

● The BMW R90/6 skims over long stretches of road with all the ease and grace of a zephyr blowing eastward. Under a canopy of sun and clouds, BMW twins are supposed to *hum*, if for no other reason than BMWs have always *hummed* for roadtesters. But the 898cc model is different; turning a leisurely 3500 rpm at an indicated 65 mph, the R90/6 only confronts the rider with faint tappet ticking, which breaks through the wind noise.

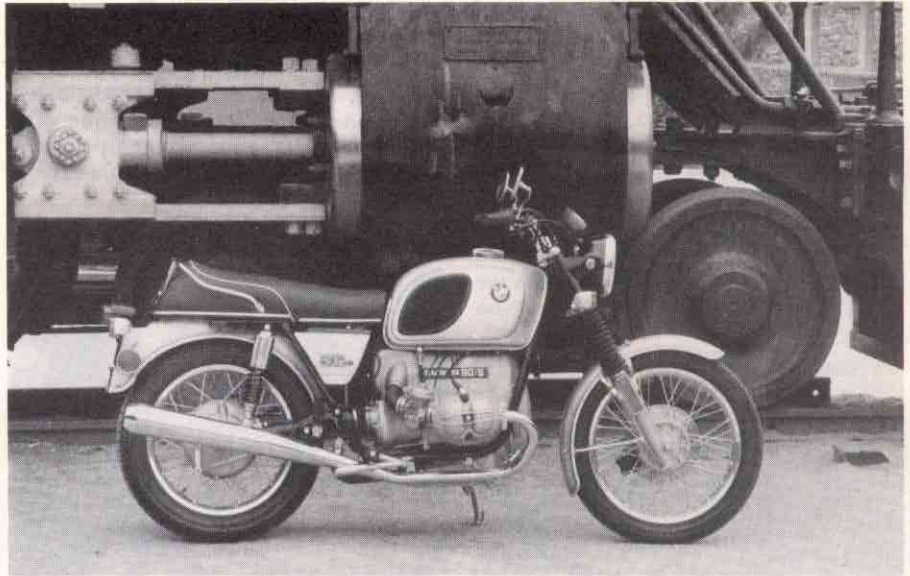
The engine lopes inside its smoothest range, leaving the rider unscathed by gnawing vibration. The front suspension smothers bumps. Irregularities, such as pavement-implanted reflectors, attack the front wheel, but the jiggles and swats disappear into eight inches of fork travel and never survive to reach the handlebars. The saddle is soft without being mushy; this perch can support one-day journeys of more than 500 miles without chaf-

ing the rider to a halt. And when the R90/6 is equipped with a 5.8-gallon tank, the rider can sniff contemptuously at numerous receding gas stations. The odometer will step off 225 miles before there is need for dipping into the reserve supply. All of this is part of the BMW tradition: machines which sweep the road beneath them, rushing toward points distant like civilized steam locomotives.

That's what you expect from BMW; heart of steam engine, wings of a zephyr. Any motorcyclist carries a whole set of

expectations to a new machine, especially one which wears a mantle of tradition like the BMW. You anticipate that the motorcycle will be finished and detailed better than other machines, because BMWs have always been so. You expect to see quality components that keep faith with the past. You expect civility, cleanliness, comfort, and reliability. Perhaps most of all, you assume that a BMW will *last*, for these German motorcycles are not disposable items. A BMW is for keeping. These things you expect. And get.

PHOTOGRAPHY: VINCE LISANTI



Cycle Test

BMW

R90/6

BMW's 900cc roadster has the power delivery of a steam engine, the longevity of a locomotive, and the luxury of a private compartment.

In 1974 you carry another set of expectations to the R90/6. Anyone who has been exposed to an R90S might guess the R90/6 would be more comfortable than the S-bike though less a handler; to be smoother than the sports version but less powerful; to be the equal of the R90S in the precise, notchy ways all mechanical elements work together. If you thought the R90/6 would be only a slightly softer, less sporting version of the R90S, you're in for a surprise. The R90/6 is something less and something different than the S-machine.

Cycle staffers warmly remember the R90S, the road test of which was published in the March 1974 issue. That motorcycle (and staff members' perceptions of it) has become one standard of comparison for other motorcycles. The S-engine, for example, was wonderfully smooth and powerful above 3500 rpm; quarter-mile times at the dragstrip verified its potency. A 440-yard trip which ends in 13.07 seconds at 102-plus mph is no stone drag. And out on the highway, the R90S would leave a Z-1 Kawasaki in any throttle roll-on contest in any gear.

Owners of Kawasaki's big four need not

fear R90/6 BMWs. The standard flat twin suffers considerably in comparison to the R90S (or the Z-1 for that matter). The best our test R90/6 could manage through the timing lights was a 13.71-second tour with a terminal speed of 95.84 mph. That's a .64-second and six-miles-per-hour difference, and those margins are significant.

Back in March 1974 *Cycle* noted that minor mechanical differences between the R90S and R90/6 "deliver equally minor performance gains." Informal test data gathered at the time showed that an R90/6 was only three-tenths and four miles per hour slower through the quarter-mile markers than our test R90S (13 seconds @ 102 mph vs 13.3 seconds @ 98 mph). And back in March we said just that. However, our current R90/6 test bike, which gave no indication of being off-song, and which received a tune-up shortly before dragstrip testing, never came close

to running a 13.3. In fact, our figures of 13.71 @ 95.8 mph square nicely with the ones supplied in BMW's owner's manual. So on the basis of our experience with the present test bike, *Cycle* must amend its earlier statement concerning R90/6 performance: minor mechanical differences account for significant performance differences.

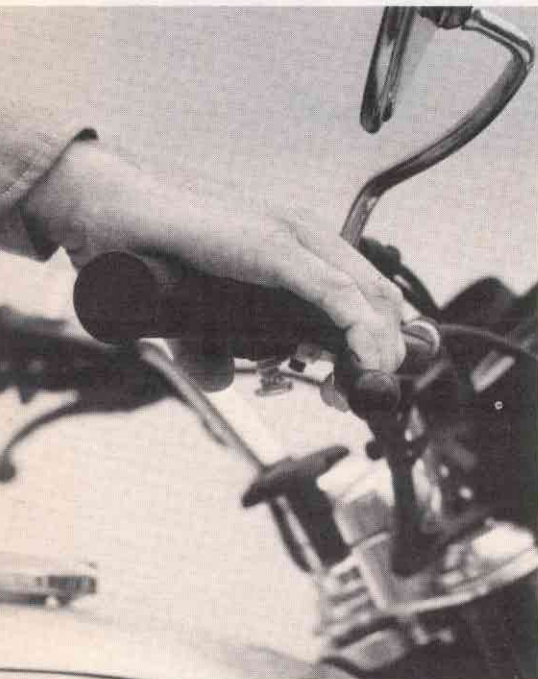
The R90S draws its fuel-and-air mixture through 38mm Dell'Orto pumper carburetors, while the standard R90 makes do with 32mm constant-velocity vacuum-slide instruments. The R90/6 squeezes its mix with a 9:1 compression ratio whereas the Sport uses 9.2:1 pistons. The common 900cc roadster pulls slightly shorter gearing (3.09:1) than the tallish 3.00:1 gear fitted to the Sport. That's it. The S-bike has no trick cams and no huge valves. The performance hike comes out of the carburetion and compression, for the steep gearing works to the R90S's detriment in the quarter-mile.

Cycle staffers have no doubt that the R90S tested in the March 1974 issue was a well-honed stock R90S. Clearly, it was a near-perfect zero-defect machine; in short, the bike was as good an R90S as anyone could ever hope to own. Our R90/6 test bike represents, we believe, a more nearly average example of the roadster. Consequently, we are not greatly surprised by the wide gap between a very sharp high-performance R90S and a good average R90/6.

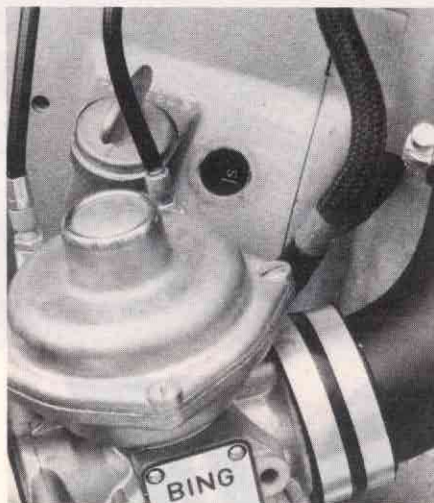
The R90/6 wasn't as smooth as the R90S over the broad range of engine speeds. The R90S entered its glass-placid stage above 3500 rpm and never vibrated above that figure. Like the Sport, the R90/6 engine drummed below 3500 rpm, and then fell smooth. At about 4500 rpm a different sort of vibration became noticeable, a higher frequency buzzing which fell short of being really annoying. But the R90/6 would buzz the handlebars and pegs right up to its redline.

The post-4500 rpm vibrations in the end proved less a problem than might at first be suspected. The R90/6 has so much low-down power—in the 3500 to 4500 band—that most of the time test riders naturally confined engine speeds to that slot. Moreover, this smoothest period in the engine meshed perfectly with reasonable highway speeds in fourth and fifth gears. Fourth gear at 3500 brought up an indicated 53-mph on the speedometer while 4500 in fifth showed about 75 miles per hour. The R90/6 has enough torque at 3500 rpm to lever the bike forward with a rush, whether it's a fourth-gear shot out of a slow-moving traffic pocket, or a fifth-cog pass on the freeway. As miles accumulated on the odometer the R90/6 smoothed a bit in the upper reaches of its rev-range, but the standard roadster failed to match the R90S's turbine-like smoothness.

The very freshness of the R90/6 un-



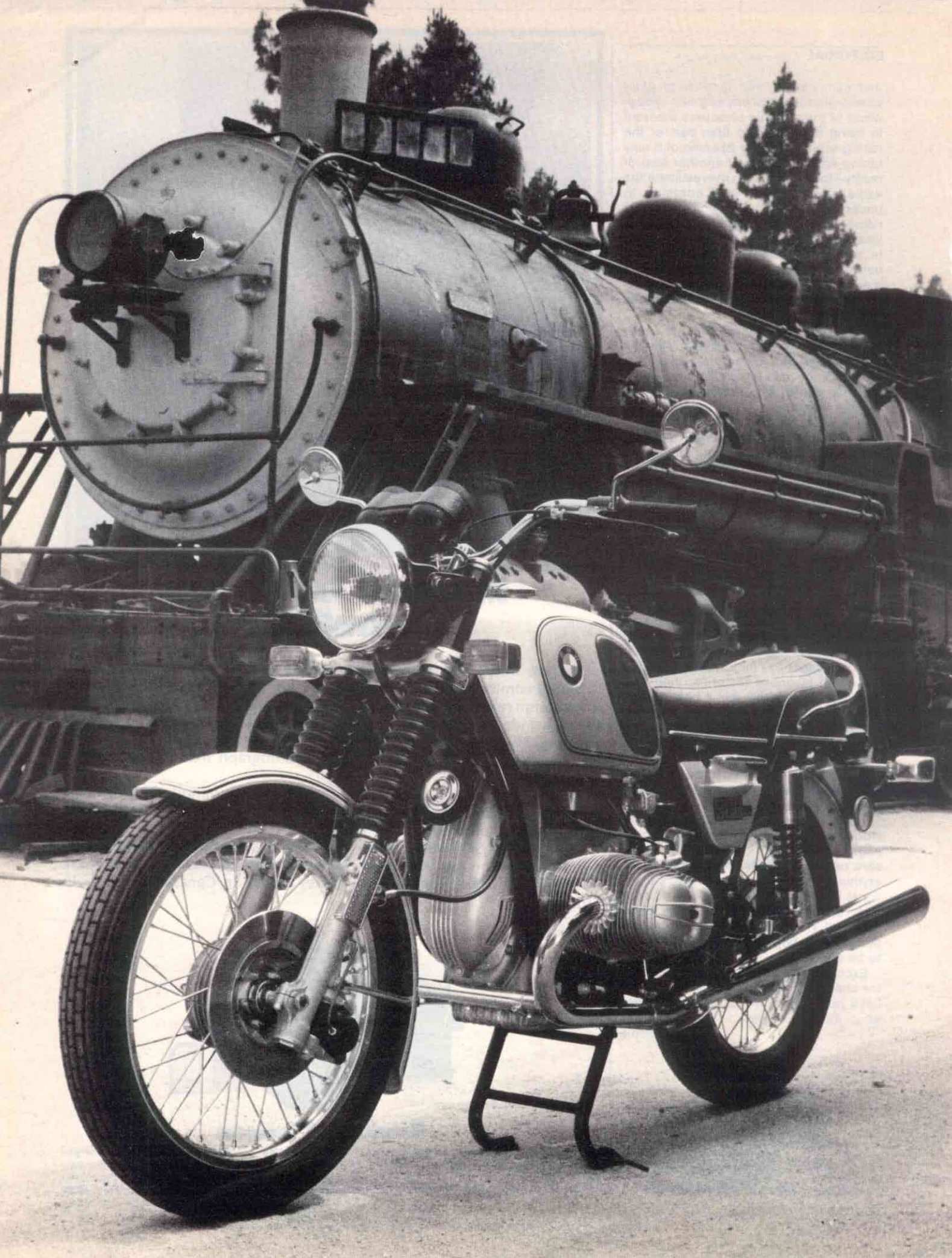
Small hands, poor grip, hard pull. Adjustments at master cylinder and caliper cured problem.



Strobe-light timing, as other servicing, is easy; basic service intervals are 5000 miles.



Traditional bother with shins and carburetors remains; boots are the only practical answer.





BMW R90/6

Price, suggested retail..... \$2930 POE East Coast
 \$2950 POE West Coast

Tire, front 3.25 x 19 Metzeler
 rear 4.00 x 18 Metzeler

Brake, front..... Disc 1.375 in. x 10.24 in. x 2
 (35mm x 260mm x 2)
 rear 7.87 in. x 1.18 in. (200mm x 30mm)

Brake swept area 105.5 sq. in. (680.5 sq. cm)

Specific brake loading 6.2 lbs./sq. in.

Engine type OHV opposed twin

Bore and stroke 3.54 in. x 2.78 in.
 (90mm x 70.6mm)

Piston displacement 54.78 cu. in. 898cc

Compression ratio 9.0:1

Carburetion 2; 32mm Bing CV

Air filtration Dry paper

Ignition Battery and coil

Bhp @ rpm NA*

Torque @ rpm NA*

Mph/1000 rpm, top gear 16.3 mph

Fuel capacity (includes .5-gal. reserve) 5.8-gal. (24 l)

Oil capacity (with filter) 4.75 pts. (2.25 l)

Transmission oil capacity 1.7 pt. (900cc)

Electrical power 280W

Battery 12v 25ah

Gear ratios, overall (1) 13.60 (2) 8.84 (3) 6.40
 (4) 5.16 (5) 4.64

Primary transmission Helical gear

Secondary transmission...Driveshaft, crown wheel
 and pinion, 3.09

Wheelbase 57.5 in. (146.5cm)

Seat height 30 in. (76.2cm)

Ground clearance 7 in. (17.8cm)

Curb weight 484 lbs. (220kg.)

Test weight 654 lbs. (298kg.)

Instruments tachometer, speedometer,
 odometer, tripmeter

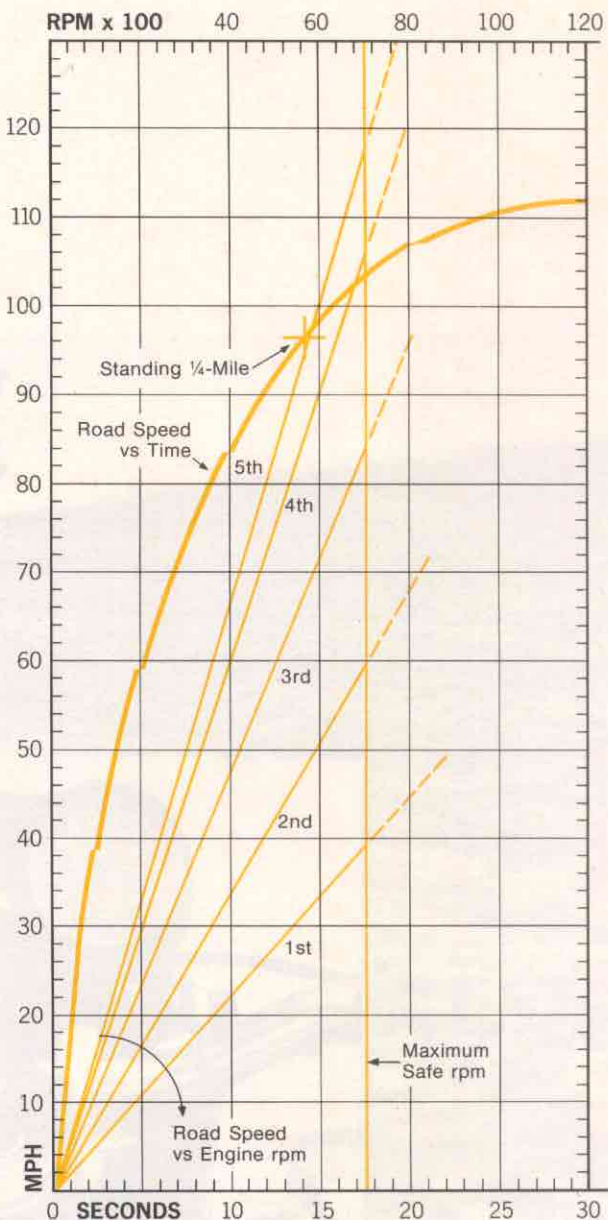
Sound level (California Standard) 82 db(A)

Standing start 1/4-mile...13.71 seconds @ 95.84 mph

Average fuel consumption 46.5 mpg

Speedometer error 30 mph, actual 27.28
 60 mph, actual 55.07

Braking force (actual)859 G.



*BHP and torque unavailable; driveshaft motorcycles are not compatible with Webco dyno.

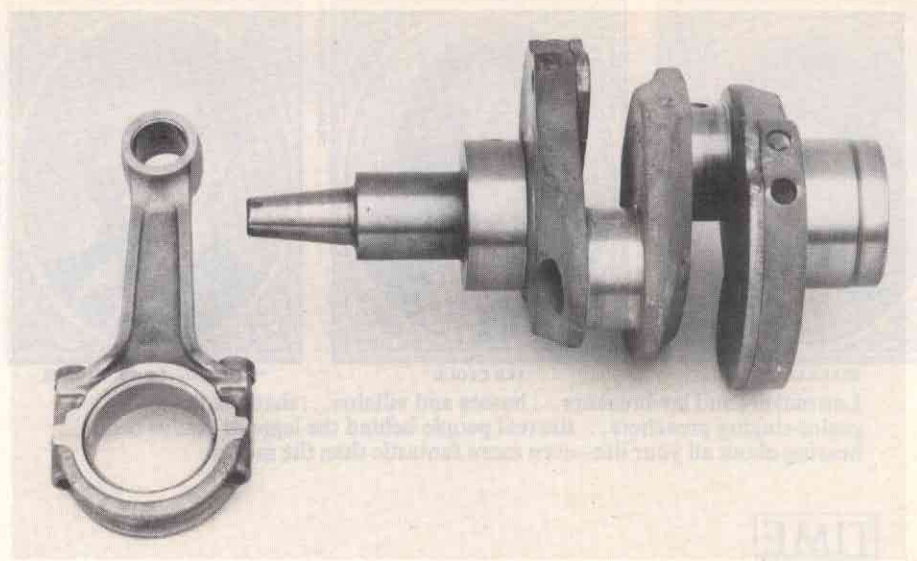
doubtedly contributed in part to some bothersome characteristics. The machine had very few miles at the start of the test (about 25); and BMWs, thanks to their close manufacturing tolerances, sometimes take an extraordinary number of miles for mating surfaces to become friends. Clearly, someone at BMW believes that tight initial fits make for longevity and silent mechanical devices, though it may result in a prolonged unhappy break-in. For the record, the notion that tight initial fits increase mechanical life (or produce quieter running) is no longer in vogue in engineering circles. New tight parts in the R90/6 may well have produced much of the noticeable buzzing which slowly modulated as miles accumulated. Nonetheless, any engine vibration paled when compared to the aggravation with the five-speed transmission, yet another (temporary) victim of close assembly tolerances.

In the beginning, the gearbox required an unacceptably high foot pressure to move it from gear to gear. At every stoplight, a fishing contest for neutral ensued, but generally the transmission snatched back and forth between first and second, refusing to halt half-way. The high lever pressure precluded riding the motorcycle with any soft-topped footwear. A certain clunkiness was far more evident in the R90/6 than in the R90S. "Clunk" hardly did the noise justice. Actually the R90/6 shifter slammed the transmission gears home with all the force and precision of a 30-millimeter breech-loader. At about 1200 miles the third-fourth-fifth movements reached acceptable levels and the slam/clunk lessened. The first-neutral-second combination remained problematic until the machine was returned briefly to the distributor for an exploratory check at 1400 miles.

A very tight fit between a gearbox cam-plate and the shaft on which it rotates proved to be the source of the shifting woes. The parts might have finally bedded-in as the miles stacked up, but we felt that 1000-1500 miles probably represents the maximum number of miles through which most customers would care to endure the hard shifting. If the problem would not self-correct inside this distance (in the vast majority of cases it does), the new owner would very likely demand that his dealer take remedial action. Once the shifting stiffness had been removed, the R90/6 gearbox was a pleasure to use—just like the R90S. The heavy clunkiness and breech-loader tendencies disappeared.

The transmission cure—and the diminished vibration from the engine—transformed the R90/6 into a remarkably improved motorcycle. New owners of BMWs have machines that will be better products at 5000 miles than at the 1000 mark. That's fine: we still don't like the tight-clearance unhappiness in the first weeks or months of operation.

(Continued on page 102)



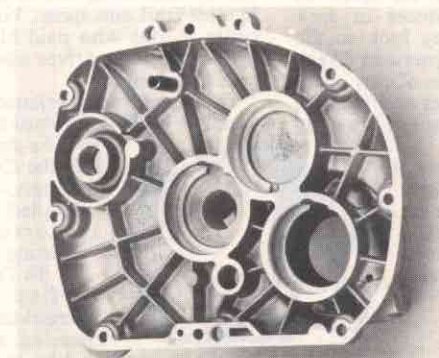
Crankshaft is a one-piece steel drop forging. Rods are identical to those in R90S.



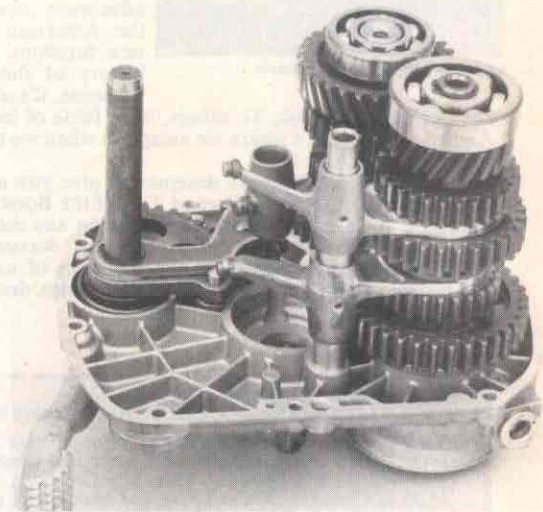
Slash-Six series is highly rationalized; R75/6 head caps an 82mm bore rather than 90mm hole.



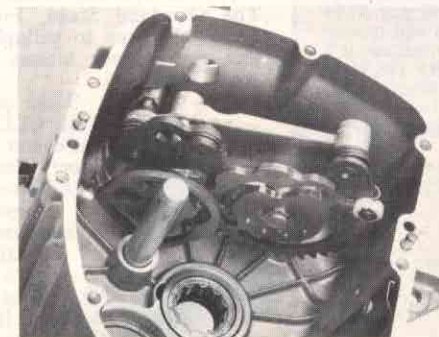
R90/6 piston on left is 9.0:1; higher compression R90S piston has larger dome.



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Tight fit between upper camplate and its shaft produced hard shifting early on.



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BMW R90/6 *Continued from page 19*

The draw on the clutch lever was a bit heavy; the R90S likewise had needed a strong hand at the lever. However, the R90/6 had an unusually wide friction point for a BMW, thus eliminating a common tendency to get jumpy starts with the flat twins. Additionally, some staff members thought the twistgrip demanded too much hand/wrist pressure.

All our staffers complained about the disc brake and its hand lever. The lever traveled through very little of its arc before getting hard to pull; those with short fingers could barely manage to draw the lever under the first knuckles of their fingers. A sudden panic grab might cause small-handed riders to lose their grip entirely on the lever. Of course, a great arc could be dialed into the lever's travel, assuming you know where to look. Strangely, BMW has buried the cable adjuster which controls the hand-lever travel under the tank. The adjuster is built into the master cylinder unit for the brake, which resides out of sight and out of harm's way in case of a rightside flop. Removing the tank and adjusting the cable somewhat lessened the problem.

Lever positioning was only part of the fix. A careful adjustment of the brake pads (relative to the disc) helped to drop the hand-lever pressure. In the end, all Charles Atlas exercises at the handlebar were eliminated.

Muscling the brake lever will swoosh the R90/6 down on its front suspension. The soft springs inside the long-travel front fork help create BMW's unequaled boulevard ride, but the front suspension is just too soft for hammering around corners in mad-racer fashion. Energetic approaches to corners necessitate hard braking; that begets a disconcerting amount of nose-dive; then the soft touring-type suspension, front and back, allows the bike to wallow and rock on its suspension, especially over rough surfaces. The Metzeler tires, as noted in the *Cycle* test of the R90S, are superior for long life, inferior in terms of traction. Furthermore, rolling the throttle back in a corner drops the vacuum-controlled slides in the Bing carburetors sharply; the shaft drive transfers the slowdown to the rear wheel without a bit of slop, and this gross change aggravates any wallowing and hobby-horsing in corners. The R90S had Dell'Orto pumper carburetors which operated more predictably and precisely in mid-corner throttle roll backs.

As a machine, our test R90/6 had no pretensions as a superbike performer. The engine was too mild, the suspension too soft, and the tires too hard. If anyone was interested in both a BMW and a super performer, then he would start with an R90S. The R90/6 is aimed at long-haul highwaymen.

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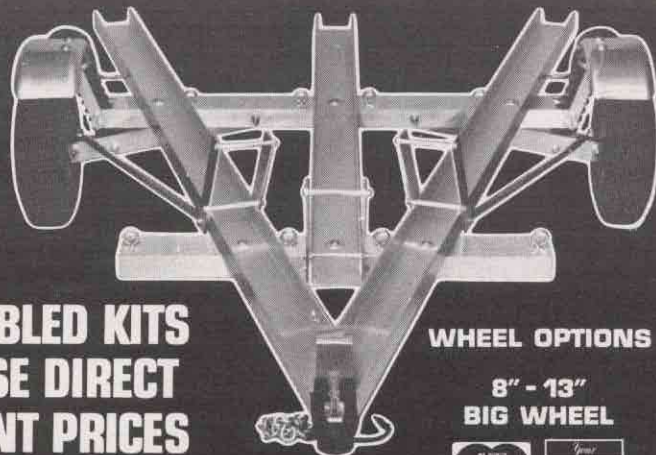
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tance riding; rapid point-to-point transit over wide-open highways; comfortable, luxurious transport over winding routes at temperate speeds. Swinging through mountain roads, the motorcycle invites the rider to settle into an easy six-tenths pace which can be maintained mile after mile. At eight-tenths, the R90/6 rider must consciously work at riding and that effort would detract from the pleasure of travel.

One crucial factor in long-haul machinery is the sheer distance which the motorcycle can cover in a day. Rate-of-speed and running time determines that distance. Some superbikes can produce distance by winging at a high rate of speed which in turn can paint the rider with fatigue after six or seven hours. The BMW gets distance by keeping the rider comfortable and fresh, thus stretching the riding time. Inarguably many superbikes can leave an R90/6 behind over mountain roads and outrun the BMW in a top-speed contest on a straight-arrow road. No matter. Speed alone doesn't produce distance. You need time too.

BMW specializes in effortless miles. At an indicated 60-65 mph, the engine is regally smooth. No exhaust din rattles the eardrums of the rider. The 900cc engine has ample passing power in fifth gear at an indicated 60 mph; stirring the shift lever is just an embellished gesture. The effortlessness extends beyond the engine. The space relationships between pegs, bars and controls fit most riders very well, though half *Cycle's* staff didn't care for the rake-back angle of the "tiller" handlebars. The saddle is obviously a triumph of the seatmaker's craft. After 100 miles or 500, it doesn't bite the rider. But the suspension really distinguishes the R90/6 as a straight-up tourer. The long-stroke fork simply removes bumps like nothing else in motorcycling.

Effortless mileage goes beyond mere physical comfort. Mental anguish can subtract from highway motoring. And, more than any other manufacturer, BMW has engineered a peace-of-mind into their motorcycles. Part of this is the firm's reputation for building durable, reliable products. Part of it can be found in its mechanical credentials. The drive-shaft banishes the ritual of chain lubrication and any thought of adjustment or replacement. The long-wearing Metzeler tires, like the final drive, have their virtues for a big trip: a three or four thousand mile journey needn't be scheduled to include a mid-point search for tires.

Other things filter the nuisances out of miles. For example, the warning lights on the panel remain visible under a brilliant sunlight. BMW hasn't added unnecessary information lights (stoplight monitor eyes or digital-readout faces); everything is there for a purpose. At night, the high-beam indicator light glows in soft blue; no intense little dot distracts the rider. It's a simple thing to be sure, but it suggests that BMW actually intended that the mo-

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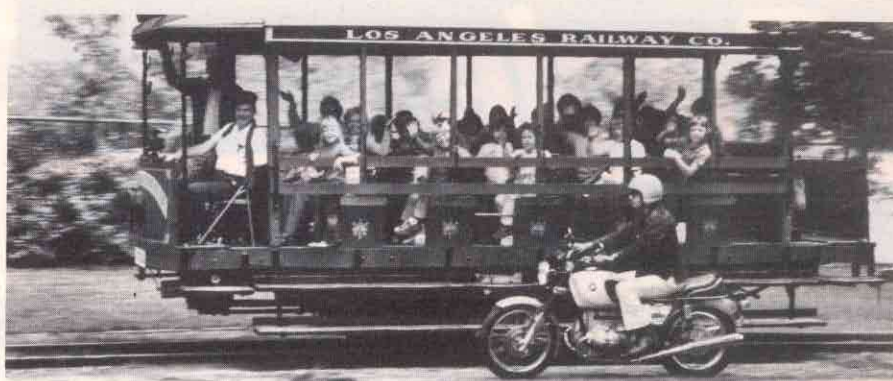
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torcycle could be ridden for long periods at night—and knew that blazing headlamps alone aren't sufficient for nighttime miles. Such a headlamp the BMW does have—it burns a gaping wound in the night and cauterizes the edges of darkness.

Day or night, there's never any panic surrounding gasoline stations. The R90/6 can be delivered with either a "small" 4.3 gallon tank, or a "large" 5.8-gallon item as fitted to our test bike. (The large touring tank adds about \$70 to the base price of \$2930.) Since the R90/6 delivers 45 miles per gallon, 225 miles could roll by without sniffing for a gas station. That range explains how easily the R90/6 can stuff a lot of distance into one day. Gas-pump breaks (normally done at 125 miles with three-gallon tanks) grow longer with chain lubing, the inevitable pause that refreshes, and the smoker's inevitable break.

A considerable number of fill-ups will occur between stops on the maintenance schedule. The BMW requires minor services at 5000 miles, and major ones at 10,000 miles. Likewise important to the long-distance hauler is the completeness of the owner's manual. It provides the reader with relevant specifications and maintenance information. Of course, it's not a workshop manual and you couldn't disassemble the engine with it. But things the careful owner would want to know, he can find—such as the torque speci-



cations for the cylinderhead bolts. What a welcome change to those cowardly booklets delivered with some Italian and Japanese motorcycles which show the new owner where the kill switch is and assures him that he will not fail to appreciate the magnificent performances of the model therein described. The BMW manual provides sufficient data so that a reasonably competent owner can perform the straightforward servicing procedures.

As a touring machine, the R90/6 is not without fault. BMW engineers must believe that every highwayman wears boots and gloves. Those with the "wrong" physical dimensions will discover that their shins still foul the airtubes running to the carburetors. Wearing boots seems the only practical method of protecting your legs

from the vergassers and their tubes. Riders of smaller stature experienced more leg-foul than larger-framed individuals. Smaller riders, reaching for the bars, position themselves far forward in the saddle, and that placement puts their shins right into trouble.

Gloves, like boots, are mandatory options. The handlebar rubbers get prickly without gloves. Moreover, the twistgrip demands greater-than-average pressure to rotate; after a while, the rider's tight grip becomes uncomfortable barehanded.

The inaccuracy of the speedometer was both surprising and disappointing. Motorcycles with \$3000 pricetags should not have a speedometer which errs five miles per hour at an indicated 60 mph. Nor is the single horn in keeping with the

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R90/6's long-haul character. The R90/6 emits a restrained low-key honk that has little capacity to instill real alarm. It's much too polite. The BMW would benefit by fitting dual horns a la Moto Guzzi, which deliver a proper Wrath-of-the-Peterbilt blast.

Anyone considering an R90/6 probably will look at an R75/6 too, and ponder the differences. Both the R75/6 and R90/6 run 9.0:1 compression ratios and 32mm Bing CV carburetors. The stroke is the same; the 900's 90mm pistons (vs. the R75's 82mm slugs) account for the increased displacement. Clearly, the R90/6 will accelerate harder, pull a load more easily, and perform its passing with greater authority than the R75/6. On the other hand, the R75/6 costs \$200 less and it's smoother than a 900cc version.

Many enthusiasts will opt for the R90/6 simply because 898cc is a larger number than 745cc. Undoubtedly, BMW anticipated such a pattern. When the Slash-Five series was developed several years ago, the long-range plans included a 900cc version, which reached maturation with the Slash-Six models. The present line-up (of 600, 750, 900 versions) was so rationalized and modularized from the outset that it's quite meaningless to call the 900 a punched-out 750 in any traditional sense. In all events, the one-liter-engine concept has a lot of momentum today. The merits of the equipment aside, any manufacturer wants to move with the tide.

Any smart prospective buyer should try both the R90/6 and the R75/6 so that he buys according to his real needs and preferences: bigger is not necessarily better. Either way the owner gets a motorcycle which combines high component quality, outstanding ride comfort, long-term reliability, and fuss-free shaftdrive. The R90/6 is not so impressive a touring machine as the R90S is a sports/touring motorcycle. The R90S fills a very special niche in grand turismo motorcycling. The R90/6 isn't really a sports motorcycle, and it certainly isn't alone in the touring field. There are all shades of Japanese, Italian and British long-distance bikes—all offering different trade-offs than the R90/6 in power, handling, comfort and convenience. And were that not enough competition, there's the R75/6, the same motorcycle minus 154ccs. So even the fellow who wouldn't consider anything but a BMW has an alternative to the R90/6.

Perhaps BMW should consider upgrading the R90/6 with S-engine components. That would reposition that R90/6 away from the smoother running R75/6 and significantly close the performance gap between the R90/6 and stronger sports/touring machines such as the Norton 850 Interstate. There's no way the S-engine could harm the R90/6, save making it more expensive.

If you can consider a \$3000 R90/6 now, springing for an S-kitted R90/6 at \$3200 would be a lot easier.