

LEARNER'S FILE:

The Freshman Class

So what do you say when a newcomer asks about a first-time ride?

BY JOE KRESS

Look around. Entry-level bikes have changed since a lot of us took a first ride. That might have been during the great motorcycle boom of the '60s, a time fueled by step-through 50s and low-stakes-to-the-extreme 125s. In fact, it's a safe bet that many of today's veteran riders, the ones now on Aspencades or Eliminators and with traces of gray around the temples, took their first, wide-eyed spin aboard one of those tiddlers of the '60s.

That was more than 25 years ago. Things were simpler; what satisfied us as motorcycling neophytes wouldn't come even close for today's crop. Today's first-time rider has *seen* better and *wants* better. Today's first-timer wants a real motorcycle, not some loose approximation like those buzz-saw 50s. Now, maybe more so than any time in recent history, that first-timer has choices. All four Japanese manufacturers have refocused attention back to the basics, presenting the beginner with an array of real, honest-to-God motorcycles. They could be just what he wants but doesn't know exists. A few these machines even warrant a hard look from the old hand.

Honda's Rebel 250 and 450 are perfect examples of this mid-'80s-style entry equipment. Sure, a \$1398 buy-in for the 250 takes a certain commitment, but so did \$250 from you back in the '60s. And unlike those old step-throughs, the Rebel is a real motorcycle. Its long wheelbase aids stability, yet its light weight and gentle power delivery make it no more intimidating than those old step-throughs. Here's a bike that's easily mastered. But from the saddle of a Rebel, there's every bit of the look, feel and sensation of genuine motorcycling. This isn't just low-cost, two-wheeled transportation. This is the bona fide article.

And that low-stakes Honda isn't alone. Suzuki's new Savage, an electric-start single, is, in '80s-speak, equally accessible. At \$1999, it isn't likely to send new prospects into financial shock, either. Like the Rebel, the Savage is cast in the classic American mold—the cruiser. It has that



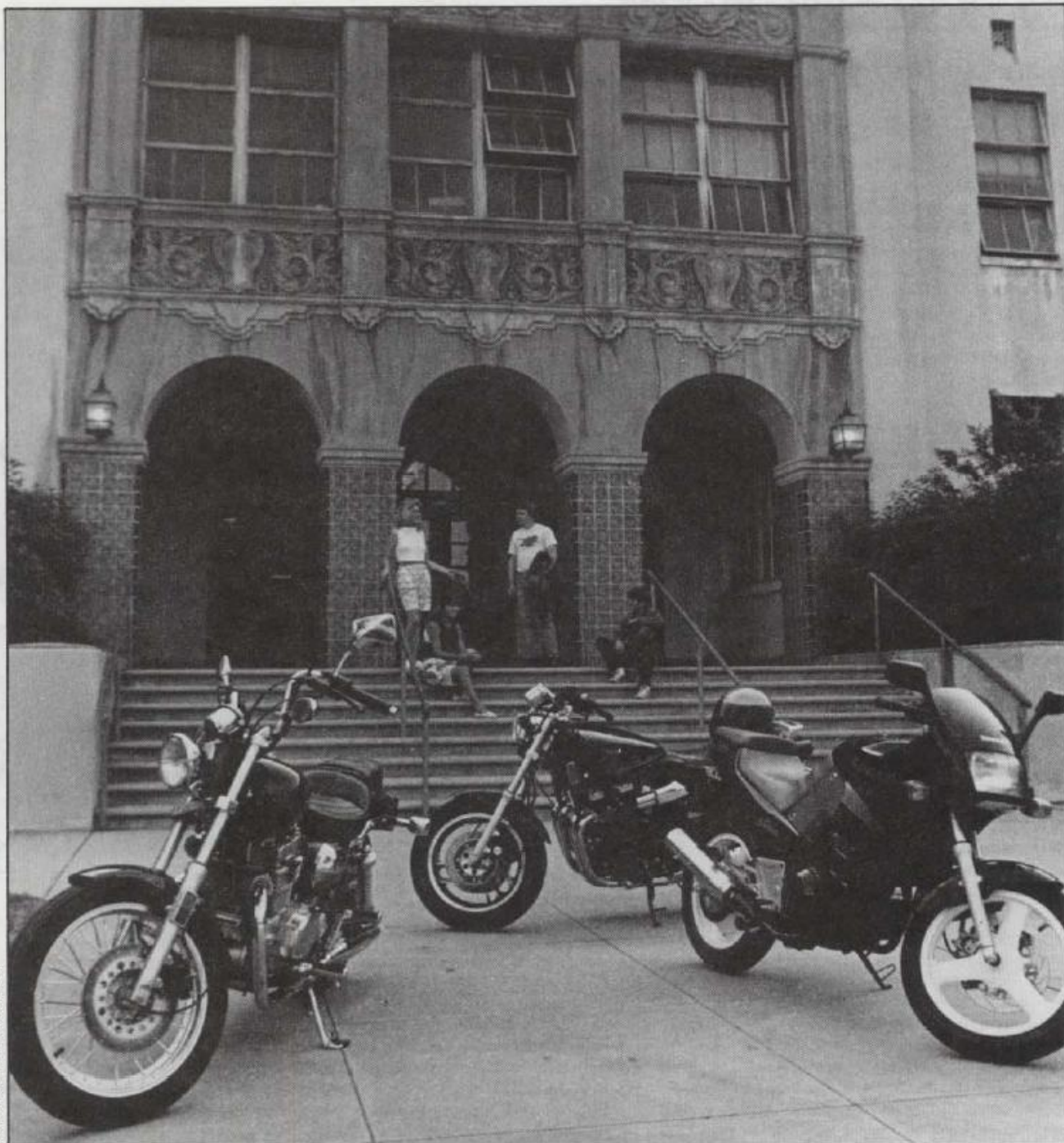
lean, clean, laid-back look most U.S. riders, new or old, want. The bike's 650cc single is no toy, either, but this Suzuki's light weight and low seat should make it all painless for a newcomer. So now when that kid down the street asks what's a good first-time cruiser, you can confidently point him toward Honda or Suzuki.

But what if he has visions of twisting roads and downhill sweepers? Not a problem, not anymore. Now, instead of being overwhelmed, both in price and performance, by a full-on sportbike, a new rider

could jump right in on the 250cc twin-cylinder version of Kawasaki's Ninja. Here's a bike *guaranteed* to just get better and deliver more smiles as its rider improves his skills. \$2299 buys a truly serious sportbike here. A docile-at-the-start eight-valve engine revs to an astronomical 14,000-rpm redline, with a respectable wallop concentrated up top. It's the perfect trainer for developing engine-speed/gear-choice feel. And a genuine Ninja-style chassis—with disc brakes, Uni-Trak suspension, 16-inch wheels with top-line Dunlops—provides more than just a foundation for learning the basics. This bike has to rate toward the top of the list as one of the sweetest handling motorcycles on the road, period.

Yamaha hasn't overlooked this '80s-style entry market, either. For \$2499, its SRX600S single is right in there, putting a new twist on an old classic—the sporting thumper. What better learning platform? Stall a kick-start single at an intersection once, and you won't do it many times after that. Clutch/throttle coordination become second nature real quick. It has to. Some might say this is akin to kicking a kid off the end of the dock and into the deep water. Truth is, '80s-era singles aren't all that hard to start.

A better choice for a new rider might be the 600cc inline-four-powered Radian. Here's as complete a motorcycle as they come. This '86 blend of old and new Yamaha hardware shows real promise of doing it all. And on a beginner's budget to boot. For \$2399, this one comes with



PHOTOGRAPHY © 1986 JOE KRESS

There's a bumper crop of new bikes and would-be new riders out there, but sometimes the two just don't meet
With the help of an old hand who knows where to look picking that first bike is a cinch.

FJ600 power, a tried-and-true 550 Maxim-style frame, contemporary bodywork and as much go-anywhere, do-anything capability as delivered in machines costing twice the price. It's a tough combination to beat. It should be even tougher for a newcomer to pass on.

And these are just some of the bikes in this mid-'80s entry-machine field. By no means are these the only examples of viable first-time hardware. Bikes like the 450

Suzuki twin, 450 Honda Nighthawk, 500 Shadow and Kawasaki's 454 LTD all make perfect starting points. They're also all excellent recommendations to give first-timers. So do everyone involved a favor, please. When an aspiring rider asks you about entry-level equipment, don't start reminiscing about 50cc step-throughs or 125s. He wants a motorcycle.

So point him to one. . . .