fine. In this arena, the Yamaha's tractability, superior ride position and more neutral steering means it is a far better city and

suburban bopper.

When it comes to that other important facet of urban motorcycling, namely posing, the poor old Yamaha also hardly turned a head in the few weeks of our test, despite the pretty French blue Gauloises colour scheme. The Kawasaki, by comparison, drew almost unwelcome attention on every street corner.

So, it is no surprise that the Kawasaki wins hearts, and races, while the Yamaha wins minds, and praise. Yamaha have been building two-stroke twins since Wayne Gardner was just a twinkle in old Norm's eyes, and the benefits of refinement, and perhaps reliability, should not be ignored. It certainly felt smooth, ran cleanly, used less fuel and oil on test.

The KR-1 engine is the first of its type for Kawasaki, and showed less refinement. Oilier on the outside, it drank more fuel and used lots more oil than the Yamaha, but at least started and idled as well. Of course, its balance shaft helped it run more smoothly than the Yamaha, though vibration could hardly be listed as a fault with the TZR.

The quality of finish of both bikes is pleasing. Both fairings offer useful streamlining for the racer crouch, as well as moderately useful highway weather protection, certainly more useful than some of the expensive blobs of plastic that afflict other more sports/touring oriented four-stroke equipment. The Yamaha, which would normally be derided for pillion comfort, suddenly ranks as comfortably sensible, although that's not really true. Neither bike can carry a passenger very far without a bowel movement taking place.

But all this carry-on about the relative merits of minor details isn't the issue. It's a choice between hearts and minds. Oh yes, and stopwatches, too. ■

## FLICKING THE

# Vees



Honda (below) and Suzuki line up their 250 challengers . . .



There's still no chance of Honda's NSR250 V-twin making an appearance on these shores but the good news is that Suzuki will be bringing in their V-version of the Gamma, the RGV250.

The little Suzi, like the Honda powered by an in-line watercooled vee with pots set at 90 degrees, was first seen here in a brief debut at this year's TT, piloted by Graeme McGregor and Andy McGladdery.

A claimed 58 horses make the Gamma, or its brochure, the most powerful kid in the class. And with a chassis that promises to be even better than that of the original alloy-framed RG250, the Suzuki should have the handling to match. With a price tag that — like the Kawasaki's — won't leave an awful lot of change from three grand (the RG250 costs £2549), it'll need it.

It's price that still prevents Honda's NSR250 from coming here. In Japan it's the most expensive 250 of all — and that's just the standard bike, not the magnesium wheeled NSR250RSP, which lowers dry weight by seven kilos to a flyaway 120kg and comes in optional Rothmans colour scheme.

We got a brief spin on an NSR for last October's issue, and the standard-issue red and white is good enough for us: if a tastier looking bike's been built we'd like to dribble on it, never mind ride it. Details of this year's updated version are sketchy but rumour has it that the much-improved Honda was good enough to win a recent Jap-mag giant test. Shame it won't be around to take part in ours . . .

	HONDA NSR250	SUZUKI RGV250
Price.....	Not imported	To be announced
Importer .....	N/a	Heron Suzuki GB Ltd, Gatwick Road, Crawley, West Sussex
Warranty .....	N/a	12 months/unlimited mileage
Engine .....	W/c 2-str 90 degree V-twin	W/c 2-str 90 degree V-twin
Bore x stroke.....	54 x 54.5mm	56 x 50.5mm
Capacity .....	249cc	249cc
Comp. ratio .....	N/a	7.5:1
Carburation .....	N/a	2 x 32mm Mikuni
Claimed power.....	45bhp @ 9500rpm (Japanese spec)	58bhp @ 11,000rpm
Claimed torque .....	3.8kg.m @ 8000rpm	3.8kg.m @ 10,800rpm
Gearbox.....	6-speed	6-speed
Electrics.....	12V battery; 60/55W headlamp	12V battery; 60/55W headlamp
<b>CYCLE PARTS</b>		
Tyres, front.....	110/70 x 17in	110/70R x 17in
Rear .....	130/60R x 18in	140/60R x 18in
Brakes, front.....	2 x 230mm (9in) discs	2 x discs
Rear .....	200mm (8in) disc	single disc
Suspension, front .....	Telescopic with stepless preload adjust	Telescopic with 5-way preload adjust
Rear .....	Pro-Link single shock with preload adjust	Full-Floater single shock with 7-way preload adjust
<b>DIMENSIONS</b>		
Wheelbase .....	1355mm (53in)	1375mm (54in)
Dry weight .....	127kg (280lb); 250RSP 120kg	128kg (282lb)
Fuel capacity .....	16 litres (3.5 gal)	17 litres (3.7 gal)