Sparring Sport-Tourers

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SPARRING SPORT-TOURERS: BMW R1200ST vs. Ducati ST3 vs. Honda VFR800FI vs. Triumph Sprint ST

text by Mark Barnes, photos by Dave Searle

COMPROMISE CAN BE a bad thing, it's too easy to wind up with a mediocre machine that proves equally unsatisfactory at every task. In the sport-touring genre of motorcycles, you can split the difference between long-range comfort and sporting prowess, only to end up with something too high-strung for a weekend of saddle time, yet too ungainly for backroad blitzing. The plush suspension that soaks up interstate expansion joints so adroitly might leave you wallowing in the twisties. Or, the ergonomics that give you maximum feedback and control when heeled over might send you calling for a chiropractor after a lengthy stall on poorly paved straight sections. What makes for glorious success in one situation can make for miserable failure somewhere else. And simply taking the middle road on every count can easily preclude greatness anywhere.

A good sport-tourer must possess genuine competence in two disparate areas. It must be able to transport its pilot—and a passenger and their luggage—across medium-large expanses through most expectable conditions with minimal discomfort. And, it must be able to corner quickly and precisely, accelerate with authority and instill a sense of confidence with copious feedback about the continuous negotiations between tire and road surface. Is that too much to ask of a single motorcycle? We say it's not.

Honda and Triumph have served up delicious concoctions in the past, with plenty of performance in all these dimensions. BMW and Ducati, likewise, have offered up their own tasty recipes, though with a bit more slant in one direction or the other; they're for folks who prefer their sport-touring combo seasoned with a little more of one, and a little less of the other. BMW's have traditionally placed more emphasis on the touring end of things, while Ducati has highlighted sporting prowess. Honda's VFR has won many awards over the years as The Best All-Arounder. But BMW, Ducati and Triumph have each released new challengers this year. So it seemed only appropriate to sample them all together during our annual staff tour from the magazine's headquarters in Irvine to the MotoGP in Monterey to find out—and tell you—how these newbies stack up against the established, but aging, champ.

In addition to the standard drag-strip, top speed and dyno testing, we gave each of these machines a thorough work-out on everything from tightly tangled mountain switchbacks to arrow-straight desert highways, from silky smooth pavement to lengthy stretches where the lumpy, crumbling patches had lumpy, crumbling patches on top of them. We did stop-and-go in thick traffic, endured interstate droning at virtually every conceivable velocity, navigated the endless esses of the Pacific Coast Highway in both zero-visibility fog and blinding sunshine, and wound our way through the roller-coaster fantasy world that is California's slightly inland foothills. And we did it all with lots of luggage, in temperatures ranging from the mid-50's to the mid-90's.

Four Different Recipes For Success

Variety is, indeed, the spice of life. These motorcycles have four different engine configurations and come from four different spots on the globe. Honda's time-honored Interceptor line is in many riders' minds the very definition of sport-touring, with its signature combination of all-day ergonomics, muscular V-four engine, and agile handling. We tested the current iteration of this bike from Japan, the VFR800 FI ABS, back in March, 2002, when it was last revamped with an all-new motor, edgy styling, updated fuel injection, anti-lock brakes, and variable valve-timing (VTEC, in Honda-speak). We were quite impressed with the way this machine carried on the Interceptor tradition, though we were left dismayed by the fact that it made less horsepower than the model it replaced. This is especially significant now, given that the VFR has the smallest motor in this bunch, a handicap ranging between 200 and 400ccs.

Ducati's ST3 was last reviewed in the March, 2005 edition of MCN. There's no shortage of associations to sporting hardware when the name Ducati is mentioned, but the Italian marque's prior attempts at a GT-type machine, the ST2 and ST4, were either too slow or too expensive, respectively, compared to their class contemporaries. Finally, the ST3 arrived to strike the balance we'd been hoping for, with a lusty V-twin engine that provided smooth strength down low and didn't run out of breath up top. The combination of a new three-valve (Ducatisti say desmotore) head and increased displacement took care of the discontinued ST2's performance deficits, without incurring the penalties exacted by the ST4: Intimidating mechanical complexity and peaky power delivery. We noted improvements in ride comfort as well, with better seat and fairing designs. However, some control quirks remained, and the suspension—while quite functional—was disappointingly much less sophisticated than the ST4's.

You can get more details on the two bikes above from our back issues, so we've reserved our magnifying glass for the two unreviewed machines, both of which are thoroughgoing redesigns of much-loved sport-touring favorites.

Not Your Father's BMW

BMW might just be the brand most closely identified with the sport-touring genre. With few exceptions, the entire Beemer lineup provides long-distance capability and at least some measure of spirited performance. Although their all-new K-series has proven the Bavarians can mix it up with other brands' inline-fours, the opposed-twin retains its iconic status among the BMW faithful. Unique, yes. Torquey, no doubt. Low center of gravity, you bet. There is much to recommend the classic boxer layout—ask any Porsche aficionado. But the R-series has only recently entered what we'd consider the truly modern era of power-train design with last year's '1200' version (actually 1170cc), which appeared first in GS format. Clunky transmission action, fuel-injection glitches and merely adequate top-end performance had previously kept BMW's boxers from receiving our unqualified praise. But the new "Hex-
head” powerplant wowed us with its slick gearbox, consistently precise fuel metering and dramatically improved acceleration and top speed, first in the latest GS, and then again in the R1200RT we reviewed this past June. The new R1200 motor proved itself to be the real deal. We were anxious to see how it would compare in the more elemental, presumably sportier ST chassis. (The new “ST” designation replaces the old “RS” suffix in BMW’s R-series.)

We covered the major engine and chassis changes from the old R-series in our review of the new RT, but here are a few highlights on the ST. Although standard equipment on the new RT, BMW’s partly integrated Integral ABS is a $995 option on the ST. Along with anti-lock capability, the Integral system uses a computer to add varying amounts of rear brake pressure—depending on conditions—when the rider applies the front brake. (The rear brake pedal operates only the rear brake.) Unique to motorcycling, an electronic power-assist is utilized in this setup. Also optional is BMW’s ESA, or electronically adjustable suspension. We loved it on the new RT, but alas, our ST was not so equipped. Those who opt to pay the additional $750 will be able to change from “comfort” to “normal” to “sport” on the fly with the touch of a button; and, at least on the R1200RT and K1200S, the difference is noticeable and each setting well-suited to its purpose. We were perplexed by the fact that the ST has a longer wheelbase (59.1” vs. 58.4”) than the RT, along with more rake (27° vs. 26.6°) and trail (4.4” vs. 4.3”). All else being equal, we’d have expected these differences to be in the other direction for the sportier bike. The ST’s styling is quite radical, and—in our opinions—falls far short of the sophisticated integration of the new RT’s “floating panel” bodywork.

A Stronger Sprint ST

Triumph’s Sprint ST was originally designed back in 1999 to go head-to-head with Honda’s VFR, and it has repeatedly posed a serious threat through each model’s update cycle. Honda’s current design is several years old, whereas the Sprint has just received a total makeover. Finally time for the Brits to take home top honors? With an inline triple that had already pumped out bigger dyno numbers than the Honda’s, the new Sprint’s additional 95cc’s ought to make any power-related competition a slam-dunk for Triumph. Completely revised bodywork has given the Sprint a much more aggressive, modern look than its rather reserved-looking predecessor, yet the new bike’s lines stop short of the Honda’s fractal-wedge styling. With a family lineage of excellent fuel injection, refined road manners, and distinctive European caché, the monster-motored Triumph seemed poised to slip ahead of its Japanese nemesis, and perhaps its German and Italian rivals, too.

The new Sprint ST boasts a thoroughly revised powertrain, with extra displacement courtesy of a 6.4mm increase in stroke. A new Keihin multipoint sequential EFI system feeds those larger combustion chambers, and a fashionable 3-1-3 undercut exhaust carries spent gasses away. The wheelbase has been dramatically shortened, and more performance-oriented tires have been fitted, all in keeping with the sharper sporting focus the new, more angular fairing implies. And, in fact, our 2005 model handily outperformed the Sprint we tested in 2002 on the dyno and at top speed.

Whereas the old motor produced a respectable 98.1 hp just past 9000 rpm, the new one churned out 106.3 hp; peak torque, now just shy of 69 lb-ft, is up from 61.2. We were able to coax 160.1 mph out of the new Sprint at our secret desert test facility, while the previous model was “only” good for 147.3. However, the old Sprint had stronger acceleration, by over a tenth of a second in the quarter-mile (11.03 seconds vs. 11.15 seconds), and it was faster from 0-60 (3.24 seconds vs 3.38 seconds), even though it was less powerful and weighed five pounds more. These unexpected differences are too tiny to make any difference in normal use, and are likely accounted for by the new bike’s taller gearing and more radical cams producing less low end grunt. Fuel capacity is up by nearly half a gallon, and the new tank is made of a plastic material instead of steel. Our Sprint was outfitted with a pre-production version of Triumph’s new ABS system. And we had to agree not to include the Sprint’s brakes in our evaluation, since the prototype ABS was unlikely to be representative of the production version.

Engines—1st: Ducati, 2nd: Triumph, 3rd: Honda, 4th: BMW

You might think you could guess how these four would stack up, just based on their respective displacements, performance heritages and layouts. A few of your guesses would probably be right on target, but we’d bet each one here would really surprise you, too. First off, everyone knows mult’s generate more peak power than similar sized twins, right? After all, those smaller components can move around more quickly, allowing higher rpm. And maximum horsepowe power is in large part dependent upon engine speed. What’s more, triples often split the difference nicely between the high peak power of fours, and the low-end grunt of twins, making three cylinders the ideal compromise.

The Triumph’s snarling triple does, indeed, make the most peak power, it’s the only one with over a hundred ponies pushing it forward. It’s also fairly strong right off the line, and its momentum builds as a silky smooth rush that culminates in an exhilarating cascade of acceleration. But the superlative—almost rheostatic—tractability of the Ducati, which makes 7.3 fewer hp than the Triumph, persuaded all but one of our test pilots that its baritone V-twin was the best engine across all the different conditions through which we rode. At any speed, the Duc is perpetually poised to lunge forward with serious authority, yet it never seems to be working very hard; the perfectly linear feel of its power delivery provided both grinned thighs and reassuring predictability. And, it not only feels smooth “for a twin”—its gentle vibes are pleasant and unintrusive for any kind of motorcycle. On anything other than a long straightaway, the Italian motor feels the fastest, gives the best engine braking and is the easiest to control.

The Triumph’s lack of victory here was in part due to intermittent fuel delivery problems, perhaps peculiar to our test bike. We were initially startled to see the composite fuel cell suddenly expand with a hiss when we’d open the cap for refueling; the fuel pump was clearly pulling a vacuum inside the tank. Eventually, a makeshift repair of the venting mechanism took care of that, but some other unidentified glitch.
of that, but some other unidentified glitch remained, as riders continued to experience occasional stalling off idle, and complained that something just didn’t feel right about the fuel injection sometimes at speed. We’d like to be more specific on this count, but intermittent problems are the hardest to define and track down, and our ability to investigate was quite limited out on the road. The Triumph’s vertical exhaust header also radiated a great deal of engine heat against its rider’s legs, a sin none of the other bikes here committed, and one we were loathe to forgive in the desert.

Oddly enough, the two motors most dissimilar in size and configuration garnered almost identical scores, even though at the top Honda’s V-four barely inched ahead of the Beemer’s boxer, largely as a result of its extreme smoothness—everywhere but around 6700 rpm, that is. Two testers complained loudly about the VFR’s odd power delivery at that point, which is where the VTEC kicks in, energizing the second intake valve in each cylinder. And the abrupt bump in power (13 hp in less than 400 rpm) can be either distracting or entertaining depending on the situation, or a bit destabilizing during cornering. Also, just before the VTEC shift, the motor seems flat, and maintaining steady rpm near the actuation point results in a weird vacillation that feels a little like hitting a rev limiter. As we said in our 2002 review of the Interceptor, Honda appears to have installed the VTEC as a way of showing off its engineering prowess. But in this case, it actually offers no power advantages—making as much as 15 hp less than the simpler engine it replaced. Again we had to wonder why Honda didn’t push displacement up during the last engine redesign. In VTEC form, it’s almost too high-strung for sport-touring.

So, what of the Beemer, whose giant motor we praised so recently? Well, it turns out there’s a difference between relative performance and absolute performance. Compared to previous boxers, the 1200 is way ahead of the pack. Both punchy and revvy (up to its admittedly low redline), this highly responsive, user-friendly motor has truly broken new ground for BMW’s R-series. But, alas, even with all its improvements, it’s still not up to the standards set by the other bikes here. Despite a new counterbalancer, it vibrates the most (though only a couple riders found this problematic), twists the chassis when accelerated or decelerated due to its longitudinal crank, and produces barely one more horsepower than the VFR, despite having a 50% displacement advantage over the little Honda. It’s also the only motor that consumed oil during our testing (not unusual for a Boxer). However, one tester did rank this motor in second place, insisting it possessed the most lively and fun-loving spirit of the group.

Considering that all the bikes were ridden over the same route at virtually identical speeds makes their relative fuel economy a very fair comparison. And although we often find that performance is more closely related to fuel efficiency than simply engine size, all the machines have very similar performance, so the big difference in fuel economy was a surprise. Despite having the smallest engine, the Honda had the worst fuel economy by far (32.8 mpg average), the BMW best by a good margin (40.7 avg.), with the Triumph just edging out the Ducati (37.3 to 36.4 avg.) in the middle.

Chassis/Suspension—1st: BMW, 2nd: Honda, 3rd: Ducati, 4th: Triumph

In this category, different really can be better. Unlike our critique of the Honda’s VTEC, we feel the Beemer’s unique technology offers definite, though qualified, benefits. Everyone agreed that the latest version of the Telelever front end delivered a plush ride, even over very rough pavement. During the most aggressive cornering, the Beemer’s suspension fell a little too soft and floaty for a couple of our testers, but this would have been remedied by the ESA option. The other half of the test team found these suspenders wonderfully stable and confidence-inspiring, especially the front end. At anything less than full-on sport riding—and remember, these are sport-touring bikes, not racer-replicas—the R1200ST supplied great road feel and supple responsiveness.

The Honda ranked a very close second to the BMW, with very precise feel at almost any speed (getting slightly floaty at triple-digit velocities). Although not quite as capable of neutralizing harsh surface irregularities as the Beemer, the Honda’s firmer suspension provided greater stability during hard cornering. One tester described it as “invisible,” because of the way it could
be forgotten in the service of attending more closely to line choice and throttle control. The Ducati also garnered praise for its sporting prowess, as anyone might expect. Despite the simplicity of its suspension compared to other offerings from Bologna, the ST3 was fabulously stable in high-speed sweepers, with a firm, but never harsh, action and excellent feedback. In slower, tighter corners, the Duck came up a little short in terms of suppleness. If only we could have had the fully adjustable Ohlins units from the ST4!

Arriving in a very distant last place is the Triumph. Everyone complained about the extremely harsh action of the Sprint’s forks; they felt as though they were moving through a single inch of travel or were filled with 80w gear oil, and transmitted every sharp edge, small and large, directly to the rider’s wrists. The problem was so severe, and so uncharacteristic of Triumphs in general, that we couldn’t help but wonder why, even though we were assured the bike was delivered in factory-specified condition. This proved to be a damaging offense for the Britbike, robbing confidence in corners and making even straight-line riding torturous when the pavement wasn’t glass smooth. Oddly enough, along with the overly hard response to bumps, the bike also wallowed some on undulating roads, suggesting inadequate rebound damping.

**Handling—1st: Honda, 2nd: Ducati, 3rd: BMW, 4th: Triumph**

Handling preferences are complex and highly personal, and the top three here all ran an extremely close race due to the differing priorities of different riders. The Honda squeezed out a first place finish, largely on the basis of its steering precision. Although a bit less hard-edged than previous Interceptors, the VFR800 is the most capable sportbike in this group; everyone appreciated its combination of great flickability in the twisties and totally planted feel when raking through high-speed sweepers. Add in a very comfortable freeway ride and you can see why the Honda took top honors here; it simply does it all.

The Ducati and BMW have different areas of strength, but neither provides the comprehensive package offered by the Honda. Most riders reported the ST3 felt rock-solid and nicely balanced at speed, but at the expense of somewhat heavier steering and a bit less agility in the tight stuff. The BMW, on the other hand, trades some stability for increased maneuverability, although one rider considered its precision seriously compromised by the convergence of relatively soft suspension, driveline peculiarities and distracting engine vibration. Others described the Beemer’s handling in exclusively positive terms, raving about how nimble and reassuring it was, especially when dealing with the worst pavement.

There were no such disagreements about the Triumph. More determined riders could go fast on it, but not comfortably. And the less determined simply didn’t push the pace because of the huge confidence deficit produced by its faulty suspension and tail-tap.

The Beemer came in at a very distant third place. Consistent with its other controls, its brakes needed only light effort, making them the most efficient in this group. And their highly responsive action was still nicely linear; nobody complained about the too-progressive feel we encountered with this system on the new RT. Also, the balance of front/rear application is very good in this bike’s EVO setup, whereas the forward bias on the new RT bothered us a bit. But, as on the RT, we did not appreciate having to restart the bike on a couple of occasions because of ABS malfunction alerts (the warning light remained on after the initial system test sequence was completed). True, the ABS worked fairly well when it engaged during actual use, but on a bike this expensive, the electronics shouldn’t need to be rebooted on a semi-regular basis; this bug lost the Beemer significant ground, and the associated decrease in confidence offset other aspects that were really quite good.

**Riding Impressions—1st: Honda, 2nd: Ducati, 3rd: BMW, 4th: Triumph**

As an even more subjective and rider-specific category than handling, the “fun-factor” rating provoked quite a bit of disagreement among our crew. The Honda won out because it pleased in so many different ways, and placement here is a matter of averaging, only two riders actually ranked it tops. The Ducati and BMW drew very mixed reviews, with both ranked in all four positions by our testers. The Triumph, however, ranked no higher than third place, and was lowest on two riders’ lists. Were it not for the way the Ducati happened to be a poor ergonomic fit for one rider (long reach to the wide bars), and another rider’s intense annoyance with the Beemer’s quirks, the Triumph would have placed last all round. The VFR, by contrast, is quite simply very easy to live with, no matter who you are. It offended no one, and got its one low (third-place) rating here only because that rider preferred the more distinctive personalities of the German and Italian steeds.

The more a rider placed a premium on comprehensive competence, including the ability to hang tough in relatively hard-core sporting conditions, the more the Honda’s laser-guided-missile-like handling counted. If forward thrust or suspension compliance was a major priority, the Duck or Beemer gleaned favor, respectively. The VFR seemed to disappear beneath its rider, producing a sort of sterile environment that
allowed for distraction-free concentration on technique and road conditions. The Ducati and BMW each had more of an interactive presence, evoking a more emotional response, for better or for worse. And the crippled Triumph—well, after the first rotation, nobody could get very excited about riding it.

Ergonomically, the Honda felt good everywhere to almost everyone; our tallest tester wanted a little more legroom and higher bars. Even though it has the hardest seat in this group, it’s so well-shaped that our posterior were comfy hour after hour. The Ducati’s seat is by far the softest, it’s downright squishy. And yet it, too, provided continuous comfort. The Duck also has the best wind protection and roomiest cockpit. The BMW’s saddle feels firm, and its broad, thick paddling delivers plenty of support. The Triumph’s seat was the only one to garner complaints; nobody could get sunlight, and intuitive to use. BMW has mounted the ST’s instrument pod considerably higher and closer to the rider in comparison to the others, making it easier to keep the road in view when checking the highly legible digital/analog combo display. Its self-canceling turn-signals work well, and provide some relief from the apparently inerminable weirdness of BMW’s usual two-handed signaling system (push the right-thumb button to signal right, the left-thumb button to signal left, and push UP on the cancel switch with the right thumb—we’ve yet to meet anyone who likes this arrangement, but it can be tolerated and the Germans seem intent on demanding such obedience). The Beemer hand levers are especially supple and delicate, giving it a very refined feel.

Following closely on the BMW’s heels is the Ducati, with its compact, neatly styled digital/analog instrumentation.

While the information provided was easily read, we had some problems. First, the temperature gauge on our unit never worked; it just gave us a flashing dotted line where the readout should have been. Second, the fuel gauge was wildly inaccurate, indicating empty very prematurely. And third, cycling through the various computer functions was far from intuitive; we never did make complete sense of it without a manual. The Duck’s levers and pedals required much physical exertion than did the others, and some of us would have liked to rotate the hand levers further down—an adjustment that was impossible to make, due to the limited clearance between master cylinders and fairing at full-lock.

This is another category in which the Triumph finished a distant and unanimous last place, mainly as a result of its much less legible instrumentation. The speed numbers are very small and closely spaced, and the semi-circular bar-graph temp and fuel gauges are more form than function. Their symmetrical design is a nice idea, but in actual practice they require too much effort to interpret at a glance. And the LCD readouts are less distinct at night than on the others as a result of the relatively dim blue backlighting. Pedal and lever operation on the Triumph is middle-of-the-road.

**Styling**—1st (tie): Honda/Triumph, 2nd: Ducati, 3rd: BMW

This is the only category in which Triumph shined. Although some found elements of its shape a bit derivative, most agreed that its various contours were pleasing and well-integrated. Its styling is rather mainstream sporting, with a few unique touches, like the three-outlet, under-seat exhaust, triple headlight and tri-circle dash (get the theme?). Likewise, radical as the Honda’s origami-like bodywork was back when it was released, it looks fairly conventional in many respects nowadays, although its long, angular nose with dual stacked headlights, and tidily tucked-in triangulated under-seat exhaust cans still make it distinctive.

Right behind the first two is the Ducati.

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### Competitors At a Glance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>As Tested Price</th>
<th>Wet weight</th>
<th>HP</th>
<th>Torque</th>
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<th>0-60mph</th>
<th>60-zero</th>
<th>Average MPG</th>
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<td>523 lbs</td>
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<td>68.9 lb/ft</td>
<td>11.15</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>n/a*</td>
<td>37.3 mpg</td>
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To our eyes, the ST3 has wonderfully classic lines, but this is a two-edged sword. Like a well-tailored white button-down shirt, it’ll never go completely out of style or stand out in some untoward way. But it’ll never catch anyone’s eye and produce a “Wow!” reaction, either. Plain vanilla can be delicious; the question is, can you eat it day after day? This is a surprising concern, given that the bike in question comes from a manufacturer certainly not associated with the ordinary and conventional, let alone—dare we say it—the boring. The Italian bike should not look staid. At the other extreme, the Beemer’s Lost in Space fashions won no fans among us ("Danger, Will Robinson!"). Although there are neat and elegant details here and there, the overall effect struck us as just plain weird, especially the fairing’s frontal area. We would have said that a Bavarian bike should not look funky, but we’ve seen what’s become of the 7-series sedan and the Z coupe over the past couple years. At any rate, we’d appreciate a little more elegance from the country that introduced sexism to engineering. And we’d gladly thank BMW’s Chris Bangle to keep his kinkiness off the motorcycle department’s drawing tables.
Attention to Detail—1st: Honda, 2nd: BMW, 3rd: Ducati, 4th: Triumph

It’s now a cliché, but Honda is no doubt pleased to have its name become synonymous with stellar fit-and-finish, and the VFR upholds that reputation well—’nuf said. We’d expect an expensive bike bearing the white and blue propeller emblem to strut its pedigree in this area, and the ST does not disappoint—for the most part. There’s certainly no faulting the luxurious coat of paint, regardless of your opinion of the shapes it covers, and the right-there-where-you-need—’em bungee hooks earned the BMW everyone’s gratitude. But the kickstand is hard to find and deploy in boots, the bar-mounted mirrors are not far enough forward, and the adjustability of the windscreen yielded little noticeable advantage. Also, the adjustable seat left long-legged riders wanting still more leg-room (but then again, at least it has an adjustable seat).

The ST3 ranked third here, with nicely fitted luggage (standard!) and adjustable exhaust canisters that rotate upward when the bags are removed, increasing the available ground clearance. The Italians have certainly come a long way in this department over the past decade (the Duck’s faulty LCD notwithstanding), and now reliably deliver well-fitting, well-painted bodywork. Triumph again ended up with a unanimous ranking of last by a wide gulf. Although it has some very nice aesthetic touches, like the chrome slivers traversing the exhaust ducts in the side fairings, there are also some oddly inconsiderate omissions, such as a total lack of bungee mounts (on a sport-tourer!) and no sight window for checking the oil (grab a rag for the dipstick).

Value—Subjective: 1st: Honda, 2nd: Ducati, 3rd: BMW, 4th: Triumph

“Objective” 1st: Honda, 2nd: Ducati, 3rd: Triumph, 4th: BMW

The Honda takes a unanimously decisive victory here, as it offers the best overall performance while ranking third cheapest in purchase price. The Ducati gets grand kudos for its inclusion of hard bags in the basic package, and it garnered consistently high, if not highest, marks from our testers across many categories. With bags, it’s actually cheaper than the Honda, and you get a sexy Italian name on your fairing. Notice that third and fourth places were reversed in the subjective and objective ratings. Allow us to explain. The subjective results were obtained in the same way as in all the other categories above: Each rider ranked the bikes from first to fourth, with first place worth four points, second place three points, and so on. The points were then tallied across all riders in each subject area, and the bikes scored accordingly. Subjectively, we felt the Triumph—at least as it was delivered to us—was a poor value, even though it was the least expensive. Some of us wouldn’t have wanted it for thousands less, or, conversely, would have happily spent much more on a machine with better suspension and handling. The Objective results were obtained by simply dividing all the points earned in the preceding categories by the bike’s MSRP. (Objective appears in quotations above because it’s a bit of a misnomer, since the points upon which the rankings are based were, of course, ultimately subjective to begin with.) Because the BMW’s price is so much higher than the Triumph’s, this purely mathematical calculation put the Beemer at a serious disadvantage.

Conclusion—Overall 1st: Honda, 2nd: Ducati, 3rd: BMW, 4th: Triumph

A number of our findings were a real surprise, while some areas were perfectly predictable. We’re not at all surprised at the Honda’s high level of performance across our various testing categories, but we certainly wouldn’t have expected a three-year-old contender to compete so successfully against brand-new, much larger-displacement, more expensive rivals—especially the Triumph, which had until now been nipping at the Interceptor’s heels. And who’d have thought long-time sport-touring kingpin BMW would be bested by Ducati, whose single-minded sporting focus has only very recently expanded to include machinery capable of delivering painless mileage.

The Interceptor simply and elegantly makes the best compromises between sporting capability and long-haul comfort/functionality. We would still like more power, especially with the latest bike’s increase in weight and the likelihood of it carrying luggage and a passenger. But overall, the VFR does its job without fuss or drama, leaving its rider to enjoy the scenery or perfect his technique without any distractions (well, except for that VTEC bump).

Ducati has created a true Gran Turismo machine in the ST3. This is a long-legged thoroughbred with a no-nonsense attitude. We wish it had the high-end suspension of its much more expensive stable-mate, the ST4, but a new shock and reworked forks cost less than the difference in MSRP’s—and then we’d still have the three-valve engine’s superior tractability. And you gotta love included hard luggage.

The R1200ST got the most varied reviews, which often diverged widely on the basis of rider preferences. Sometimes one would rank it first where another ranked it last. It certainly has the most peculiarities in this group, and if those happen to be to your liking—and you’ve got enough money to ignore the value issue—this could well be the bike you’d like best. However, experience on previous boxers (or lack thereof) would probably make a significant difference in your ability to appreciate the best of this bike (and overlook the worst). In addition, we feel compelled to note that the new R1200RT is not only a better long-distance mount than this bike, but it’s also a better sporting ride than the ST (go figure!). So, while we like the new ST, we loved the new RT and strongly suggest that potential buyers try both before committing funds to the former.

Finally, we hate to condemn the Triumph here, but it simply wasn’t the world beater we expected. We hope the suspension issue was peculiar to our test bike, but other issues remain. We certainly liked this model’s predecessor, along with lots of other bikes from the Hinkley Factory, but given this example, we simply cannot recommend the new Sprint ST over the others. Perhaps Triumph compromised too much. The attempt to beef up the Sprint ST’s sporting prowess has hurt its ability to function well on the long haul. Even if the forks and fuel injection were fixed, it’s still hot, uncomfortable, lacks wind protection and bungee points, has hard-to-read instruments and displayed faulty shifting. We’re sad to say it, but the new Sprint ST was our biggest disappointment.
Model Comparison

With classic Honda virtues like exquisite fit and finish and the ability to do everything well, while doing nothing badly, the VFR800/ABS scores an upset victory over a trio of newer, larger-displacement machines—sporty, with great suspension, a butty smooth transmission, excellent optional luggage and an entertaining exhaust note.

Right and below: The VFR’s fitted luggage was the roomiest in our test. Attractive and easy to use, its availability makes the machine a very practical sport-tourer. The radical looking exhaust system makes the rear of the machine very distinctive and the sound it makes does a lot to add excitement to an almost too refined machine. Note the preload adjusting knob below, just above the passenger peg bracket.

Right: With linked brakes and ABS, the VFR has excellent stopping power. We were particularly impressed by how straight it stopped in our testing, and how aggressively the ABS is programmed, giving a brief stoppie before settling the bike on its wheels! Of the various linked brake systems that Honda builds, the VFR’s has always been our favorite as it works best.

Above: The dash is logically presented and quick to read, with a digital speedo, analog tach, clock and fuel gauge in prominent view. Both handlebar levers are adjustable for reach, while the handlebars are relatively narrow, feeling more sportbike-like. The bike’s suspension is one of its best features, with a remarkably good ride that still provides plenty of feedback for hustling on twisty roads.

Testers’ Log

The VFR felt a lot like my own Honda VTR, but with one testicle removed and a bit of middle-aged spread. I was probably the most critical of the Honda—a result of my constantly missing the thrust of my SuperHawk, and feeling a little bored with the familiar handling. Nevertheless, I can certainly appreciate this bike’s high degree of refinement and competence. In fact, I knifed through the tightest twisties most easily on the Honda, barely noticing it beneath me; it has so little mechanical presence compared to the twins that it virtually vanished from my perceptual field. While that’s an impressive accomplishment, it’s not one I particularly treasure—I like my bike to be an enthusiastic riding companion, not a surgical instrument or a well-trained butler. If you happen to love the VFR, don’t ever ride a SuperHawk. —Mark Barnes

This was my first ride ever on a VFR800. With no preconceived ideas or expectations, I was surprised that, in many ways, I found this one the best of the bunch in terms of balance, smoothness and precision. Corner turn-in is light and trail braking on the VFR is effortless as the brakes are so precise and smooth. Everything fits well. The mirrors, controls, gauges and riding position. Yes, the VTEC engine’s turbo-like characteristics take some getting used to, but it helps to think that what you have here is basically two bikes. When under 6000 rpm, it is a nice, calm, easy-riding, go-to-church sort of bike. Around 6700 it turns into a hungry, snarling, get-out-of-my-way, agile mountain lion. —Steve Larsen

The VFR is elegant, powerful, and perfectly balanced. This bike challenges you to learn to be a better and more focused rider. Every road becomes a high-speed slalom course and the VFR allows you to draw a visual line that can trace as if it were an X-Acto knife. The VFR would be a delight on the track, and, but for its fairly cramped cockpit, would be a great long-distance two-up sport-tourer with its optional integrated hard bags. The four-valve VTEC power is less than overwhelming when it comes on at 7000 rpm, but it’s still nice to have, and whatever the VFR lacks in torque, it more than makes up for it with its perfect stability, plush suspension, precise transmission, and powerful three-pot linked brakes. For my money, and even putting money aside, the VFR wins this contest hands down. —Don Searle

The VFR is my second-place in this comparison. It’s handling makes distant twisties worth the effort to find, the linked brakes keep it composed when diving into turns, and the exhaust note was my favorite, even though I kept feeling like I was hitting the rev limiter when riding near the VTEC’s engagement point. Honda’s hard bags are a really nice design as well. —Dave Searle
2002 Honda VFR800FI ABS Interceptor

SPECIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE DATA

ENGINE
Type: liquid-cooled, 90° V-four
Valvetrain: VTEC DOHC, 4 valves per cyl., shim-under-bucket & shim-bucket
Size: 781 cc
Bore/stroke: 72.0 mm x 60.0 mm
Comp. ratio: 11.8:1
Fuel Injection: PGM-FI w/automatic enrichener circuit
36 mm x 4 w/ 12-nozzle injectors
Exhaust: 4-1-4

DRIVE TRAIN
Transmission: 6-speed
Final drive: No. 530 O-ring chain,
RPM @ 65 mph/redline = 4750/11,500

DIMENSIONS
Wheelbase: 57.4"
Rake/trail: 25.5°/3.74°
Ground clearance: 4.75"
Seat height: 31.25"
GVWR: 950 lbs.
Wet weight: 554 lbs.
Carrying capacity: 396 lbs.

SUSPENSION
Front: 43 mm HMAS cartridge forks, adj. preload, comp. and reb. damping, 4.7" travel
Rear: Pro-Link monoshock damper, adj. preload and reb. damping, 4.7" travel

BRAKES
Front: dual 296 mm discs, twin three-piston calipers with LBS
Rear: 256 mm disc, single three-piston caliper w/LBS

TIRES & WHEELS
Front: 120/70ZR17 Dunlop D204 Sportmax II on 3.50" x 17" wheel
Rear: 180/55ZR17 Dunlop D204 Sportmax II on 5.00" x 17" wheel

ELECTRICS
Battery: 12V, 12AH
Ignition: digital-mapped with throttle position sensor
Headlight: 4 bulb—2 H7 low beams, 2 H7 high beams

FUEL
Tank capacity: 5.8 gal.
High/low/avg. mpg: 43/27/32.8

PERFORMANCE
Measured top speed: 142.8 mph
0-1/4 mile: 11.21 sec.
0-60 mph: 3.36 sec.
0-100 mph: 7.88 sec.
60-0 mph: 119.5 mph
Power to Weight Ratio: 15.91
Speed @ 65 mph indicated: 60.2

M/C RATING SYSTEM
Engine
Transmission
Suspension
Brakes
Handling
Styling
Riding Impression
Instruments/Controls
Attention to Detail
Value
OVERALL RATING

ERGONOMICS TEMPLATE

A: front of bike to rear most seating position.
B: front of bike to center of handgrip.
C: front of bike to center of footpeg.
D: ground to center of handgrip.
E: ground to center of footpeg.
F: ground to lowest point of seat.

MISCELLANEOUS
Instruments: speedo, tach, odometer, trip meter, coolant temp.
Indicators: hi-beam, t/s, neutral, oil pressure, low fuel
MSRP: $11,499
Price as tested: $12,498.95 (saddlebags, $999.95)
Routine service interval: 4,000 mi.
Valve adj. interval: 16,000 mi.
Warranty: 12 mo., unlimited miles
Color: Red

DYNAMOMETER DATA

A remarkably satisfying engine, the VFR sounds good at low rpm and great past 7000. It offers excellent speed control and doesn't snatch on and off throttle like so many injected motors. A bit of vibration from 6000 rpm up is not bothersome.

93.7 rpm
52.9 lb. ft.

TEST NOTES
- Superb fuel injection makes the engine a pleasure to use.
- Excellent handling and suspension give great road feel.
- Styling goes one step beyond, enters the twilight zone.
- PANS
  - The 10% optimistic speedometer is constantly annoying.
  - High-styled tail section makes securing soft stuff tough.
  - We'd gladly trade the VTEC's complexity for 200 more cc's.

STANDARD MAINTENANCE

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Ducati’s excellent ST3 was a close second. More capable of very high speeds and with delicious engine braking on winding roads, the Duck gives the pilot an excellent cockpit, wide handlebars and great stability. Its luggage is also very nice. But we all were disappointed by the suspension’s cheap feel by comparison with the competition.

Left: All the ST-models now feature a much improved front fairing, with superior lighting, a higher windshield and turn signals attractively integrated on the sides. The spring-mounted mirrors are quite effective, but the internal springs will be stretched out of shape by a tipover—don’t ask how we know...

Top: From the rider’s view, the cockpit is attractively finished and well laid-out. But both clutch and brake efforts are relatively high, which can be fatiguing in traffic situations.

Below: The ST-models feature two-position muffler mounting. Remove the bags and raise the pipes for even more ground clearance.

Above left: A wet clutch is the big news for 2005 on the ST series. Ducati’s classic dry clutch clutter is either a charming signature sound or a terribly irritating and unnecessary noise, depending on your point of view. The wet clutch is quiet, but has a bit of drag when disengaged, making for false shifts if inadequate toe effort is used and more difficulty finding neutral at a stop. But it makes hard launches much easier, and the ST3 now actually beats the ’04 ST4’s 1/4-mile times!

Above right: The ST3 seating is very good, well-shaped and padded for long-term comfort, and it doesn’t restrict movement from side to side when a rider feels like hanging off in turns. The passenger portion is also comfortable, with a slight rise at the forward edge to prevent sliding forward under braking. Note how well the saddlebags are fitted to the rear bodywork. Stylishly sleek, they are big enough to each hold a full face helmet and easy to open/close.

Testers’ Log

Part of the appeal of a sexy Italian roadster is its flash factor, or at least it should be. I certainly wouldn’t buy a Ducati that fades into anonymity. That said, the ST3 is a superbly functional machine. Both friendly and powerful, with a roomy, comfy “interior,” the Duck was my second favorite of the bunch. Even though it deserves better suspension, the ones it has aren’t bad—they’re just not as great as the rest of the bike. I liked it best ralling through smooth sweepers, where it was sure-footed and always ready to leap forward with gusto. It was also my pick for long straights, with its plush seat and onerous throttle—like relaxing after a big pasta dinner. Just don’t make me adjust the valves.

—Mark Barnes

I currently ride a ’99 ST2 (with 40K on the clock), which I love for its up-right comfort, tractability, aural grunt and fully adjustable suspension (no longer the case), but the ST’s additional 30 hp transforms the ol’ gal into a bonafide hot rod. It now has the best characteristics of the 4-valve engine without all the maintenance hassles. There is one glaring defect, however: The lack of fully adjustable forks (just preload). The stock settings are decent, however, and if this is not high on your priority list, the ST3 deserves a serious look if you’re looking for a long-distance touring mount that will get you there in a hurry and in that imitable Italian style.

—Don Searle

The Ducati is my pick for the best of the bunch. It fits me best, I can ride it the fastest, the brakes give the best feel, the motor is the best overall and I can really appreciate the improvement the wet clutch makes, both in sound and performance. But I was frustrated that the suspension couldn’t be just a bit better, and how expensive it could be to upgrade.

—Dave Searle
2005 Ducati ST3

SPECIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE DATA

ENGINE
Type: Liquid-cooled, 90° L-twin
Valvetrain: 3-valve desmodromic, shim-adjusted valve clearances
Size: 992cc
Bore/stroke: 94.0mm x 71.5mm
Comp. ratio: 11.3:1
Fuel Injection: Marelli Electronic
Exhaust: 50mm x 2 throttle bodies

DRIVE TRAIN
Transmission: 6-speed
Final drive: Chain
RPM @ 65" mph/redline: 4070/9800

DIMENSIONS
Wheelbase: 56.3"
Rake/trail: 24.0°/4.02"
Ground clearance: 4.5"
Seat height: 32.6"
GVWR: 925 lbs.
Wet weight: 517.5 lbs.
Carrying capacity: 408.4 lbs.

SUSPENSION
Front: Shows 43mm preload adjustable inverted cartridge fork 5.1" travel
Rear: Sachs monoshock, adjustable comp./rebend, ride height w/ remotely adjustable preload, 5.8" travel

BRAKES
Front: Dual 320mm semi-floating rotors, w/Brembo 4-piston, double-action calipers
Rear: Single 245mm disc w/ 2-piston Brembo caliper

TIRES & WHEELS
Front: 120/70ZR17 Michelin Pilot Sport on 3.50" x 17" wheel
Rear: 180/55ZR17 Michelin Pilot Sport on 5.50" x 17" wheel

ELECTRICS
Battery: 12V, 10AH
Ignition: Magneti Marelli digital motor electronics
Headlight: 55W/55W

FUEL
Tank capacity: 5.5 gal.
Grade specified: Unleaded premium
High/low avg. mpg: 46.8/35.3/36.4

PERFORMANCE
Measured top speed: 140.4 mph
0-1/4 mile: 11.19 sec.
@ 120.8 mph
0-60 mph: 3.37 sec.
0-100 mph: 7.92 sec.
60-0 mph: 113.5'
Power to Weight Ratio: 1.5:23
Speed @ 65 mph indicated: 60.6

M/C RATING SYSTEM
EXCELLENT: Open Sport-Tourer

ENGINE
Transmission
Suspension
Brakes
Handling
Styling
Riding Impression
Instruments/Controls
Attention to Detail
Value
OVERALL RATING

MISCELLANEOUS
Instruments: Speedo, tach, odometer, tripmeter, clock, oil/water temp, fuel gauge with both analog and digital readouts, trip computer: average speed, instantaneous and average fuel consumption, consumed and remaining fuel, mph or km/h readout with self-adjusting background lighting indicators. High/low beam, neutral, turn signals, oil pressure, fuel reserve, immobilizer, fault warning.
MSRP: $11,995
Routine service interval: 6000 mi.
Valve adj. interval: 4000 mi.
Warranty: 24 mo., unlimited miles.
Colors: Red, Silver, Black

TEST NOTES
PICKS
- Delightful powerband from the new desmo4re motor
- Trip computer functions included in the instrumentation
- Excellent saddlebags are standard equipment

PANS
- Non-adjustable fork damping to save money
- Adjustable handlebars are still on the low side
- Wet clutch is quiet but makes neutral harder to find

DYNAMOMETER DATA

STANDARD MAINTENANCE

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Totals: 6.9 $174.67 $414.00

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Model Comparison

BMW’s new R1200ST gave a good account of itself, giving the Ducati a close race for second. A fine and functional machine in nearly every way, it lost points for lackluster aerodynamics, somewhat awkward rider ergonomics, ABS brakes that needed to be occasionally rebooted, and styling that left us cold, even in the desert.

Above: The ST’s cockpit is sporty without being uncomfortable. Oddly, the ST has a slightly longer wheelbase and more trail than the R1200RT.

Below: The analog speedo and tach are easy enough to read, but the LCD information panel on the lower right has low contrast, making it harder to read in certain lighting conditions. A fuel gauge, odometer, clock and coolant temp readouts are the primary information it provides.

Above: Although heavily sculpted, the seating on the ST is comfortable for long hours in the saddle, and its ergonomics suited our shorter testers especially well.

Left: The ST’s windscreen is on tracks, allowing it to be raised 1/8”. In its lowest position, below 75-80 mph, wind is blown under the rider’s helmet, so this little adjustment can make a real difference to rider comfort. Stylistically, none of us had any enthusiasm for the ST’s far-out shapes. They don’t make the same coherent whole as the R1200RT’s, which was introduced at the same time, although the details are nice: paint, textures and fit and finish.

Right: Our ST was equipped with the optional, $995, partially integrated, integral ABS, which allows the rear brake to work on the rear wheel alone. However, on several occasions the ABS warning light would stay lit after startup, indicating that the ABS was not functioning. Each time, “rebooting” the system by turning the bike off and restarting would get it working again, but this is not the sort of behavior you want from one of your bike’s most important safety systems.

Testers’ Log

First, I have to say that this is perhaps the most hideously ugly motorcycle I’ve ever seen (right down there with the Amazonas). But pretty is as pretty does, and this bike really does it for me. I once in the cockpit and don’t have to fight the back the fairing-induced nausea, I can settle into this Beemer’s perfect (for me) ergonomics and delight in its nimble steering feel and uber-torquey propulsion. And I’ve never experienced a front end that felt so planted and confidence inspiring over gnarly pavement. If I could take one of these home, I’d tape a brown paper bag over that face and drive this one away. (Actually, I like the looks of it’s tight little butt with the G-string taillight, and the new hex-head motor is gorgeous.

—Mark Barnes

My first impression was appreciation for how far this BMW has come from earlier versions of the boxer. The result of this significant engineering work and lengthy testing is rider awe.

I felt solidly planted on this bike; it went exactly where I pointed it every time. Road bumps and dips did not upset it. It’s a bit heavy but once underway, I did not feel the weight. The motor pulses solidly from down. I loved the ergonomics and found it nearly as comfortable as my old R1100. By an easy margin, it was the most comfortable of the four. Attention to detail is excellent and this was the most convenient bike for attaching bags. I could even get used to the styling.

—Steve Larsen

Call me underwhelmed, either that or a poor judge of progress. The 1200 Boxer engine is really impressive, for a Boxer engine, although the design wizardry of the Telelever front and Paralever rear suspension creates an incredibly plush and level ride.

I hate to judge a bike by its looks, but the bulbous, oddly carved dual-tone tank and newly designed headlight configuration (although extremely bright) left me feeling vaguely nauseous. The ride has none of the precision of the VFR, downsizing in or near turns remains a no-no due to excessive driveline lash (an unfortunate characteristic of all of BMW's boxer shaft-drive twins), and the brakes feel one step removed from the rider’s input. It’s nothing you couldn’t get used to, and probably learn to love, but this one is not for me.

—Don Searle

Surprisingly torquey, the ST can really shorten a straightaway, and the new transmission shifts very nicely, but after several restarts to get the ABS failure light to go out, and a styling job that only a mother could love, even the remarkably effective suspension couldn’t win me over.

—Dave Searle
# 2005 BMW R1200ST
## SPECIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE DATA
### ENGINE
- **Type:** air-cooled, boxer twin
- **Valvetrain:** high-cam, OHV
- **Valves per cyl.:** threaded adjusters
- **Bore/stroke:** 101.0mm x 73.0mm
- **Comp. ratio:** 12.0:1
- **Fuel system:** BMS-K sequential electronic fuel injection
- **Exhaust:** 2-1 with catalyst

### DRIVETRAIN
- **Transmission:** 6-speed
- **Final drive:** Paralever shaft drive, RPM @ 65 mph/ redline ..3500/7500

### DIMENSIONS
- **Wheelbase:** 59.1"
- **Rake/trail:** 27°/4.4"
- **Ground clearance:** 7.25"
- **Seat height:** 31.9"
- **GVWR:** 1014 lbs.
- **Wet weight:** 523 lbs.
- **Carrying capacity:** 491 lbs.

### SUSPENSION
- **Front:** 35mm Telelever forks, w/monoshock, 4.3’ travel
- **Rear:** monoshock w/remote preload adjuster, adj. rebound damping, 5.5’ travel

### BRAKES
- **Front:** dual 320mm floating discs w/ABS, dual four-piston calipers
- **Rear:** 265mm disc w/partial integrated Integral ABS, twin-piston caliper

### TIRES & WHEELS
- **Front:** 110/70-ZR17 Bridgestone Battlax BT020 on 3.50” x 17” wheel
- **Rear:** 180/55-ZR17 Bridgestone Battlax BT020 on 5.00” x 17” wheel

### ELECTRICS
- **Battery:** 12V, 14AH
- **Ignition:** digital-mapped with throttle position sensor
- **Headlight:** two H7 55W (one low, one high)

### FUEL
- **Tank capacity:** 5.5 gal.
- **Octane required:** 91 (R+M/2)
- **High/low avg. mpg:** 51.6/34.9/40.7

### PERFORMANCE
- **Measured top speed:** 146.0 mph
- **0-1/4 mile:** 11.39 sec.
- **0-60 mph:** 3.32 sec.
- **0-100 mph:** 8.44 sec.
- **60-0 mph:** 117.6’
- **Power to Weight Ratio:** 1.552
- **Speed @ 65 mph (indicated):** 62.5

### M/C RATING SYSTEM
- **Engine **
- **Transmission **
- **Suspension **
- **Brakes **
- **Handling **
- **Styling **
- **Riding Impression **
- **Instrument/Controls **
- **Attention to Detail **
- **Value **

### OVERALL RATING

### ERGONOMICS TEMPLATE

### MISCELLANEOUS
- **Instruments:** Analog speedo and tach, odometer, two trips, distance to empty, fuel gauge, clock, oil temp
- **Indicators:** ABS failure, turn signals high beam, neutral, oil press, low fuel
- **MSRP:** $14,990, as tested, $16,310 (chrome exhaust $125, heated handle grips $200, ABS-$995)
- **Valve adj. interval:** 12,000 mi.
- **Warranty:** 36 mo., or 36,000 miles.
- **Colors:** Granite Gray/Light Magnesium, Piedmont Red/Light Magnesium, Sydney Blue/Light Magnesium, Granite Gray/Dark Graphite, Piedmont Red/Dark Graphite, Sydney Blue/Dark Graphite

### DYNAMOMETER DATA
- **Low end:** 94.8 hp
- **Mid-range:**
- **Top end:** 74.6 lb. ft.

### TEST NOTES
- **PICKS**
  - Massively torquey motor shortens straightaways
  - Composed handling thanks to the clever Telelever fork
  - Greatly improved shift quality

- **PANS**
  - Styling on the wacky side of avant-guard
  - Abrupt fuel injection response below 4000 rpm
  - ABS that needs to be occasionally "rebooted" to work

### STANDARD MAINTENANCE

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Parts</th>
<th>Labor</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Synch EFI</td>
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<td>$30.00</td>
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**Totals** 3.05 $116.31 $156.00
Model Comparison

Although we had high hopes for the new Sprint ST, it failed to deliver on its promise. The worst suspension, a top-heavy handling feel, mediocre wind protection, the worst seat and excessive heat reaching the rider were all issues that need to be addressed. We did like the style and the power, but the class is very competitive.

Below: Completely redesigned for 2005, the Sprint ST’s new bodywork was clearly the stylistic favorite of our testers. Using the “triple” theme throughout, it looks sleek and purposeful.

Above: Triple clocks have style but the speedo (left) is particularly hard to read. The LCD readout on the right includes fuel level, coolant temp, and can be toggled through trip computer functions like average mpg and distance to empty.

Below: The triple-outlet silencer magnifies the exhaust sound and drew lots of favorable comments. An optional “off-road” model uses tips like an MV Agusta for even more style.

Above: The ST’s seat was our least favorite in this group, and the only one to cause discomfort between rotations among the machines. It slops forward, pressing the rider into the gas tank and felt poorly shaped. Heat exposed by the header to the underseat exhaust was also a real problem.

Below: The ST’s motor has been stroked for more displacement, but the hp boost seems to have been accomplished by aggressive cams which reduce engine braking significantly.

Below: Our Sprint ST was equipped with pre-production ABS, which we were asked not to comment on, explaining the absence of braking data in our comparison.

Testers’ Log

I really wanted to love the Sprint. At first glance it was easily the best-looking, most aggressive beast in our stable. And I’d fallen hard for the raucous personalities of earlier-model Daytona and Speed Triples. Was I ever disappointed! Every turn riding the Triumph became something to endure, with the harsh forks abusing every joint from wrist to shoulder and the malformed seat offering only an array of equally painful options for bodily rearrangement. Add its top-heavy, tipy, skittish feel in corners and you get a great deal of mental discomfort, as well. No way this is the same bike other magazines have praised. No way it shares DNA with other Triumphs. I don’t get it. I’d rather not ride at all than have to ride the Sprint we tested. It was really that bad.

—Mark Barnes

Because the 955i Tiger is one of my favorite bikes, I was prepared to love the Sprint. Unfortunately, Triumph disappointed me with a concerted lack of attention to detail. The suspension on our test bike was not set up properly. Downshifting during spirited riding threw a good deal of heat onto the left leg. The vacuum in the gas tank got so severe that the sides visibly expanded when we opened the tank to fill it. However, the basics for a great bike are all here. The motor and sound are more than satisfying. The road feel was good, and I liked the tire grip and position of the handlebars. The Triumph exhibits its British heritage in both good and bad traits.

—Steve Larsen

Ouch, my butt hurts from just thinking about the Sprint. Wooden seat + wooden seat = monkey butt every time. I don’t know if the ST had not been properly prepped before we picked it up, but by unanimous consent this is one incredibly painful ride, especially over 150 miles of expansion joints on LA’s freeways. Thanks to its engine, which dusted the competition in the hp department, you can still fly on this bike, but just not for long and preferably only in straight lines. In short, this bike cries out for better quality, fully adjustable suspension for and aft. Other than this one fatal defect, it’s not a bad mount. Can I be more lukewarm?

—Don Searle

I really expected the Sprint ST to win this contest. The old one was close, and freshly redesigned, Triumph knew what it had to do. But we have to test what they give us. I’m hoping for an apology and another Sprint ST to test.

—Dave Searle
2005 Triumph Sprint ST
SPECIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE DATA

ENGINE
Type: liquid-cooled, inline three
Valvetrain: DOHC, 4 valves per cyl.,
adjusting shims under buckets
Size: 1050cc
Bore/Stroke: 79mm x 71.4mm
Comp. Ratio: 12.0:1
Fuel System: Keihin multipoint sequential electronic fuel injection
Exhaust: 3-1-3

DRIVETRAIN
Transmission: 6-speed
Final Drive: X-ring 530 chain
RPM @ 65 mph: 3960/9500

DIMENSIONS
Wheelbase: 52.4"
Rake/Trail: 24.9°/13.54°
Ground Clearance: 5.75"
Seat Height: 31.9"
GWR: 1003 lbs.
Wet Weight: 548 lbs.
Carrying Capacity: 455 lbs.

SUSPENSION
Front: 43mm cartridge forks, dual rate spring, pre-load-adjustable, 5.0" travel
Rear: Monoshock w/adj. preload and rebound damping, 4.72" travel

BRAKES
Front: Dual 320mm discs, Nissin four-piston calipers
Rear: 255mm disc, twin-piston caliper

TIRES & WHEELS
Front: 120/70ZR17 Bridgestone BT020 on 3.50" x 17" wheel
Rear: 180/55ZR17 Bridgestone BT020 on 5.50" x 17" wheel

ELECTRICS
Battery: 12V, 35AH
Ignition: Digital-inductive
Headlight: 3 x 55W

FUEL
Tank Capacity: 5.5 gal.
High/Low/Avg. MPG: 45.7/32.8/37.3

PERFORMANCE
Measured top speed: 160.1 mph
0-1/4 mile: 11.15 sec.
@ 122.82 mph
0-60 mph: 3.38 sec.
0-100 mph: 7.73 sec.
60-0 mph: n/a
Power to Weight Ratio: 1.5:1.2
Speed @ 65 mph indicated: 62.4

M/C RATING SYSTEM

MISC. RATING
Engine: 1
Transmission: 1
Suspension: 1
Brakes: 1
Handling: 1
Styling: 1
Riding Impression: 1
Instruments/Controls: 1
Attention to Detail: 1
Value: 1
OVERALL RATING: 1

ERGONOMICS TEMPLATE

A: Front of bike to rear most seating position.
B: Front of bike to center of handgrip.
C: Front of bike to center of footpeg.
D: Center of handgrip to center of footpeg.
E: Center of footpeg to lowest point of seat.

INSTRUMENTS: Analog speedo, tach, digital clock, fuel level, coolant temp and trip computer (ave. mpg, miles to empty)

INDICATORS: Hi-beam, neutral

DYNAMOMETER DATA

Low end
Mid-range
Top end

The powerhouse in this group, the Sprint's 1050cc triple makes 12 hp more than the others and matches the 1170cc BMW for low end power, but lacks engine braking. Still, it's a fun powerplant and makes a roaring soundtrack, too.

TEST NOTES

PICKS
- Attractive styling, especially the triple exhausts
- Strong power
- Trip computer functions

PANS
- Serious problem with heat from the vertical header
- Suspension that rides harshly, hammering the rider
- The seat is not level, pushes the rider into the tank

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<td>Battery Access</td>
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Totals
$240.32 $345.60

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2005 Triumph Sprint ST

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Valvetrain: DOHC, 4 valves per cyl., adjusting shims under buckets
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Bore/stroke: 79mm x 71.4mm
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Fuel system: Keihin multipoint sequential electronic fuel injection
Exhaust: 3-1-3

DRIVETRAIN
Transmission: 6-speed
Final drive: X-ring 530 chain
RPM @ 65 mph*: redline 3960/9500
*actual, not indicated

DIMENSIONS
Wheelbase: 52.4"
Rake/trail: 24.9°/3.54°
Ground clearance: 5.75"
Seat height: 31.9"
GWR: 1003 lbs.
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0-1/4 mile: 11.15 sec.
@ 122.82 mph
0-60 mph: 3.38 sec.
0-100 mph: 7.73 sec.
60-0 mph: n/a
Power to Weight Ratio: 1.5:12
Speed @ 65 mph indicated: 82.4

M/C RATING SYSTEM
EXCELLENT
VERY GOOD
GOOD
FAIR
POOR

Open Sportbike

Engine
Transmission
Suspension
Brakes
Handling
Styling
Riding Impression
Instruments/Controls
Attention to Detail
Value

OVERALL RATING

ERGONOMICS TEMPLATE
A: front of bike to rear most sealing position.
B: front of bike to center of handgrip.
C: front of bike to center of footpeg.
D: ground to center of handgrip.
E: ground to center of footpeg.
F: ground to lowest point of seat.

MISCELLANEOUS
Instruments: Analog speedo, tach, digital clock, fuel level, coolant temp and trip computer (ave. mpg, miles to empty)
Indicators: Hi-beam, neutral turnsignal, oil press., EFI fault, low fuel
MSRP: $10,599
Routine service interval: 6000 mi.
Valve adj. interval: 12000 mi.
Warranty: 24 mo., unlimited miles, transferable
Colors: Caspian Blue, Aluminum Silver

DYNAMOMETER DATA

TEST NOTES
PICKS
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- Strong power
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