

SYM WOLF CLASSIC 150

The small-bore single gets a new lease on life

Story and photos by Richard Backus

Once upon a time, small-bore singles occupied a significant slot in the motorcycle market. Simple, approachable and easy to ride, they were an affordable way to decide if you really wanted to be a motorcyclist after all.

Back in the Sixties, every motorcycle manufacturer — even Harley-Davidson — had at least one small single in its model lineup. Honda was no exception, hardly surprising from the company often credited with bringing motorcycling to the U.S. masses, its catchy “You meet the nicest people on a Honda” ads showing happy, non-motorcycle-type people riding single-cylinder C100 or C110 step-throughs.

It was a different era, slowly ushered out in the U.S. as small bikes were increasingly pushed aside to make way for ever-larger multi-cylinder machines, many of them from Honda. By 1973, the year Honda introduced the CB125S overhead cam single to our market, the influence of small bikes on the U.S. market had dramatically diminished.

But that didn't mean small singles weren't appreci-

ated elsewhere, and they continue to influence many markets today, particularly in large cities where parking space is non-existent or in developing countries where incomes don't support automobile ownership. Although you wouldn't know it judging by the U.S. market, Honda's presence in the category continues, with its own products and license-built clones of its singles selling by the millions around the world.

Almost from the start, Honda pursued licensing agreements with other companies to build its bikes. In 1962, Taiwan's Sanyang Industry Co. Ltd. partnered with Honda to build Honda motorcycles, eventually manufacturing Honda cars before the joint venture was abandoned in 2002. In the intervening 40 years, SYM, Sanyang's motorcycle division, built literally millions of little Honda singles.

It still does today, but now they're sold under the SYM banner.



Yes, it's small, but that's part of its charm. And at only 266 pounds all-in the SYM is easy to handle.

The Wolf Classic 150

Honda may no longer build the CB125, but SYM has continued cranking them out, first in 125cc guise and now as a 150 (actually 149.4cc, but who's counting?) it markets here as the Wolf Classic.

If you're only mildly familiar with the original CB125S you'll be forgiven for looking at the Wolf and thinking, "Hey, cool old Honda," because that's what most people think. While we were photographing our test bike, a 50-something passerby was mildly incredulous when we told him our SYM wasn't a restored classic but a brand new bike.

That was a common reaction to the Wolf Classic while we had it, and we'd wager it's precisely what SYM is banking on in the U.S. market, where making small bikes hip seems to be a good — and necessary — marketing strategy.

And the Wolf is definitely hip-looking. The white paint on our test bike was lustrous, nicely set off by the contrasting red-painted frame and the seeming acres of chrome splashed on the Wolf. Granted, some of that chrome isn't of the heavy metal kind. The mirrors, for example, are chrome plastic, as are the instrument housings and turn signals.

Plastic or not, those bits look good, and combined with the Wolf's other vintage cues — like a nicely stitched two-up saddle, a low-slung exhaust and a pair of très-cool looking clip-on handle bars mounted above the upper triple clamp — they let the little Wolf shine in a café sort of way. It's sort of old school standard meets new school urban 20-something.

On the road

We picked up our Wolf Classic from Kansas City SYM dealer Mike Bergstrand at M & M Motorsports (www.kcscootertrends.com), who checked it over and gave it a few break-in miles before we took delivery.

Riders with memories of vintage singles will feel immediately at home on the Wolf Classic. Its small size makes it easy to swing a leg over, and a low, 30-inch seat height lets you plant both feet easily and firmly on the ground. An 80mph speedometer sits to the left, with a 14,000rpm tach to the right. The black clip-on bars are angled back nicely, giving a comfortable reach, and the traditional switchgear is easily deciphered, with turn signals, horn and headlamp high/low on the left, and an ignition kill switch and starter button on the right.

The ignition key is dead center on a nice little chromed strap bridging the speedo and tach, with a choke knob — yes, the Wolf is actually carbureted — poking up just behind the ignition switch.

Pull the choke full up, turn the key one stop, check for neutral, thumb the starter button and the little Wolf fires to life almost immediately.



Given its likely lean jetting, we expected the Wolf to be somewhat cold blooded, but we found it needed very little warm-up before we could shut off the choke and let it settle into a smooth idle. Restarts from warm were always sans choke, and when ambient temps were above 70 F our bike started easily without the choke. Electronic ignition surely helps.

The transmission on our bike was faultless, snicking into first with only a gentle push of the shift lever and shifting through its other four gears with equal ease. Pulling away from a stop is drama-free, requiring little more than a short twist of the throttle to bring the engine up to speed and a feathered release of the clutch to get rolling. With only 15hp on tap it'll never get away from you, and reasonable torque for such a small engine (SYM claims 9 ft/lb at 9,000rpm) makes it surprisingly hard to stall, even with second gear launches.

Moving down the road, the SYM displays its modest ambitions; it doesn't so much accelerate as incrementally build speed, the tach happily swinging up to 6,000rpm as you twist the throttle, the speedo only slowly rising as you work through the gears. Work it hard and you get a little more oomph, but it feels happiest with a gentle push rather than a full twist of the wrist.

Top speed is a claimed 65mph, a figure we never touched, if only to be nice to "our" SYM's engine, which had only 2 miles on it when we took delivery. A ceramic-coated cylinder (!) should relegate the traditional 500-mile new engine break-in routine to the dustbin (and provide superior



Tiny Keihin carb (top) feeds the fuel/air mixture. Oddly amusing warning on plastic exhaust cover.



SYM WOLF CLASSIC 150

Engine: 149.4cc air-cooled OHC single, 62mm x 49.5mm bore and stroke, 14.8hp @ 8,500rpm (claimed)

Top speed: 65.5mph (claimed)

Carburetion: Single Keihin

Transmission: 5-speed, chain final drive

Electrics: 12v, electronic ignition

Frame/wheelbase: Single downtube, engine as stressed member/49.2in (1,295mm)

Suspension: Telescopic forks front, dual shocks w/ adjustable preload rear

Brakes: Single 9.45in (240mm) disc front, 5.12in (130mm) SLS drum rear

Tires: 2.75 x 18in front, 3 x 19in rear

Weight (wet): 266lb (121kg)

Seat height: 30in (762mm)

Fuel capacity/MPG: 3.3gal (12.5ltr)/85mpg (claimed)

Price: \$2,999 (MSRP)



long-term durability), but we didn't want to be the ones proven wrong so we went easy on our little Wolf, limiting our top speed to 55mph.

A short, 49.2-inch wheelbase makes the Wolf a little twitchy at speed, but 18-inch rear and 19-inch front wheels help the bike move confidently through turns. It's no canyon carver, nor was it ever meant to be, but you never worry about the bike's ability to take a turn. And when it comes time to slow down, a 2-piston front caliper paired with a 9.5-inch disc (plumbed with a stainless steel brake line; nice touch) hauls the bike down to a stop quickly and confidently. It's linear and predictable, exactly what the entry rider needs.

And that's really where the Wolf shines, as an entry-level motorcycle. While some will be quick to dismiss the Wolf as a toy, we'd beg to differ. This is a real motorcycle, with all the

attributes of a real motorcycle, just in three-quarter scale. We think its small size and low power are its greatest assets, making the Wolf a bike anyone can ride with ease. It will never over-power you, giving the entry-level rider in particular the chance to learn to ride to his or her — and the bike's — limits. Even so, it's equally fun for the experienced rider looking for something light and easy to toss around town, a reminder that bigger

isn't always better, and that small-bore bikes aren't just for new riders.

Old school ergonomics make it easy to warm up to, and a touch of café styling gives it the sort of panache even the original CB125 never had. And while a \$2,999 MSRP isn't exactly chicken feed, we think the Wolf Classic delivers a lot in return. **MC**



Return of the simple single: The Wolf Classic 150 rides like a real motorcycle, and looks like one, as well.