FORWARD INTO THE PAST

1996 LOBO 250R

Mark Ehrhardt's Honda goes back to the future

By the visionaries at *Dirt Wheels*

❑ Like Dickens said so long ago, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Back in '89 you could easily say that about the ATV industry. We were still in the midst of a media backlash, primarily against three-wheeled ATVs, but one that eventually took a toll on the industry as a whole. We faced an unprecedented wave of government investigations and cries for action against ATVers and ATVing. The manufacturers were under pressure from the government and the legions of money-grubbing lawyers who saw a ripe target in the high-performance ATV market.

In more ways than one, it was a watershed year for the ATV industry. It was also the last year Honda produced what remains today as the single most popular high-performance quad ever made—the Honda FourTrax 250R. If not for the Consumer Product Safety Commission and the eventual Consent Decree agreement with the manufacturers (which effectively banned three-wheeler sales and severely limited the manufacturers' involvement with high-performance ATVs and off-road racing), there is no telling what direction quad racing might have taken.

THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW

Suffice it say that even with the demise of the 250R back in '89, racing not only survived, it has even managed to prosper. Through the dedication and determination of legions of ATV enthusiasts, the sport has bounced back to the point where an entire cottage industry of aftermarket companies thrives on filling the need for making these older machines competitive.

Everything from accessory pipes, porting, wheels, tires, axles and even replacement frames for these outdated race quads have been selling like hot cakes ever since they disappeared from the showroom floors over six years ago.

With stock 250R frames getting to be upwards of six years old, replacement frames are fast becoming the rage on the racing circuit these days. Laeger, JP, Triple EEE, and DRD&D are a few of the aftermarket companies making replacement frames for the 250R. One of the most unusual and innovative designs we have seen is the new multi-adjustable DRD&D LOBO chassis for the 250R.

We first took a look at this all-new chassis design back in the April '95 issue. The LOBO chassis incorporated the latest CAD (Computer Aided Design) technology derived from Indy car racing and translated it over to quad racing. The LOBO chassis is the first to use a sealed linear steering mechanism that virtually eliminates "bump" steer on the vehicle. Bump steer is the tendency of a vehicle to steer in the direction of any bumps it hits. Less, or zero, bump steer means that a vehicle goes exactly where you point it.

On the back end, the LOBO chassis uses a unique "layed down" shock approach that uses a pull-rod-actuated, linear rising-rate spring and damper. The amount of adjustment with this system is almost unlimited. Combined with suspension adjustments, this gives the LOBO chassis more adjustability than anything currently out there.

National Championship contender Mark Ehrhardt has been racing a LOBO-chassied Honda 250R on the National circuit this year, and *Dirt Wheels* had an opportunity to try out his machine on his practice track located in Hemet, California. Having only gotten a look at the machine previously, we were intrigued to see if it was as good as it looks.

COULD THIS HAVE BEEN THE '96 HONDA 250R?

With the arrested state of development of the 250R chassis, we will never know exactly what direction Honda

◄ The heart of the LOBO chassis is its almost infinite adjustability. Adjustments for castor, camber and toe-in on the front end are quick and easy with the heim joint A-arms. Doug Roll, the creator of the LOBO chassis, has come out with a manual detailing adjustments of the chassis and suspension for varying track conditions.

LOBO 250R

might have taken it and what it might have looked like had it continued in production, but we'll venture to guess that the LOBO chassis might very well have been the direction Honda could have taken. If not with a production machine, then possibly with their factory team racer had it evolved.

First of all, the LOBO's zero bump steer is something that is a definite improvement over the stock 250R chassis. When you don't have to worry about what direction a bump might steer you, you can better concentrate on where you are going. The downside to all this adjustability is that unless you know exactly what you are doing, you could end up hopelessly lost and actually be worse off than before.

To that extent, we feel Honda probably would not have ventured into making a chassis as adjustable as the LOBO's. Be that as it may, after taking Ehrhardt's machine out for a test ride, we came away with a whole new appreciation of where technology might have led us had there been an evolution of the 250R.

TEST RIDE REPORT

The first opinion of our test riders was that the LOBO 250R feels like it sits on the high side, especially since there doesn't seem to be a lot of suspension sag when you first sit on it. Until we got the hang of it, the steering felt awkward. It was quick—almost on the twitchy side. Tight turns were taken fine, but high-speed straights gave the impression the rear end wanted to come around. After coming back in from some early laps, we talked with Ehrhardt about it.

One problem with any quick steering machine is that it is so precise that you had better be sure you want to go in the direction the handlebars are pointed. Mark had set the machine up for his own particular style of riding, which is very precise steering. It was dialed-in for the tight turns and quick jumps of stadium type courses that Mark had been riding. Therefore you needed to be set up and leaning into the turn before you got to the apex, because by the time you got there, it was too late to start your lead.

The LOBO chassis' handling was so responsive that it took some getting used to at first. There was absolutely no bump steer whatsoever on the machine and not a hint of pushing in the turns. This allowed the rider to dive for the inside line, even in a bump-infested corner.

Ehrhardt uses a Duncan Racing/Paul Turner engine package on his LOBO race quad. It pumps out impressive mid to top-end power over a very broad range.

Once we changed our technique, we were able to anticipate the turns before we got to the apex and leaned in accordingly. Since the steering was so quick and precise, it instantly improved our lap times. We suddenly found we could drive much deeper into the corner and exit out harder.

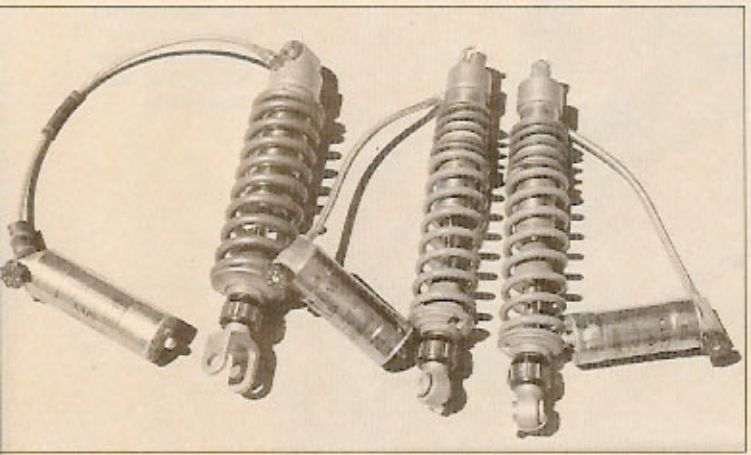
The harder we rode, the better we liked it. There was absolutely no push in the front end in the turns. By push, we mean the tendency of the front end to continue going straight when you turn the bars. You could literally steer the machine with the handlebars and not have to resort to using the throttle or brakes to get it to corner.

On long, sweeping turns, you could pitch it if you wanted to, but there generally was no need to because you could keep traction to the rear tires and continue driving ahead. You could drive into the corners, pitch it and drive out.

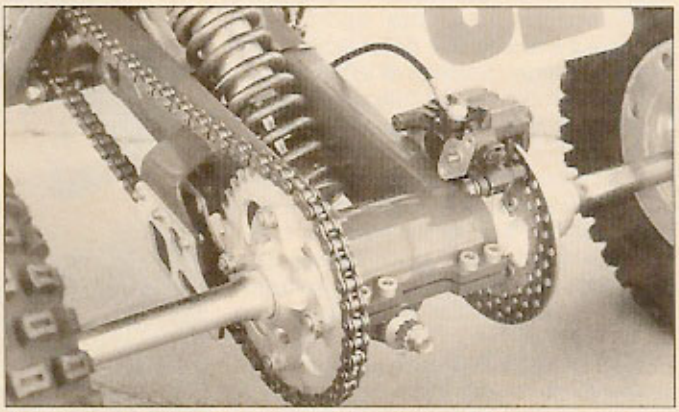
As a matter of fact, you could dive to the inside line extremely easily and almost at will. With the wide range of adjustability of the LOBO chassis, it would be easy enough to set up the handling to be more forgiving at high speeds or not as quick handling in the rough.

PULL RODS & ADJUSTABLE SUSPENSION

One item that will change between Ehrhardt's machine and the new production LOBO chassis' will be the adjustable pull rod mechanism on the back end. Instead of being infinitely adjustable, it will be changed to a fixed rod system that uses set rod lengths for the chassis adjustments. LOBO designer Doug Roll felt that the suspension and tuning options were so great on the back end that unless a rider knew



Custom Axis did the shocks on Mark's race quad. They feature adjustable compression, rebound and pre-load on both the front and rear suspension.



See that nut and bolt just below the middle of the rear axle bearing carrier? That allows you to adjust the leverage ratio on the back end of the LOBO chassis. In order to make tuning the rear suspension easier, future LOBO chassis will use a set- length rod instead of the adjustable version Mark has.

The DRD&D designed LOBO chassis and custom Axis suspension makes Ehrhardt's machine a dream to ride through gnarly, whooped-out bumps or off of supercross-style jumps. It is very responsive to rider input and will turn on a dime and give you back nine cents change.

exactly what he was doing, and where he was at all times, he could easily find himself totally lost and not know what direction to take to remedy it.

Doug feels that using different rod lengths for differing track conditions will make the system more user friendly and easier to keep track of. To that end, Roll has come up with a new owner's manual for the LOBO chassis that explains in detail how to adjust the chassis, set up the shocks, and make any chassis or suspension-related adjustment to the vehicle.

The shocks themselves are specialty items manufactured by Custom Axis, which makes the Penske team's shocks for their Indy car racers. The Custom Axis shocks are one additional reason the LOBO chassis remains one of the most adjustable units available. The shocks feature hand-built, aluminum reservoirs both on the front and rear end, with compression, rebound, and pre-load adjustments.

The overall feel of the suspension is one of plushness, and the ability to soak up big hits as well as small stutter bumps was nothing short of amazing. You were never concerned about where or how you landed with this suspension. Both ends sucked up the bumps with no problems. The back end didn't kick or want to throw you sideways if it took an unexpected hit, and it was plush, predictable and confidence-inspiring.

Handling off of launcher jumps felt very good, and you didn't have to use your arms and legs to soak up the landing like you might on a standard chassis. It felt like you could dial in the shocks and chassis to virtually any track conditions you could ever encounter. About our only complaint was that the suspension did not like to pre-jump, jump or compress the suspension prior to launching off a jump. That could be adjusted for by resetting the suspension damping.

ODDS & ENDS

Ehrhardt's Duncan Racing motor was set up for crisp midrange power

LOBO 250R

Riken Radials custom-grooved, getting the call up front.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Overall, we can honestly say after riding it that Mark Ehrhardt's LOBO 250R reflects what might very well have been had Honda continued production of this legendary high-performance machine. Actually, in its wide range of adjustability, it is probably much closer to what a "factory" quad racer would have been like if quad racing had continued at the factory level. In that respect, we really are seeing what amounts to a factory ride becoming available to anyone with the knowledge, skill and money to afford it.

With a spec LOBO chassis selling for $3495, this is one factory ride that can still be considered a bargain. Now all you have to do is find a good used 250R to build it around.

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