

## First Ride: 2005 Honda CRF250X Dirt Rider Project Bike

Story and Photos by Dan Kouba

When Jimmy Lewis told me he thought the Dirt Rider Honda CRF250X was the best combination of power and handling of any bike on the market, and that it was one of his favorite race bikes, I couldn't help but stick a finger in my ears for a quick cleaning. The best? Lofty words considering the choices Jimmy has to choose from in the Dirt Rider stable. And while I've put in my fair share of seat time on Big Red's little X, and think it's impressive in so many ways—from the top-flight ergonomics, electric-smooth motor and bombproof reliability—I don't think I'd have the cajones to dub a CRF250X "the best" in stock trim. Ah, there's the asterisk in Lewis' claim: Dirt Rider's project bike has a few choice upgrades that transform an already good bike into an unrivaled trail and track-worthy machine.



Dirt Rider's beat 2005 CRF250X was Dan Kouba's riding impression assignment. Pretty and unscratched it wasn't, but purposeful it was.

While setting the sag and making minor adjustments to the X's levers and Renthal bar (technically the bike belongs to the much-shorter and lighter Heather Lewis) in a dusty and barren Hungry Valley parking lot, I couldn't pinpoint what made this bike so special. Yeah, it had a beautiful Leo Vince titanium silencer, Enduro Engineering guards and red TM Design Works chain guide, but other than that I was still doubtful as to what made the bike so special. It was only upon closer inspection that started to comprehend the sensibility behind Lewis' bold claim.



**There's a reason these babies took Dirt Rider's product of the year. Air Cell's fork bottles take fork tuning to a new level.**

The first visual difference is the aforementioned Leo Vince exhaust. Riding in areas like Hungry Valley, where upwards of 20,000 OHV's congregate on weekends, comes with an extra strict set of responsibilities, namely sound. The \$699 X/3 Enduro exhaust not only has a U.S.F.S-approved spark arrestor but a 94 db quiet insert. The setup sports a titanium silencer, straight stainless steel header (there is an optional low-boy head pipe) and prototype heat shield courtesy of Jimmy's friend. Beside being stealthy, the X/3 impresses with its ability to run at peak performance with stock jetting. While some aftermarket exhausts do a commendable job at keeping noise levels down they often feel like there's a potato stuck midway down the silencer. The CRF retained its crisp response down low while still being able to rev through the gears without hitting the rev limiter early.

The next modification admittedly drew a disappointed sigh from yours truly. The CRF has a Rekluse clutch, and unfortunately I've had inconsistent luck with the automatic clutch on other models, specifically big bore four strokes. Maybe those bikes were improperly set up, but Jimmy said this bike was impossible to stall. Of course you know I was hell-bent on proving him wrong because if anyone can stall a bike...

Without going into a long-winded tech shakedown, the Rekluse clutch replaces the stock pressure plate, and helps eliminate stalling and puts power to the ground with minimal wheelspin compared to a "normal" bike's clutch. The clutch automatically disengages the engine at idle speed, and as throttle is applied, centrifugal forces engage the clutch to provide perfect clutch/throttle control. Beside doing away with stalling, the Rekluse reduces arm-pump, and allows the rider to focus on one less thing while cornering, climbing, braking... You get the picture. And yes, a rider can override the Rekluse when the need for a stock clutch operated bike arises.



Derek Steahly gave DR's CRF250X a spin for Dan Kouba's lens. Even though the bike was built for a woman, it was good enough for a man.

Riding around Hungry Valley's unfamiliar trails I lost count how often the Rekluse saved me from stalling the bike or spinning out on the dry and slick trails. Plunking along in first I could creep up to a steep rocky step-up, and survey the best line without the bike stalling. The clutch also pulled me through a series of tight, slow corners with aplomb thus allowing me that extra split second to get a good drive into the fast straights without the need to constantly shift over-exaggerate body English to maintain traction. While you still have to shift the bike it truly feels like you're riding an automatic; the right gear, and subsequently, the right amount of power, seems to always be at the ready. Whether battling in the Vet Pro class in a two hour WORCS race or fighting a case of the monkey butt on a multi-day tour, the amount of energy saved from pulling in the clutch, restarting a bike, etc., can be immeasurable. And for the record I was unable to stall the little two-fifty.

**But if I thought the Rekluse clutch was good, what lurked behind the X's front number plate could very well change the way riders look at motorcycle suspension.**

"These take a bike's level of turning, traction and performance to a whole new level," Lewis said about the small, shiny Air Cell sub-tanks clamped onto the upper fork tubes. While I don't claim to be the next Karel Kramer, I believe the principal behind sub-tanks has to do with the air space in the fork: in a nutshell, the Air Cells work like a high-speed compression adjustment for the front end utilizing air volume in the fork by making room for air above the oil, thus allowing more oil volume which in turn lends to better bottoming control while keeping small bump compliance. With the Air Cells I could confidently survive a row of seat-high whoops and then race down a rock-filled sandwash, and not worry about being thrown to the side like a chicken bone at an all-you-can-eat buffet; normally my forks are set up so stiff for the big stuff that my wrists pay the price in the chop. The Air Cells are like cheating, and it's no wonder many top off-road racers are clamoring to get their gloves on a set.

At the end of the day (literally: I rode the 250 until sunset... and my shoddy "action shots" are proof that I wasted good light in the name of ride time) I found myself taking back everything I ever said or thought about the Honda CRF250X being "not this" or "not that." It's definitely not the flashiest or fastest, and it's not going to impress your friends with thunderous bravado and fourth gear wheelies up big sand hills.

**What the Honda CRF250X Dirt Rider Project Bike does do is EVERYTHING, and it does it quietly (no pun intended) without fanfare. If you get a chance to ride it don't be surprised to hear yourself say, "Maybe Jimmy was right. This could be the perfect all-around bike."**

#### **What's Hot!**

- **94db race-worthy exhaust without restricting power.**
- **Rekluse clutch performed consistently in every gear, speed, terrain and panic situation imaginable.**
- **First gear is low enough for goat trails while top speed is adequate for all but the longest fire roads.**
- **Enduro Engineering guards are bombproof, coming out winners against a plethora of Hungry Valley rocks and trees.**
- **Air Cell bottles take an already good set of forks and make them feel like one-off works bike unobtanium.**

#### **What's Not!**

- **Some riders noticed a top-heavy sensation due to brush guards.**
- **If racing against the Dirt Rider CRF250X you may not hear it sneaking up for the pass.**