

CLICHE TEST

HUSQVARNA XC500

READY WHEN YOU ARE uncivilised big bore

Husqvarnas are nothing if not consistent. Looking back, we reckon we could have done the XC500 test over the phone in true motorcycle journalist style. The motor was just like we expected, the suspension and handling was just like we expected, everything about the bike was predictably Husqvarna. So, if you think we are saying the same old things we say in every Husqvarna test, you're dead right.



The XC500 Husqvarna is a kind of democracy bike. The off-road race bike of the people, by the people, for the people. Husqvarna's R&D department is still manned by accomplished dirt bike racers who concentrate more on function than sales gimmickry, and the XC range came about as a means of giving Husky buyers exactly what they wanted.

A lot of them preferred features from both the enduro and motocross machines and the XC is the result. The only problem is that this people's bike, just like that famous people's car, the VW Beetle, starts to look too expensive to most people when the opposition begins to offer good products for less money.

Still, two out of three's not bad, and if Husqvarna never intended their 500 to be used as an enduro bike, it hasn't stopped people buying up XC500s hand over fist.

THE MOTOR

The Husqvarna 500 motor (488cc actually) started life as an attempt to put the open class Huskys back into the horsepower race against everything else on the motocross start lines. We first saw this motor in the "pre-white" frame as a 1982½ model bike which delivered its power to the rear wheel through a four-speed gearbox. That in itself was quite a change because Husqvarna had been equipping all of their bikes with a six-speed gearbox for several years.

As it turned out, despite making a name for itself in Europe where it reportedly achieved considerable popularity among privateer racers whose next meal depended on how much they twisted the throttle, the CR500 never enjoyed much popularity in Australia or in the US.

From what we've heard, most of these first CR500s were sold not to motocross riders, but to power-crazy hoons who quickly discovered the answer to the question everyone was asking (does the six-speed gearbox fit in there?) was, yes it does.

By 1983 Husqvarna was supplying a ready-made 500 six-speeder in the form of the XC500. XC, for those of you who aren't familiar with the Swedish factory's prefixes, stands for cross country.

They are intended as more of a desert racer with their long travel motocross suspension hanging off the enduro frame but many buyers are convinced that more power is the great cure-all and they are only too happy to use their 500s in enduros.

The Husky factory still maintains that a smaller capacity motor with more usable power is the way to go for enduro work and their pure enduro open class bike still uses the 430cc motor. Maybe they're right but they're not stupid enough to argue with queues of riders lining up with money to spend on six-speed 500s.

The XCs come with the good old Motoplat 35 watt ignition. It seems a

bit of a strange choice for a bike that is supposedly a desert racer when the enduro Husqvarnas, which only need minimum lighting, come with 200 watt SEM ignitions which supply enough power to light up Luna Park. Still, it's our gain. Even now the (claimed) much improved SEM doesn't enjoy the reputation or reliability of the Motoplat so unless you plan to ride the Alice 12-Hour, the standard ignition is fine.

The gearbox has been strengthened in several areas to handle the extra power produced by the bigger motor, carburettor is a 40mm Mikuni instead of the 44mm version found on the first CR500s and this brings us to a potential trouble spot or two. We've heard of a couple of these bikes needing a new needle and seat to help cure carburetion problems and you should also keep an eye on the carburettor/reed block manifold. Quite a few of the manifolds on the first shipment of 500s were splitting and sucking air and dirt into the motor which wasn't too good for the motor. If you were lucky(?) the dirt would grind enough clearance into the motor to prevent it from seizing with all the extra air making it run lean.

SUSPENSION

Yes, it's still got two shock absorbers controlling the travel of the rear wheel. Husky call the system Immediate Track Control (ITC) and we call it very good. Better than average (which is saying a lot these days) but as always we prefer Suzuki's Full Floater suspension for all out versatility and deluxism.

The Husqvarna designed, Ohlins built shocks have a spring on them and they're blue. As you can see we are in no mood for technical details but we'll say again that the rear suspension does work well. You'll need to set the pre-load so the rear of the seat sags about 100mm when you sit on the bike. It feels a little stiff at very low speeds but works fine everywhere else.

The front forks don't impress us as much. 40mm dia fork tubes and almost 300mm travel do not necessarily make a great set of forks. Even if the seals don't leak anymore (they don't). You have to put more oil in the forks than the factory recommends just to stop them topping out. At least 500ml. Most riders are using 10 weight oil. A few have even gone to 15 weight, but nothing works real well.

The forks refuse to respond satisfactorily to small bumps, sharp bumps, or small sharp bumps unless you drop back to 5 weight oil which doesn't give you enough control in the big deep whoops. Best stick to the heavier oil and put up with the front suspension which, despite its annoying feel, handles its job well when things get serious. We're sure something must be able to be done by the factory to make the forks a little more comfortable yet still retain their confidence-inspiring behaviour in the rough.

Releasing the pumped-up air through the air caps regularly helps

Continued over

HUSQVARNA XC500

things comfort-wise but that's not the worst of your problems. The plastic damping washer which fits over the damper rod is a real headache. Take a look at the set-up sidebar somewhere in this article and follow the instructions.

BITS AND PIECES

A Trelleborg 3.00x21 Deep Grip tyre is fitted to the strong Norwegian Nordisk rim and non-straight pull spokes hook it up to a good double-leading shoe front brake that is so waterproof the only thing you have to clean out after a muddy ride is brake lining dust. The front axle isn't a quick-change artist: you

need to tape the front brake cable to the fork leg just like Husky riders have always done right back to caveman times.

The XC doesn't come with lights so you get a motocross front number plate, behind which lurks a steering head which probably doesn't have enough grease on its tapered roller bearings. Don't ride too many events before you grease it up. World's strongest handlebars are fairly low. Some like them, some don't. Gunnar Gasser throttle is still top equipment but Magura levers aren't as respected as they once were. Japanese levers don't break as easily as they used to and many riders prefer them because you don't have to reach so far. Hanging off these levers are typical European stretcho cables which don't give such a positive feel to the brake and clutch as a Yamaha

cable, for example. Still, they're operating much the same at the end of a hard muddy ride which is more than you can say for a lot of the oriental opposition.

The fuel tank is a big aluminium job which holds over 12 litres of premix (or V8 vege juice if you're into that) and it isn't too bulky at all considering its capacity. Behind it is a yellow seat underneath which lurks the airbox. You can't use the plastic airbox lid on the open class Huskys because they are too restrictive. Air, therefore, enters through the top of the airbox and cancels out some of the "high-breather" feature. These white Husquarnas have the airbox extending up under the petrol tank from where it takes clean, water-free air. It's certainly clean air. The filter keeps remarkably free of dirt after a dusty ride, but quite a few Husky owners still maintain that a

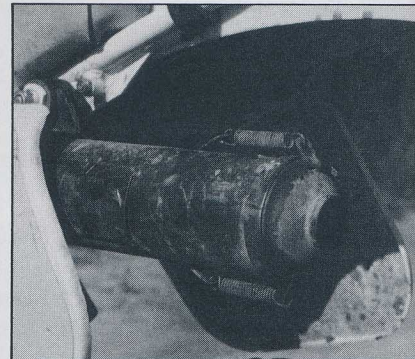
fast creek crossing simply forces water up under the tank, much of which runs down into the air cleaner. Some like it. Some don't. It's not a serious problem but it may be worth you keeping an eye on if you get one of the new Huskys.

Below the airbox is bolted an oval-section chrome moly swingarm which carries a good, simple sidestand and, on the opposite side, a spring loaded chain tensioner. The tensioner seems to work well but it is a weak link. Better off with a stationary roller we reckon. Besides, the tensioner is a bitch to maintain, and it's all because some irresponsible, good for nothing, sunavabitch at the factory insists on assembling everything back to front. First thing to do when you get a new XC or CR Husky is undo the tensioner mounting bolt and poke the aluminium



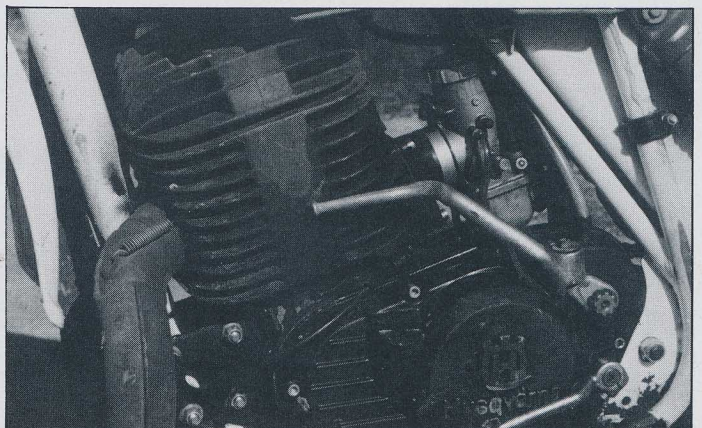
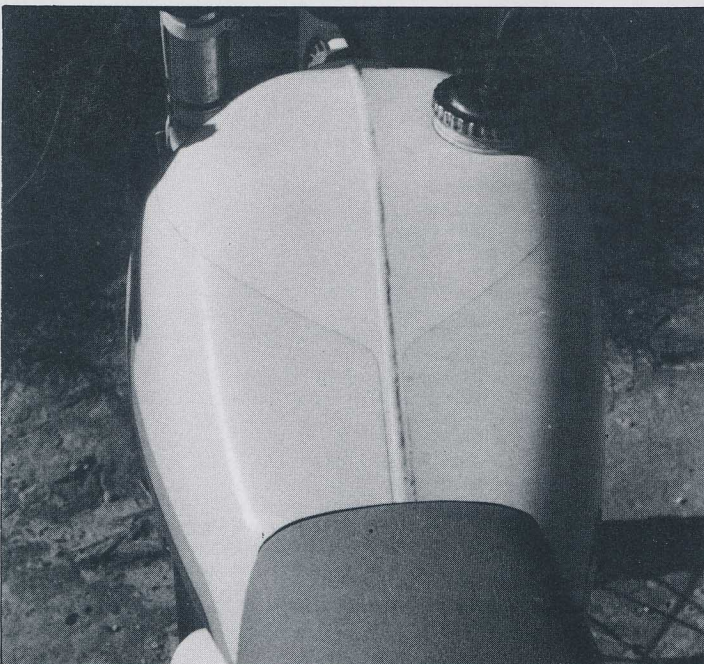
LEFT

There she stands. The big, rorty, desert racer-cum-enduro bike-cum-club motocrosser. A bit heavier than the opposition but you'd never know unless you weighed it.



ABOVE

Muffler is not going to win any awards for effectiveness. The bike was so noisy we put it on the trailer and took it out near the dump to run the motor after we'd washed it.



LEFT

Probably one of the last non-plastic gas tanks we'll ever see on a dirt bike. It doesn't look so big but it holds over 12 litres. Unless you flatten it against a tree, of course. Then it holds considerably less.

ABOVE

The motor is a very uncivilized bit of equipment that doesn't tolerate fools or wimps. It doesn't really start to work until it's in the hands of a confident rider who plans on getting from point A to point B as fast as possible. Of course, we loved the bike, because we're right into that.

bush out before it gets stuck in there. That allows you to remove the bolt and fit it from the other side which means you can work on the tensioner without a hacksaw, cold chisel and a carton of spare parts. So simple. Why, oh why, doesn't the factory do it?

The rear chain guide always gets bashed back on its rubber pivot, again, just like they've done for years, and the rubber lower roller gets chewed out almost instantly. Fit a harder plastic roller and it makes life easier. Rear wheel is quick change, Nordisk rim and Trelleborg tyre again. The muffler is the bigger steel-walled version similar to the enduro bikes but it's not real quiet, unfortunately. It's supported in one rubber-mounted spot on the enduro frame. We know it's the enduro frame because it's got a

complete rear frame loop supporting the too short rear guard and it's got protection bars under the motor.

RIDING IT

First thing is starting it. It had been ridden the day before so it shouldn't be too bad. About fifteen kicks later at the high, left hand side kickstarter, we could see this test getting off to a bad start.

Push it outside in case it came down to a bump start, and give it one last half-hearted prod. Surprisingly it bursts into life. Easy starting is important on a big bike as far as we're concerned. It takes a big effort and if you need to take several hearty prods at the kickstarter each time you stall the bike, you'll be exhausted long before you get to the end of a ride. The XC500, like

all Huskys, is relatively awkward to kick over but it's something you adapt to. The actual firing up of our test bike was difficult to get used to, though. It was so inconsistent. It would start perfectly on the first or second kick a couple of times, then about every third time it would refuse to co-operate until you shifted back to neutral and gave it six or eight good serves. Our test IT490 got a few foul-mouthed words of abuse every time it stopped because it always took four kicks to start it. The XC500 on the other hand, was abused less frequently, but when it was, it got the full vocabulary.

Into gear and off we go. There's no doubt about it, 500 Husqvarnas are intimidating bikes. The power doesn't build up as the revs climb, it's just there. We went out to get a few action photos and spent the day trying to gain some confidence on the bike. Peak horsepower is nothing to write home about but the raw, rough-edged power of the XC500 doesn't tolerate wimpy riders easily. Experienced big-bore riders will probably never notice this side of it as they get straight on the gas and ride the bike as it's meant to be ridden.

It's the same story if you take the bike out on a fast, open track, but jumping onto the bike and riding over tight enduro trails makes the XC500 seem like a real handful. Just like the Husqvarna factory figured when they elected to keep the 430cc capacity for their open class enduro bike. The XC can get the job done of course, it's just that the bike demands a more positive approach by its rider. Husqvarnas have always been like this to a certain extent, but with the XC500 it's more noticeable.

The suspension seems to complement this approach perfectly. It doesn't start to feel right until you pick up the pace. The uncomfortable front end mentioned earlier works very well when it comes to guiding you safely through potential crash situations but it's difficult to appreciate this when a lot of little sharp jolts are being fed through to your hands and wrists.

The rear suspension, once you get over riding-around-the-pits speed, works great. Jump straight off a single shock bike and you'll notice the extra width of the bike around the top of the shocks, but you'll soon forget that. There's not much to say about the rear end, really. Set the spring pre-load to suit your weight and live happily ever after. No need to lash out on expensive aftermarket rear suspension.

One place Husqvarnas are never happy, and the XC500 is no exception, is in rocks. The best technique is to hold a steady throttle and a dead straight line. You're better off bouncing over boulders than trying to weave your way through. Once you start to deviate, the Husky starts skittering and bouncing all over the place. The faster you get into, and out of, a stretch of big, loose rocks, the better off you'll be. But if rocks are where the XC500 is at its worst, then soft, heavy going is where the bike shines. It's just what

we've always come to expect from a bike bred on sandy motocross tracks and boggy enduro trails.

The Trelleborg Ten Master tyres don't start to work properly until they have a surface soft enough to get their teeth into, the suspension works great across deep, rolling whoops, and the motor really comes into its own when it's under heavy load.

We rode the XC around a motocross track that had undergone a lot of preparation and was covered in about six inches of wet, churned up, heavy soil. The 500 ate it up and gave the impression that it was at a definite power advantage. As the track dried out and the surface became harder, any impression of superiority was lost, and it was back to concentrating on getting the not-so-nimble Husky through the tight turns to keep up. No one expects the slow steering geometry Husky to be an inside line king and if you get lazy you'll find the bike seems to give up on its end of the bargain as well.

Ride it as it was designed to be ridden and the bike will do the right thing by you. It's more at home on the faster, rough trails it is designed for, and although it is ill-at-ease in some situations it is exceptionally good in others.

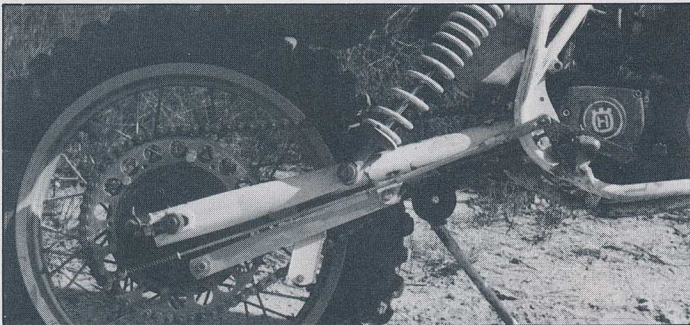
This was made obvious through a certain section of the same course on which we tested the mighty IT490 Yamaha.

There's this deeply whooped-out sweeping curve which is an ideal place to overtake other riders who are proving a problem. On the IT, the straight, fast line was only used as a last resort overtaking line, and it was a case of hang on and pray you got through before the getting-out-of-shape bounces finally bounced you off. On the XC500, you could confidently take this line every lap. If you did get out of shape, the bike would bounce once and then get back into line. Seconds before, you were cursing the uncomfortable front forks and the effort required to get the XC through a tight, berms turn, and now as you wheeled past a rider with a death-like grip on the bars of his machine, you almost convince yourself the extra money you paid for the bike was worth it.

SUMMARY

Should you buy an XC500? Not unless you are an experienced rider as far as we can figure. We gave a novice enduro rider a burst on our test bike and not only was he intimidated by the power, but he claimed the suspension "doesn't seem to work at all". If you are an enduro strongman who believes power is the great race winner, the XC500 gives you power in a frame and suspension package which contains no surprises. Who needs surprises in a six-speed 488cc bike that can do around 150ks standard?

If you are up to the task of handling the XC500 you'll probably think the bike is the best thing since shorty-pyjamas. You should even be able to justify the extra initial purchase price. A lot of riders have.



BELOW
The front forks are in the same boat as the motor. They are reluctant to co-operate until they are worked hard, and then they work very well.

ABOVE
Enduro frame and swingarm means you don't have to put up with that poxy motocross full floating rear brake setup which is more trouble than enough. Note rear chain guide knocked back into roller-destroying position, and also in the shot is the chain tensioner we bitched so much about.

