

Classic Japanese Motorcycles / Classic Honda Motorcycles

1966-1967 Honda CL 160: Brief But Successful

By Clement Salvadori and Larry Coolidge



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Larry says he feels like he is 16 again every time he rides his CL160.

It is one thing to build a successful motorcycle, another to market it. When Honda presented their low-piped **road-oriented Honda CB160** back in 1965, it met with reasonable acclaim as a sporty small bike at a small price of \$550. In 1966 the high-piped street-scrambler CL160 appeared, and it became a major hit because of The Look. Trying to be sporty with a top speed of 70mph was a bit of a challenge, but turning off the pavement and blasting up a dirt road — that was a different image.



Image by Clement Salvadori and Larry Coolidge



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Changing the CB to a CL, the Honda designers had sensibly left the 160 engine and chassis pretty much alone, although they did do some minor work to make the minimalist frame a bit stronger with the anticipation of some off-road bumps. Two short arms come down from the steering head and bolt to the top of the engine, which is a structural member of the chassis. The tubular backbone itself runs under the tank and back down to join with the rear of the gearbox, using a tubular swingarm and two mildly adjustable shock absorbers. Up front the CL uses the same forks as on the CB model, which made for some curious handling when puttering up a sandy road. A steering damper could tighten the turn of the handlebars should the occasion demand.

Making it go

The parallel twin engine, made mostly of aluminum but with shrink-fit steel cylinder liners, leans forward a few degrees. With a bore of 50mm and a stroke of 41mm, for a total of 161cc, it was highway legal. The two 20mm Keihin carburetors have a Siamese hookup, with a single cable running off the throttle, splitting to two cables under the tank. Using a chain-driven overhead camshaft, two valves per cylinder in a hemi-shaped head, and 8.5:1 compression ratio, that engine generates some 16.5 horses at 10,000rpm. Roughly 9 lb/ft of torque come into play at about 6,000rpm. The 360-degree crankshaft has the pistons running up and down side by side, but they fire 180 degrees apart, keeping the vibrations low. The crankshaft runs on four bearings, one ball and three rollers, which may be one reason we still see 160s running around today.



Image by Clement Salvadori and Larry Coolidge

The power end of the crankshaft connects by gears with the wet clutch, while the opposite end has the alternator — and here a difference appears. The CB has an electric starter, while the CL160 does not. Powerful legs are certainly not necessary to fire up the CL, which uses a conventional battery and coil ignition. The CB curb weight, according to a 1967 *Cycle* magazine comparison, is at 288 pounds with a 2.8 gallon tank, while the CL is 6 pounds lighter, with a 2.5 gallon tank. The difference would be more, except the CL now has a skid plate under the exposed engine, just in case.



The 4-speed transmissions are the same, and share the same oil with the engine. The manual recommended changing the oil every 1,000 kilometers, or 620 miles; Honda definitely did not see this as a long-distance cruiser. The CL has two extra teeth on the rear sprocket, meaning the CL is about a mile slower in top speed. But it is faster in the quarter-mile, by almost a second — 18.6 seconds.

In style

What brought the buyers on was that new off-road image, those up-swept twin exhaust pipes being a real turn-on in the late '60s, giving a scramblerish look to essentially street bikes. Many riders might actually try to do a bit of off-road riding, but the first sandy hill might convince them this was not a terribly good idea. The wheels are 18-inchers, with mildly knobbyish tires, giving slightly more grip in the rough than the CB, a 2.75 on the front, 3.00 at the back. They hold fine on the pavement, and the bike is said to have a 40-degree lean angle, sufficiently sporty for most. This was before disc brakes, so the front wheel has a twin-leading-shoe drum, the rear, a single-leading shoe. And they work quite well, according to the testers of the time.



The possibility of falling over was always there, and minimizing damage is the purpose of the upswept exhaust. As well as the folding footpegs for the rider, with springs making sure they were always where your foot could find them. The CL has both a sidestand, and a centerstand, convenient should the chain need adjusting.

I mentioned the difference in tank size when talking about the weight, but far more important is the design. The smaller tank flows into the saddle, as opposed to the rather taller version on the CB where the rider's private parts might come into contact if one moved too far forward, sometimes referred to as the "Honda Hump." It was a much sleeker design overall, with a long, comfortable saddle, cross-braced handlebars and properly placed footpegs providing an excellent ergonomic combination. This is one darned comfortable bike to ride for anyone 6-foot and under.



Image by Clement Salvadori and Larry Coolidge

A couple more changes were made to improve the scrambler look, with the front fender being shortened and the front forks having rubber gaiters rather than the circular metal covers seen on the CB.

The stats on both bikes were quite the same, with a 50-inch wheelbase, almost six inches of ground clearance, and a saddle height of just under 30 inches. But the CL has The Look.

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Engine	Four-stroke OHC Twin Cyl.
BHP/rpm	16.5 @ 9,500
Bore & Stroke	50mm x 41mm
Compression Ratio	8.5:1
Weight (dry)	282 lbs.
Tires	Front: 2.75 x 18 (Universal) Rear: 3.00 x 18
Clutch/brake	Two 20mm piston valve type
Fuel consumption	120 mpg (approx.)
Transmission	Forward 4-speed, Constant mesh

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The CL160 sold well, until Honda did its usual upgrade, making it a CL175 late in 1968.

The 1966 CL160 cost a nominal \$580, plus taxes and set-up. With Dad willing to co-sign a loan and a friendly dealer offering payments as low as \$25 a month, this could be done by delivering newspapers or mowing lawns. And at 75 miles per gallon it was cheap to run.

After a year on the market Honda decided to upgrade the CL160 to the CL160D, which included an electric starter, for the really lazy types. MC

Nostalgia: The owner's story

"This was my first bike — not this one, but one just like it. I got it when I was in high school. When I turned 16 my parents were hesitant to put me on their insurance since I hadn't completed my driver's education yet, which did provide a discount on insurance.



Image courtesy Clement Salvadori and Larry Coolidge

Larry, second from right, gets the "Hole Shot" at the 1967 AMA Scrambles in Fisher, Illinois.

"I asked if I could get a motorcycle, and they said yes. The bike cost \$495; I got a loan and my dad co-signed, my payments being \$25 a month. I paid for it with my paper-route money, \$12 a week. The next year I began racing AMA Sportsman Scrambles and would ride my bike to the closest track, which was Fisher, Illinois. I'd remove the headlight and taillight and put on my 13-tooth front sprocket. In this photo [at left], that's me, #13, second from right, and you can see I got the 'hole shot,' with my clutch lever out and front wheel an inch off the ground. To the right of me is Craig Vetter on a 125 Yamaha, and next to him is Duane Anderson on a 125 Kawasaki. They didn't have enough bikes that day for the 125 and 200 classes so they combined them into one. I would also ride my 160 to the Kickapoo State Park and trail ride the strip-mine trails all day. I kept that bike through high school and the first year of college, and then sold it to my roommate — who still has it. A severe bout of nostalgia made me buy this one in 2017."

— Larry Coolidge

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