

FIRST RIDE



The WR500ZB's feel is worlds removed from the YZ490A. The WR feels lighter, slimmer and more responsive to irregularities.

High-tech, back-to-basics big-bore

Yamaha's venerable, but aged, YZ490 wasn't included in their 1991 press kit. The YZ is still popular among riders who prefer an air-cooled bike, but it can no longer compete with the Honda CR500, the Kawasaki KX500 or KTM 500; still, we were saddened to see the demise of another 500cc machine.

However, Yamaha wasn't axing the Open bike, just keeping their plans a secret to surprise their dealers. It seems that there's still room for the 490's air-cooled motor in Yamaha's production line. Until now, riders who wanted an air-cooled machine were forced to sacrifice leading-edge chassis, handling, suspension and brake technology. For those riders, there's great news! After studying the market for the 490, Yamaha has opted to update the chassis, choosing a direction that wouldn't alienate riders still interested in the built-in versatility of a stable, air-cooled 500.

MAJOR MOTOR FACE-LIFT

There have been many YZ250-framed/490-engined hybrids: Broc Glover's 1988 U.S. GP bike, Dan Ashcraft's 1988 off-road racer, Mike Stahlman's 1989 Open Pro class AMA Amateur National Motocross Championship winner and, more recently, the 250-chassised YZ490 that Doug Dubach piloted for his upset win over Johnny O'Mara at the Mammoth Mountain motocross.

However, Yamaha didn't just stick the 490 motor in a YZ250 chassis. Instead, on the WR500ZB they experimented with engine location, linkages,

1991 YAMAHA WR500ZB

Stunning,



Yamaha's new WR500ZB took the strengths of the old YZ490, then remedied most of the 490's flaws. It should be the perfect all-round Open-classer.



Moving around on the machine is easy as there is nothing to snag the rider. The tank is narrow at the seat but wider than the 490 near the fork.



The 500's dial-a-wheelie tractability and supple suspension turn technical obstacles such as this cliff climb into molehills.

carburetor size and gearbox ratios, as well as new porting and different pipes. This WR-Z has been thoroughly competition tested in the desert for at least three years.

Major changes for the motor include a smaller carb for more low-rpm power, a new compression ratio and combustion chamber shape to eliminate pinging and steel motor mount plates to reduce vibration. The chassis has slightly different geometry than the WR250ZB, a smaller, less damage-prone front disc rotor and a completely removable subframe.

After riding the new 500 we were pleased to find that the good points of

the old 490 motor still exist. The grunty, heavy-flywheeled motor has more bottom-end power than ever, thanks to the 2mm smaller 38mm Mikuni, and the engine's upper revs are as strong as ever. The same type of clutch cable found on the new YZs also makes the 500's clutch pull lighter than earlier models. Yamaha kept the same gearbox and ratios, so the shifting is a little chunky but workable.

FANCY LEGS

Yamaha opted to give the 500 its own suspension valving for off-road riding, and during the short time we had with the machine, the suspension felt ex-

Simple, Effective



To add to its already considerable high-speed stability Yamaha gave the WR a bit more rake than the YZ250's chassis, yet it still turns very well. After tackling a rutted downhill the 500 still dropped easily into this little sand turn.



Yamaha's WR off-road-tuned suspension prefers to suck up obstacles like rocks, but it also enables you to loft off them to clear others.



Hitting the face of this steep little hill proves that the suspension is well balanced front to rear. The bike should be a powerful off-road weapon.



This is a fork that the YZ490 needed badly. Valved for a wider range of conditions than the motocross-only YZs, it features 43mm tubes, a cartridge design and fully adjustable damping.



A smaller carb, lower compression and head mods update the reliable air-cooled power plant. The tank holds over three gallons, and the linkage matches the YZ250's but it works a shock with off-road valving.



Yamaha's streamlined bodywork with integral lift handles appear on the 500, too, but the 500 also has a fully removable subframe and a swingarm-mounted kickstand.

remely plush in off-road situations and—as you would expect—a bit soft on the motocross track. Even with the suspension's off-road character the new WR-Z is a far better motocross machine by accident than the old YZ490 was by design. To be competitive, the WR-Z only needs an optional smaller tank, although the stock tank is no larger and a lot more streamlined than some aftermarket units.

The 500 feels light for an Open-classer; it's nimble and well suspended. The 490's weaknesses—frame and suspension flex, ponderous steering and poor rear suspension action—are gone.

Although the old Yamaha Open-



The rear disc, improved and relocated shock and the more modern linkage surround the venerable motor with new-wave suspension and handling.

classer might not have been your choice in the past, this new 500 may be. The YZ was a good all-around Open-classer that was perfectly at home in any sort of competition, but anything the YZ490 could do, the WR500ZB can do better.

At \$4200 the WR is a little pricier than the five-year-old 490, but some suspension work and an accessory fuel tank for the 490 would price them darn close, and with the WR you're still way ahead on ergos, flex, handling and brakes. This could very well be the do-it-all, easy-maintenance bike you've been wanting. Now you can have your simplicity and roost with it, too. **DR**