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2008 HONDA CBR1000RR

FIREBLADE

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30 PAGES OF EXPERT ADVICE AND INFO

- USED BIKES ■ SET-UP
- WORKSHOP ■ Q&A
- SUSPENSION
- TECHNIQUE



1st RIDE HONDA CBR1000RR FIREBLADE

DESERT STORM

Honda launched its 2008 Fireblade in the middle of the Arabian desert. We know it's ugly but **beauty is only skin deep, isn't it?** Al flew to Qatar to find out if the new 'Blade puts Honda back to the top of the litre-bike tree

Words: Alan Dowds Pics: Double Red



Specifications

Price: £9,300 (TBC)
 NU ins. group: 17

Engine

Type: LC 16v, DOHC, inline-four
 Displacement: 999.8cc
 Bore & Stroke: 76 x 55.1mm
 Compression: 12.3:1
 Carburation: PGM-DSFI fuel injection, 46mm throttle bodies, dual injectors
 Gearbox: Six-speed chain
 Power: 175.3bhp@12,000rpm
 Torque: 84lb ft@8,500rpm

Cycle Parts

Chassis: Gravity cast aluminium twin spar
 Suspension: (F) 43mm fully-adjustable USD forks (R) Monoshock, fully adjustable
 Brakes: (F) Dual 320mm discs, four-piston, one-piece calipers (R) 220mm disc, single-piston caliper
 Wheels: Cast aluminium
 Tyres: Bridgestone BT015 (F) 120/70 17 (R) 190/50 17
 Seat Height: 820mm
 Wheelbase: 1,405mm
 Capacity: 17.7 litres (3.9 gal)
 Wet Weight: 199kg (438lb)

Contact

Honda UK 01753 590500
 www.honda.co.uk

EXHAUST

All-new underslung system replaces the underseat pip of before. Complex piping and resonance chambers together with no less than two ECU-controlled flapper valves optimise the performance all the way through the rev range.

WHEELS

Lighter and stiffer than before – 240g lighter at the front, 310g less at the rear. Tyres are Bridgestone BT-015s or Dunlop Qualifiers.

WHAT MAKES IT TICK?

It's an all-new bike, so you've guessed there are some things that need explaining

ENGINE

Heavily revised motor returns to a separate cylinder block with new linerless bores and a clever electro-deposited coating inside the cylinders. Inlet valves are titanium, and the bore is up 1mm (stroke is down 1.5mm), while the new pistons are lighter than before, yet stronger too. Total engine mass is down by 2.5kg.

FRAME

Cast frame is 30mm narrower and 2.5kg lighter, while being much more rigid. Swingarm is also all-new, with a gull-wing section, longer length and higher pivot point.



SUSPENSION SETTINGS

Recommended base settings from BSB Supremo Mr Johnny Rea. If they're good enough for that ten stone star...

		STD	Track
Front	Rebound	Max minus 2.25 turns	Max minus 0.75 turns
	Compression	Max minus 2 turns	Max minus 1.75 turns
	Preload	Min plus 6 turns	Min plus 3 turns
Rear	Rebound	Max minus 2 turns	Max minus 1 turn
	Compression	Max minus 2 turns	Max minus 2 turns
	Preload	4th ring	8th ring

CLUTCH

Honda's new Assisted Slipper Clutch uses a system of ramps and undercut dogs to both release the clutch under back-torque conditions when downshifting, as well as forcing the clutch pack together under acceleration. This allows lighter clutch springs and a lighter lever feel. It also means a cable can replace the old hydraulic setup, saving weight.

BRAKES

New Tokico calipers are 430g lighter in total than before, and are now proper monoblock, one-piece castings. Pistons are aluminium with chrome plating, and there are four pistons using two pads. Discs use six point mounts instead of ten-point, and have variable-sized drillings, further saving weight and boosting feel.

Before the oil boom, there wasn't much to see in Qatar. Diving for pearls and fishing for, er, fish was about it, and the population was mostly nomadic tribal folks, who didn't stay in one place for too long. Indeed, with summer temperatures hitting fifty degrees celsius and no fresh water, you can see why no one bothered to live there in the days before air conditioning, desalination plants and Häagen Dazs shops.

It's all different now, oh yes, there's plenty going on here. And there's plenty going on with Honda's Fireblade too. We're

here in Doha to ride the new 2008 version of the firm's litre sportsbike, and from initial glimpses at the NEC, Milan and Paris shows, it looks to be a pretty special machine. An all-new engine in a revised chassis, with more power, less weight, and a dash of novel technology – including some sort of traction control system.

Like Qatar, though, the new Fireblade is not uncontroversial. In the case of the Honda, that's down to a, frankly, ugly new top fairing, which combines a low-browed Neanderthal forehead with a stumpy, snub-nosed side profile.

In the case of Qatar, it's down to some frankly ugly labour laws: four-fifths of the population are immigrants, who do all the dirty work, and if they don't toe the line pretty damned carefully, they're kicked out of the country toot bloody sweet. It's getting better, and in terms of broader human rights, Qatar is much better than some of its neighbours, but we'd like more progress please.

Featureless

Back at the track though, we've had the obligatory technical presentation, and I'm heading out for my first session at this track.

And it's me that's needing to make a bit more progress here I'm afraid. The last time I was on track was the Suzuki Hayabusa launch nearly three months ago, and while I've been riding constantly since, tiptoeing my Speed Triple through a freezing South London commute every day, this hasn't been much preparation for what's going on now. And what's going on now is that I'm piloting a 175bhp superbike around a new track, and it's one of the fastest, least forgiving, most featureless circuits I've been to.

Losail is, obviously, built in the desert, and so there's little



STYLING

The main concern about the new Fireblade from visitors to the www.superbike.co.uk web forum was the styling. And while it's true to say that the bike looks a bit better once you get used to it, the stumpy front nose cone gives the bike a face only a mother could love. The parent involved – design chief Toshiaki Kishi – apparently developed the new look after a visit to the Japanese temples of Kyoto, taking further inspiration from the design of a Samurai sword. The stubby nose was also designed to underline the centralised mass of the new bike, and the reduction in side area also aimed to improve the way the bike moves sideways through the air. Hmm. Perhaps it will look better with a Ten Kate Hannspree or HM Plant paintjob...

HESD

New generation Honda Electronic Steering Damper is much smaller and lighter than before. It's now located under the fuel tank cover, out of sight. An ECU-controlled solenoid alters the damping level according to road speed and throttle opening, giving light steering at slow speeds with heavier, stability-boosting damping when required.

BATTERY

A frankly tiny 7AH battery replaces the previous 10AH part. Honda claims a revised starter setup allows the change, which saves 3kg. But if you fit an alarm or heated grips, or leave your headlights on without the engine running, you now have even less margin for error before needing a bump start...



SUSPENSION

Largely unchanged from before – but the forks have a wider span and more offset. Rear shock is essentially identical.

in the way of landmarks around the track. It's pretty flat too, and there are one or two sections which look very similar on the way in, but which differ vastly in the speed you can carry through them. Consequently, the new 'Blade is taking up a little less of my attention than managing to work my way around the track without ending up in the sand. But after the first couple of laps following Hannspree Honda world supersport racer Johnny Rea around at a steady pace, I'm starting to get an early picture of the bike.

HRC KIT BIKE

Honda was showing off a race bike fitted with HRC's own race kit, which will apparently be available from Honda dealers. It looked utterly mean in black, and was dripping in top kit: Brembo calipers, Showa race suspension, quickshifter and race rubber.



Honda has sent us out for the first session on bog-stock road suspension settings and standard BT-015 tyres, so things are a little bit squidgy and vague, with a fair bit of pitching fore and aft when getting on and off the gas. But for an initial session at a new circuit, the 'Blade is actually pretty friendly and easy to get on with. There's a good spread of power from 6,000rpm up towards 12,000rpm, with a linear, progressive delivery and smooth fuel injection. The brakes are incredibly strong too, and they dig me out of one or two little holes with ease.

For our second session on track, we're treated to some pre-selected suspension tweakages. Ex-BSB race winner Rea has been here all week, and he's prescribed a general firming up front and rear (see box) that has really transformed the bike. There's an instant improvement in the composure of the bike on the brakes, and there's also a lot more feedback through the

now-taut suspension. I've also had the angle of the brake lever on the bars adjusted downwards to better suit my spacked right wrist. These changes, together with the basic map of the track I've started to build in my head, is letting me push on a bit quicker now, and the 'Blade is inducing a bit of a grin inside my lid.

Chastened

But halfway through the 20 minute session, I drift off line a little bit just after turn two, and as I hammer the gas on, the bike passes over the top of a small rise, and the back wheel steps out. In an instant, I'm out of the seat as the Honda snaps away, then back into line under me. A couple of big wobbles pass in a terrifying instant, and I'm breathing huge sighs of relief as the bike calms down and I back off, suitably chastened for the rest of the session.

We're stopping for an early lunch now, so I get a chance to sit down with a cup of tea to settle





■ On a featureless track you need an agile machine to make good progress. The 'Blade appears to be chaperoning Al nicely

my jangling nerves before my next ride. The excellent Honda techs have replaced the stock BT-015 road tyres with full-on BT-002 track rubber for the rest of the day now, and so I'm feeling a little more confident as I ride down the pit lane and out onto the now-hot track. I get a couple of decent laps in before Grand Prix legend Mr Ron Haslam pulls in front of me. When he's still in sight after fifty yards or so I work out that he's letting me stick on his tail so I can pick up the way around a bit quicker. It's a massive help both to my confidence and the accuracy of my lines round here. I soon pick up loads of hints about where to position the bike for some of the more tricky corners, and start to exploit the grippier tyres and track suspension settings a bit more.

There's nothing really standing out about the CBR's

performance though – just lots of good stuff going on. The brakes are impressing me more and more each lap, with seemingly limitless power and even more feel now the tyres and suspension are sorted. It's easy to hold a tight line through the longer hairpin bends – essential on this flowing circuit if you're to keep in position for the next corner – while the bike feels composed and nimble through

fast direction changes. The slipper clutch is great too, giving seamless control over hard downshifts with no juddering, grabbing or anything disconcerting at all. And that new engine is still just fine on track, pulling in a strong, yet friendly manner through the midrange and top end. There's not much call to dip below about 5k here, but when I do manage it once with a dense outbraking manoeuvre, the bike pulls

“There's nothing really standing out about the CBR's performance though – just lots of good stuff going on.”

UPS AND DOWNS OF THE 'BLADE

Fifteen years, nine model updates, a revolution in sportsbike design principles, and a stack of wheelies, stoppies, and fast laps. Whichever way you shake it the FireBlade has been a truly ground-breaking machine...

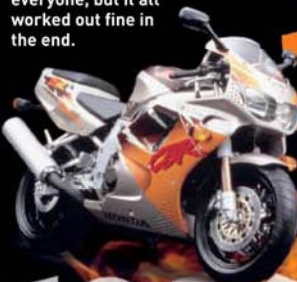
1992

■ The original beastie: launched in Australia, with an 893cc motor and 122bhp, in a 185kg chassis. 16-inch front wheel terrified everyone, but it all worked out fine in the end.



1994

■ First tweaking, with suspension and other detail mods. Urban Tiger colour scheme thrills the world.



1996

■ Still on top, and gets a bigger 918cc motor. Doesn't realise that Yamaha's R1 is coming to kick sand its face in for next year though.



1998

■ More sophisticated and civilised than ever, the '98 Blade was actually derided as a soft sports-tourer by speed-addled magazine road testers at the time.



2000

■ First fuel injected Blade gets a new 929cc engine, with a 17-inch front wheel and a full makeover. Can't top the R1 – and shits itself whenever it sees a GSX-R1000 K1



2002

■ Up to 954cc, and a really sorted motor. Extremely light too at 168kg, but still couldn't top increasingly severe competition from full bore rivals – Yamaha's R1 and Suzuki's GSX-R1000

■ First new generation bike gains 100 nominal cc and loses a capital 'B'. CBR1000RR Fireblade has all-new engine and chassis, gains weight and power.



2006

■ Tweaked chassis and lower-gearing for the motor made a big difference to the bike, and it came close to winning group test honours for the first time in a decade. Suzuki's continuing GSX-R genius still won out though.





■ With Messrs Haslam, Rea and Crutchlow on hand Al honed in on the right lines eventually

TORQUE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Honda's take on the 'traction control' system actually came from a typically Honda concern with civilised road manners, rather than a desire to keep wheelspinning track jockeys happy

● According to Dave Hancock, Honda's development rider, the system was originally aimed at reducing slow-speed jerkiness from transmission lag. The ECU analyses the throttle position and its speed of opening, as well as engine speed, and retards the ignition for a tiny spell to give a softer 'ramping up' of power, rather than a straight hit. This original plan worked well, but Honda realised that this could also provide an anti-wheelspin function.

● So the ECU analyses the rate of acceleration of the crankshaft as well as the throttle opening, and if it 'sees' a set of conditions which are outside its pre-mapped figures, it will retard the ignition slightly, softening the power and – hopefully – preventing a loss of control. But if you're wanting to spin the back end up, it won't stop you – the proper racers on the launch were having no trouble smoking the back tyres on opposite lock all the way out of Losail's long exotic corners.

● Having said all that, Honda isn't too keen on publicising the feature (which may be down to fears of litigation from crashed owners more than anything else). It's not mentioned in the extensive press kit and doesn't even seem to have one of those acronyms so beloved of the Japanese (I suggest HAT-JOK – Honda Anti Throttle-Jockey OverKill!).



cleanly enough from 3,000 revs.

Back in the pits, and I'm pondering on how the new Blade will cope on the road. It's notoriously difficult to draw road performance from a track launch – especially a track as serious and fast as this one. And we'll really have to wait for a proper road ride back here in Europe to see how

Honda's done with that. Having said all that, there are some encouraging signs: the riding position was comfortable and relaxed for my 5'8" 13 stone frame, the dash looks good (but only has basic info; no gear indicator or fuel gauge), the mirrors work well. The fuel consumption meter on my bike suggested it was getting around 20mpg – not so bad for the riding conditions on this super-fast track.

Before I know it, I'm out for the last session of the day and, like most trackdays, I'm enjoying

the final session most – and am doing my best riding. The 'Blade is really excelling now, and I'm really starting to feel at one with it, but then the chequered flag comes out, and I pull into the pits as the desert sun sinks low on the horizon.

And finally

For the job Honda set it in Qatar, the Fireblade excelled. Getting round a serious, WSB-class race track in quick order, while making it seem very easy is no easy task, and the new bike managed it a treat. And the positive smiles of Honda guests Leon Haslam and Cal Crutchlow (who'll all be racing this bike in BSB next year) underlined that success.

But, of course, 90 per cent of the riding time spent on 2008 CBR1000RRs will be on the road. And from what a day on a desert race track can tell you, the new bike will be pretty good at that job too – scant dashboard aside.

But then the old one did both of these things very well too – and there are three competing Japanese machines from Suzuki, Yamaha and Kawasaki which are far from poor performers in any sphere. The new 'Blade is sharper than before, but it's also uglier. And whether it has sufficient ability elsewhere to take on the competition, while carrying that cosmetic handicap, remains to be seen. **EW**