

## 1977-1979 Harley-Davidson XLCR Sportster Café Racer



by Moshe Levy

**Willy G. Davidson, in one of his first major attempts to reshape the image of Harley-Davidson, created a sleek sportbike based on the Sportster platform. Its performance and sales didn't live up to its wicked looks, but few Harleys are now so coveted.**

**H**ARLEY-DAVIDSON'S SPORTSTER is an undoubtedly an icon of motorcycling, and deservedly so, as it is the longest running, continuously produced nameplate on the market today. But in the Sportster's storied 52 years of existence, one special model stands tall among the rest—a daring styling exercise and spectacular sales flop known as the XLCR Café Racer.

When the original Sportster debuted in 1957, it was Harley's undisputed muscle bike. It was a bestial, primitive machine respected for its unvarnished character and stoplight-to-stoplight prowess. Its reign as the hairy-chested bar bouncer of motorcycles lasted over a decade, but by the early 1970s, it became clear that the Sportster was lacking enough "sport" to retain its street performance crown. A fresh wave of Japanese newcomers like the Honda CB750 and Kawasaki Z1 had enormous horsepower advantages, with their modern four-cylinder motors humbling the Sportster's ancient 45° V-twin design. Meanwhile, European café benchmarks like Ducati's seductive 750SS and BMW's fabled R90S seriously outclassed the Sportster in both road manners and refinement alike. Harley-Davidson's Sportster was losing its luster.

So in 1974, Willie G. Davidson (grandson of co-founder William A. Davidson, and at the time H-D's Vice President of Design) began work on what he called "a

Sportster motorcycle in a racerly mode." One year later, the prototype debuted at the Daytona Trade Show, and the finished product finally hit the showrooms for the 1977 model year as the Sportster XLCR Café Racer.

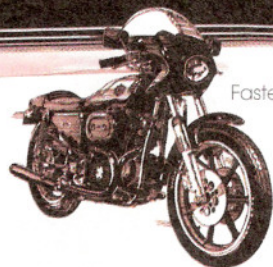
Strikingly different from any other Harley before it, the XLCR was a very radical styling departure from the traditional Sportster. Even today, the blacked-out theme is very dramatic, starting from the minimalist front fender, to the sleek quarter fairing, the elongated four-gallon gas tank, and back to the windswept fiberglass tail section. All this unique bodywork showcased a wrinkle-black 1000cc V-twin, spartanly highlighted with beautiful brushed aluminum rocker covers and tasteful chrome pushrod tubes. The gorgeous seven-spoke Morris cast alloy wheels shod with raised-letter Goodyear Eagle rubber add to the eye candy, and the longer one stares at this bike, the more other interesting details reveal themselves. But the most renowned stylistic aspect of the XLCR is the inimitable "Siamese" dual exhaust header pipe set, which sounds even better than it looks. The overall aesthetic effect is darkly sinister and instantly aggressive, a distinctly American response to the onslaught from overseas. In its current range of "Dark" customs, the Motor Company continues the XLCR styling tradition.

Functionally, the XLCR received some notable improvements over standard Sportsters. In a cue borrowed from Harley's legendary XR-750 racer, the XLCR's new duplex cradle frame positioned the rear shocks more vertically, and farther rearward on a box-section swingarm. Rake and trail were stable at 29.5° and 4.37", respectively, and the reworked frame was far less flexible than its predecessor. 10" dual disc brakes with new Kelsey-Hayes single-piston hydraulic calipers handled stopping duties up front, with a third 10" disc out back (replacing the standard drum) for added measure. In a bow to styling, the rear shocks were actually mounted behind the axle to make room for the beefy rear disc brake caliper. Finally, rear-set footpegs gave a more aggressive rider position.

Meanwhile, the XLCR's tried and true 45° four-cam "Ironhead" V-Twin soldiered on in essentially the same guise as the standard XLCH Sportster. A butterfly-type 38mm Keihin carburetor with an accelerator pump fed fuel and air to its hungry cast iron jugs. With some tailoring of the spark advance curve and thanks to the barely restricted 90+ dB siamesed dual exhaust system, the XLCR's mill managed 68 crank hp @ 6200 rpm – barely more than a standard Sportster, but still enough to advertise it as "the most powerful production Harley-Davidson ever built." The rather agricultural standard four-speed Sportster transmission was

# 1977 XLCR 1000

## LIMITED EDITION CAFÉ RACER



Fastest production Harley-Davidson ever  
 12 month, 12,000 mile warranty  
 Dual disc front brakes  
 Mag wheels... Distinctive styling  
 All-black finish

**Above:** A period advertisement for the machine billed it as the “fastest production Harley-Davidson ever”—which was true.

unchanged as well, though the Café Racer’s overall gearing was lowered from the standard Sportster’s by dropping a tooth from the primary sprocket of the triple-row chain primary drive. A sturdy 17-plate wet clutch was more than adequate to handle the motor’s output.

Alas, on the street the XLCR’s beauty was mostly skin deep. With only about 55 horses getting to the rear wheel, performance was nothing to brag about. Quarter-mile times hovered in the 13 sec. range, midpack for its class. The engine ran out of steam at only 106 mph, while direct competitors accelerated to 125 mph and beyond. The Showa front forks and Gabriel rear shocks (both lifted intact from the standard Sportster) supplemented the revised chassis and handled sweepers well, but the suspension’s severely limited travel resulted in a punishing ride quality. The brake calipers used a very hard pad compound for longevity’s sake, leading to a wooden feel and extremely long stopping distances of over 200’ from 60 mph—embarrassing for a performance bike. In short, all of the XLCR’s sexy

show wasn’t backed up with much more go than garden variety performance.

These days it’s commonly accepted that the XLCR was “ahead of its time,” but several practical factors conspired to suppress its appeal. It debuted just as the motorcycle industry entered a 15-year sales slump, which the Japanese manufacturers answered by dumping inventory at fire sale prices. Simultaneously, Harley itself (then owned by American Machine and Foundry) was in its darkest hour, with serious dissension between management and labor leading to crippling quality problems.

And frankly, the promise of the XLCR’s muscular appearance against the reality of its mediocre performance was not lost on the marketplace either. Sportbike riders who coveted four-cylinder Japanese powerhouses ignored the XLCR because of its middling acceleration, low top speed, and dismal braking. And traditional Harley riders did not accept the XLCR’s café racer image, preferring instead the familiar traditional Sportsters as a blank slate which they could customize themselves.



**Above:** The left side reveals the XLCR’s iron cylinder barrels. Inside the cases was a high-effort four-speed transmission.

So after only three model years, even with a relatively reasonable MSRP of \$3595 (\$500 more than a standard Sportster 1000), the Sportster XLCR sold a mere 3,124 units before it was killed off for good. Naturally, yesterday’s marketplace failure is today’s rare collectible, especially where Harley-Davidson is involved. As of press time, XLCR prices fluctuate greatly but generally fall into the \$10,000 to \$25,000+ range, depending on condition.

Current or prospective owners will find a very vibrant online Sportster enthusiast community, and would do well to check these sites:

XLCR Club: [www.xlcrclub.com](http://www.xlcrclub.com)

The Ironhead Sportster Garage: [autos.groups.yahoo.com/group/theironheadsportstergarage](http://autos.groups.yahoo.com/group/theironheadsportstergarage)

The Sportster Homepage: [www.sportster.org](http://www.sportster.org)

The XL Forum: [www.xlforum.net](http://www.xlforum.net)

Special thanks to the Wheels Through Time Museum ([www.wheelsthroughtime.com](http://www.wheelsthroughtime.com)) for donating photographs.



**Above:** The speedo and tachometer were the same style as used by Honda at the time and marked with optimistic numbers: The top speed, 150 mph and the tach to 8000 rpm!



**Above:** The XLCR’s bikini fairing was a fairly generic design, similar to what you’d get with a Ducati or BMW, but it gave the machine a sportbike style like no Harley-Davidson before it.