

# GL vs. LT: BMW MAKES ANOTHER BID FOR THE CROWN

by Fred Rau



PHOTO BY NANCY FOOTE

**J**UST BY WAY of a quick recap, it's pretty safe to say that the Honda Gold Wing has held the "Greatest Luxury Touring Bike" title for 27½ of the last 29 years. The only chink in its record, by our count, at least, was the 18-month period just after the BMW K1200LT was first introduced, surprising everyone by toppling the GL1500 from its throne. But, of course, Honda fired back quickly with the introduction of the GL1800, and has pretty much had things all to themselves again ever since.

Which, of course, begged the question, "Would BMW take its lumps and back off, or would the usurper train for a comeback shot?" Well, the 2005 LT is the answer, and we've got something akin to a WWF "Ultimate Smackdown" on our hands, as the two greatest heavyweight luxury tourers ever built face off once again. And we can tell you up front it isn't going to be a knockout for either, but a controversial split-decision. Here's how we scored it:

## Engine—GL 1st, LT 2nd

The obvious question is, has the retuned new LT been able to match the power of the Gold Wing? On the surface, you'd immediately think it couldn't be done. The GL's motor is 50% larger than the LT's, and we all know the ditty, "There's no replacement for displacement." Still, we have to note that though Honda claims no changes to the GL1800 since we tested it in February of 2001, our latest dyno test showed nearly a five-horsepower and four lb. ft. loss of torque in the ensuing three years. At first we thought that might be a dyno error, but the performance testing also revealed 0.6 second increases in its quar-

ter-mile and 0–60 times, and a full 1.6-second longer 0–100 elapsed time, so evidently the dyno numbers are correct.

However, there's more to the story. The GL motor uses size rather than technical finesse to make power. Consider that the flat six is a single overhead cam engine with just two valves per cylinder. And these valves are all in a straight line, operated by direct-acting bucket tappets. This arrangement is used not for its efficiency, but to keep the cylinder head compact so as to retain cornering clearance. Torque is typically equal to cubic inches of displacement, so we could expect the GL to make 111.75 lb. ft., and it nearly does, with 104.1 at the rear wheel. Horsepower will vary considerably with the state of tune, but note that the GL is not highly tuned. When 600cc sportbikes may claim to make 200 hp per liter, the GL makes just 54.5/liter. It clearly isn't working very hard, but produces over 90 lb. ft. of torque right off idle for a locomotive-like thrust that moves its considerable weight with ease.

On the other hand, the LT is a dual overhead cam design with four valves per cylinder, a much more efficient design with higher hp potential. The LT also has a higher compression ratio, boosted this year from 10.8:1 to 11.5:1, compared to the GL's 9.8:1, and the greater efficiency of the four-valve head magnifies the difference.

In actual practice, the two engines make almost identical peak horsepower on a dyno, and run virtually neck-in-neck in performance testing. Top speeds measured less than one-half of one mile per hour different, and quarter-mile times were within .05 second of each other. Even the bikes' 0 to 100 mph times were only a half-second apart.

With everything else about these two engines so nearly on a par with each other, we gave the decision to the Honda based solely on its 30 extra lb. ft. of torque. After all, we figured, these are *touring* bikes, which will probably see lots of duty riding two-up with loaded luggage, or even pulling trailers, which are conditions under which that extra torque will be very noticeable, and appreciated. We've got to give BMW a big thumbs-up for their level of improvement in the LT's powerplant, but it still falls a little short of Honda's mighty six-cylinder.

## Suspension—LT 1st, GL 2nd

The last time we compared these two bikes (February 2001), we gave Honda the nod in the suspension department, so this rating represents a reversal of fortunes. This is due, at least in part, to BMW's addition of their new rear travel-dependent damping (TDD) suspension on the LT, with a new WP monoshock with adjustable preload.

We still like the pushbutton-adjustable rear suspension of the GL, with its two memory presets, but the Wing's suspension simply transmits a bit more road shock to its rider. Though we have for years considered the Wing's straight-down-the-highway comfort level exemplary in the industry, BMW has actually raised the bar another notch in this department. And while both bikes stay exceptionally well-planted during turns, the LT transitions a tad bit quicker.

The GL's new front anti-dive system seems to work just as well as BMW's Telelever system, so we couldn't give an edge to either here. But where the Wing's "feel" at the handlebars used to be superior, BMW has engineered out the rubbery, disconnected feel once associated with its steer-

ing, and the LT's handling is now as precise, if not a bit moreso (according to two out of three test riders) than the Honda's.

## Transmission—LT 1st, GL 2nd

Here again we have a reversal of our previous test. BMW has greatly improved the LT's transmission, with new and improved "high rise" teeth on all gears, improving mesh, lowering noise and increasing smoothness. The difference is astounding, producing shifts so effortless and quiet that you'll find it hard to believe.

The Wing's transmission is only slightly clunky, fairly easy to shift, with well-spaced ratios, and in normal use would seem perfectly acceptable—even very good—until you try it back-to-back with the new LT. Again, BMW has set a new standard.

## Brakes—GL 1st, LT 2nd

Last time we gave the LT the nod in brakes, mainly because the GL wasn't yet available for testing with ABS. Now that we could test the two ABS systems back-to-back, and BMW has switched from "fully-integrated" to "partially-integrated," we have to say we prefer the Honda's system.

In actual practice, the Wing stopped a scant 5-½" shorter than the LT from 60 mph, despite a 20-lb. weight disadvantage, but the biggest deciding factor was the amount of rider effort involved in achieving a maximum stop on the LT. To get maximum braking efficiency, our test rider had to literally stand up on the rear brake pedal.

However (and this is important), just as we were going to press, we heard about a recall for rear brake master cylinder seals on LTs (see Bulletins). Sure enough, on checking with BMW, we found we had one of the recalled units. That being the case, it's quite possible the LT could have won this one, but parts weren't available in time for us to find out for this article, so we're letting the results stand for now. Also, because a "win" by BMW in this category would not have affected the ultimate outcome.

## Handling—LT 1st, GL 2nd

Chalk up another win for the BMW engineering staff. Three years ago it was a unanimous decision in favor of the GL's "more precise steering" and "sense of stability." Naturally, none of that has changed on the latest GL, it is just that the LT has improved so much in this area.

BMW claims 0.5° more rake and 15mm more trail on this newest LT, and there's no denying the changes have had a considerable effect on the LT's handling, particularly in tight, twisting road conditions.

In addition, we couldn't help but notice that our 2005 model had been quietly switched over to bias-belted tires from the



Though the GL sports a lean angle most touring bikes would envy, it could be even better if not for the wide engine. And as stable as it is in the turns, the LT is even a little bit better.

previous radials. Though we all tend to assume that better handling always comes from radial tires, this is the second bike we've tested in recent months that runs exactly contrary to that belief.

Whatever the case, the changes in tires, rake, trail and suspension all work together to give the new LT exactly the same advantage we gave three years ago to the Honda—namely, greater steering precision and more effortless transitions from side-to-side.

## Styling—LT 1st, GL 2nd

Before all you Gold Wing owners out there start flaming us, let us just say that this wasn't our call. Everywhere we took the two bikes, we simply took informal polls, from motorcyclists and non-riders alike, on which one people like better. Oddly enough, when we did this same thing three years ago, the Wing won, by a very small margin. This time, the LT won, and by a very large mar-

gin. Maybe Dave Robb's design was just a little ahead of its time?

## Riding Impression—LT 1st, GL 2nd

This category came very close to a tie, but the LT's much improved handling took a slight edge over the GL's low-end grunt. In addition, because of the kind of bikes these are, we had to pay a lot of attention here to the input of our co-riders. Three different passengers racked up a total of over 3000 miles on the back seats, and the consensus was in favor of the LT, mainly for a more comfortable saddle. However, it should also be noted that the passengers felt that the wind protection was superior on the Wing, no matter what adjustment position the windshields were set at. Also, though the testing was done in summertime temperatures, our passengers liked the fact that the LT offered heated seats and a heated passenger backrest—options not available



The LT's lean angle has been compromised a bit by the new centerstand, but it's still no slouch, and actually feels steadier and more controlled during extreme maneuvers than even the GL.