'The ZX-6R laps quicker than the CBR and instils spade-loads of confidence'

★ WORLD EXCLUSIVE

Fist fight!

The supersport brawlers from Kawasaki, Honda, Suzuki and Yamaha brought together for the first time. There's more testosterone than a fight in a pub car park...

BY MICHAEL NEEVES **PICTURES BY** HOWARD BOYLAN



THE gloves are off for the closest, most vicious bout of the year – 600cc supersports are, once again, THE most competitive class. With the exception of Suzuki whose already brilliant, new-for-2004 GSX-R600, remains mechanically unchanged next year, all the Japanese manufacturers have been busy training their 600cc fighters.

But while Yamaha and Honda have taken the more subtle approach by refining their diamond-like R6 and CBR600RR, it is Kawasaki who is threatening to steal the middleweight title with its all-new ZX-6R.

From our previous experiences of riding each bike on its own we reckoned the radical new Kawasaki had what it takes to be the champion in 2005. But there was only one way to find out for sure – to ride them all side by side.

In this world exclusive group test we've taken to the sun-drenched roads of southern Spain to find out what these finely-honed 600s will be like to live with when you pull them out of the garage on a Sunday morning. We also let them loose on the circuit of Almeria, to get an idea of how they'll cope on the ragged edge at your next trackday. And finally, we put them on a dyno and blasted them down our test strip to see how fast they all are and to measure how much power they really make.

Seconds out...

THE CBR (left) has become the turbo-nutter track-tool of the 600 class – but can it match the ZX-6R on the road?

HONDA'S 6kg weight loss contributes to its harder punch

ZX-6R v CBR

LAST year's ZX-6R was the tool to have around the race track. Like the current ZX-10R it was light, nimble, electrifying to ride and very, very fast.

But the CBR600RR still took top honours in our 2004 supersport group test for one very good reason: it was a better road bike.

Now that's all changed. In short, the ZX-6R has gone all sensible on us. Jump aboard and you'll notice the sumptuous seat padding, a larger (and dare I say ZZ-R-style?) fairing to keep the elements at bay, a relaxed riding position to keep your joints from seizing, and a newly-shaped tank for the less Brad Pitt-shaped of us to rest our bellies on.



ZX-6R ride is less frenzied than before

And there's more. Go to pull away and first gear slips into place in utter silence, while the engine internals seem to spin in single cream. In fact it's only when you're the naughty side of 10,000rpm that you're greeted by the raw, familiar ZX vibes, signalling that you're still on a snarling, green 600. A class act.

There's still the familiar, meat-laden midrange we've come to know and love, but you'd hardly know it's there, such is the turbine smoothness of this engine. But despite the Kawasaki's new sensible shoes, it still knows how to party. There's no sudden power step, but fierce acceleration starts to take hold around 9000rpm and charges relentlessly to 14,000rpm.

So what has Honda done to retain its title? Well, in addition to fitting those racy-looking upside-down forks and radial-mount brakes, they've sent their CBR600RR to Fat Fighters to lose a significant 6kg. The results are incredible.

With less bulk, the CBR is far more responsive when you tweak the light action throttle. It's like it's gained another 10bhp (which is hasn't, power remains the same). It surges forward with 750-like ferocity, a bit like the old ZX-6R in fact. And, just like the old Kawasaki, it feels firmer than before, turns sharper, steers quicker and the suspension feeds back more of what its Bridgestone BT-014s are doing in the corners.

On the road the ZX-6R is the more comfy of the two but not by much. The CBR's tank is more slender so it's easier to move around on.

On the track, roles have been completely reversed. The CBR600RR is now the hardcore nutter – it's lighter and easier to chuck about and, thanks to its weight loss, has proper punch.

Meanwhile the ZX-6R actually laps faster than the Honda but its extra size and weight has blunted the exquisite feel you got from the old ZX. It still instils spade-loads of confidence, it's just not as track-focused as it used to be.

The stoppers can't match the stunning ones on the Honda, but the ZX-6R is more composed and level when hard on the brakes.





COMFY bar position; sturdy USD forks

GSX-R v ZX-6R

One for the nutters!

THE beautiful black and silver GSX-R might not be the fastest but it's easily one of the most astonishing sports bikes on the planet. It reminds you why you love riding so much.

But here's why the ZX-6R is a better road bike: the Suzuki is a scratcher's delight, but if you want to trot across Europe to the Nurburgring, take the ZX. If the GSX-R's high-set footpegs don't get you wishing for the more relaxed Kawasaki's cockpit after a tankful of fuel, the vibes from that raw 599cc devil motor will do you in.

The ZX-6R is the bike you'd take to the shops and, like the R6, is so un-intimidating it's also great for less experienced riders. The GSX-R is too mad to live with, too much of the time.

The Suzuki has some serious grunt low down. There's no need to stir the super-smooth gearbox (as good as the Kawasaki's) to make speedy progress, and being the lightest bike here makes the GSX-R easy to flick around.

Despite its hardcore image it is impossibly easy to ride fast. It takes virtually zero effort to get the Suzuki leaned hard over into a corner and hold it there ready to fire out the other side.

Then there's the glorious GSX-R growl when you're on the gas. If the blood-curdling wail at 13,000rpm doesn't get you going, then I suggest checking your pulse to make sure you're still with us.

The only flaw is the Suzuki doesn't have the top-end surge of the others. It's got a nice fat mid-range, but the power fizzles out past 12,000rpm, where the ZX-6R is still pulling hard.

So, if you want an easy-to-live-with 600, go for the ZX-6R. If you're a maniac, it's the Suzuki every time.



RIDICULOUSLY easy to get on its side



R6 v ZX-6R

Fastest on track

IT'S a shame Yamaha didn't update the R6's styling because it's only when you ride it that it immediately reveals how fantastically brilliant it is.

It's the easiest bike to get on with – everything feels so natural. You could rack up serious mileage in comfort. The bars are set high, the seat is nicely padded and the pegs are low without sacrificing ground clearance. It's comfier than the ZX.

Although a revvy little minx, the R6's screaming motor is still smooth and packs a decent midrange.

The R6's top-end rush is in the same league as the green machine. Accelerate hard out of a first or second gear turn and the front wheel clears for take off, while you get shoved back in the seat. It all settles down in the higher gears but when you're pinning it like a loon in fifth gear you still have to laugh out loud.

But the two bikes' gearboxes are a world apart – the R6's clunky transmission can be heard a mile off.

It's on the track where the R6 impresses most – it's so well balanced, and a joy to grab by the scruff off the neck and hammer on to its side. The feedback almost makes the ZX's steering feel vague by comparison.

The R6's handling is phenomenal and much of this comes from the new upside-down forks and bigger contact patch when cornering on the taller-profile 120/70 front tyre.

It's fun, too. Although the Kawasaki is just two-tenths of a second behind on the track it doesn't feel quite as electrifying to ride as the R6.

It's just missing the X-factor of that striking, lime-green ZX-6R. Looks-wise the Kawasaki wins hands down and those extra cubes make it easier to ride on the road, too.



FASTEST on the track – by two tenths





PEGS are high, steering is ultra-light

GSX-R is guaranteed to make your hair stand on end

PERFORMANCE

WE can't yet give you complete rear wheel power results, thanks to a dodgy Spanish dyno, but the picture that seemed to emerge was the ZX-6R leading the pack by about 4bhp from the R6, with the Honda and Suzuki following closely behind. Our upcoming full UK test of all the 600s will, however, have a complete comparative analysis of each bike's power and torque curves, measured on the same dyno we always use, so we'll also know how different each is to last year's version.

All bikes wore Bridgestone BT-002 supersport tyres for timed laps around Almeria, and were ridden by Spanish Supersport champ Oriol Fernandez, who also decided track settings.



YAMAHA R6

Top speed: 162mph
Standing 1/4-mile: 11.1secs @130mph
Lap time: 1:49.14

TRACK SETTINGS
FORKS
Pre-load: Full in
Rebound: 1 click from full in
Compression: 3 clicks from full in
REAR SHOCK
Pre-load: 5 clicks from full out
Rebound: 5 clicks from full in
Compression: Full in

HONDA CBR600RR

Top speed: 161mph
Standing 1/4-mile: 11.3secs @ 128mph
Lap time: 1:50.10

TRACK SETTINGS
FORKS
Pre-load: Full in
Rebound: 1 turn from full in
Compression: Full in
REAR SHOCK
Pre-load: 8 clicks from full out
Rebound: 1.5 turns from full in
Compression: 6 turns from full in

KAWASAKI ZX-6R

Top speed: 166mph
Standing 1/4-mile: 11.2secs @ 132mph
Lap time: 1:49.35

TRACK SETTINGS
FORKS
Pre-load: 2 rings showing
Rebound: 1.25 turns from fully in
Compression: 0.5 turns from full in
REAR SHOCK
Pre-load: 6 lines showing
Rebound: 8 clicks from full in
Compression: 0.5 turns from full in

SUZUKI GSX-R600

Top speed: 163mph
Standing 1/4-mile: 11.03secs @ 128mph
Lap time: 1:49.96

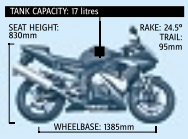
TRACK SETTINGS
FORKS
Pre-load: Full in
Rebound: 0.25 turns from full in
Compression: 0.75 turns from full in
REAR SHOCK
Pre-load: 7 lines showing
Rebound: 1.5 turns from full in
Compression: 0.5 turns from full in

YAMAHA R6

★★★★½

COST:	£6599
POWER (claimed):	126bhp
WEIGHT (claimed):	163kg
TORQUE (claimed):	49ftlb

Available: Now
Colours: Red, blue, black, Rossi replica 'R46'
Insurance group (est): 15 (of 17)
Info: Yamaha, 01932-358-000



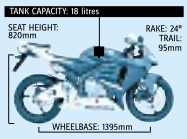
TECHNICAL SPEC
Engine: Liquid-cooled, 600cc (66.5mm x 44.5mm) dohc, 16v four-stroke in-line four. Fuel injection. Six gears
Chassis: Aluminium twin spar
Front suspension: 43mm USD forks, fully-adjustable
Rear suspension: Single shock, fully-adjustable
Tyres: 120/70 x 17 F, 180/55 x 17 R
Brakes: 2 x 310mm front discs with 4-piston radial-mount calipers, 220mm rear disc with single-piston caliper

HONDA CBR600RR

★★★★★

COST (est):	£7400
POWER (claimed):	115bhp
WEIGHT (claimed):	163kg
TORQUE (claimed):	49ftlb

Available: End of December
Colours: Red/blue, black, blue
Insurance group: 15 (of 17)
Info: Honda, 01753-590500



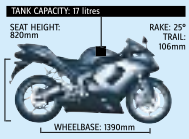
TECHNICAL SPEC
Engine: Liquid-cooled, 599cc (67mm x 42.5mm) dohc, 16v four-stroke in-line four. Fuel injection. Six gears
Chassis: Aluminium twin spar
Front suspension: 41mm USD forks, fully-adjustable
Rear suspension: Single shock, fully-adjustable
Tyres: 120/70 x 17 F, 180/55 x 17 R
Brakes: 2 x 310mm front discs with 4-piston radial-mount calipers, 220mm rear disc with single-piston caliper

KAWASAKI ZX-6R

★★★★★

COST:	£7300
POWER (claimed):	128bhp
WEIGHT (claimed):	164kg
TORQUE (claimed):	49ftlb

Available: Early January
Colours: Green, blue, titanium
Insurance group (est): 15 (of 17)
Info: Kawasaki, 01628-856750



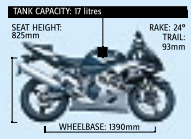
TECHNICAL SPEC
Engine: Liquid-cooled, 636cc (68 x 43.8mm) dohc, 16v four-stroke in-line four. Fuel injection. Six gears
Chassis: Aluminium twin spar
Front suspension: 41mm USD forks, fully-adjustable
Rear suspension: Single shock, fully-adjustable
Tyres: 120/65 x 17 F, 180/55 x 17 R
Brakes: 2 x 300mm front discs with 4-piston radial mount calipers, 220mm rear disc with single-piston caliper

SUZUKI GSX-R600

★★★★☆

COST:	£6849
POWER (claimed):	118bhp
WEIGHT (claimed):	161kg
TORQUE (claimed):	52ftlb

Available: Now
Colours: Blue/white, red/black, silver/black
Insurance group (est): 15 (of 17)
Info: Suzuki, 01892-707001



TECHNICAL SPEC
Engine: Liquid-cooled, 599cc (67mm x 42mm) dohc, 16v four-stroke in-line four. Fuel injection. Six gears
Chassis: Aluminium twin spar
Front suspension: 43mm USD forks, fully-adjustable
Rear suspension: Single shock, fully-adjustable
Tyres: 120/70 x 17 F, 180/55 x 17 R
Brakes: 2 x 300mm front discs with 4-piston radial-mount calipers, 220mm rear disc with twin-piston caliper

VERDICT

RIDE any one of these bikes in isolation and you'll swear it's the best thing since paid holiday. But we have a winner – the Kawasaki ZX-6R.

Although it's not the balls-out track tool it used to be, the ZX-6R still has what it takes to satisfy the most speed-crazed of us around the circuit. And it's a relatively civilised, comfy road bike.

The Honda comes just behind. Shaving off that weight has given it crisper acceleration and better handling. It's a great all-round road bike, but is eclipsed by the ZX-6R's better comfort, more midrange and toys, like the slipper clutch.

The R6 lacks the 'specialness' of the Honda and the Kawasaki. It was fastest on the track, it is incredible value for money but doesn't have the X factor which makes you desire one.

If we lived on the track, the Suzuki would win. It's fast, fun, and flattering, but too extreme for regular road use. And it's cheaper than the CBR and ZX-6R.



KAWASAKI'S ZX-6R: the best on the road, and still a stunning track tool