Rapid Transit

It was almost dark by the time we got the Bill Krause-modified Honda to the skid pad at Orange County Raceway. The subject of the test was a warmed-over, wide-wheel version of the Honda Coupe. We reset the accelerometer and John Christy started his right-hand tours of the 200-foot circle. After 8 laps he pulled over, turned on the interior light and checked the mysterious squiggly lines that interpret into cornering speeds. He only grinned and muttered, "fantastic."

He had been scooting around the circle at just a fraction over 35 miles per hour (35.4 to be exact) and that figures out to .838g's of lateral acceleration. He ran the circle to the left the second time out and grinned again. He ran 35.5 miles per hour, .840g's. That means that by taking your garden variety Honda, slightly modifying the suspension and adding wide wheels and spacers and mounting 5.00/7.00 x 10 Bridgestone racing tires (wet variety) you can make the stocker corner in a static situation with Porches and Ferraris. Even the stock Honda, at .713-g's to the right and .726g's to the left, will outdo a shocking number of reputable sports cars.

There was more to it than just adding wide tires, of course. Under the direction of Bill Paine, the Honda wizards at Krause cut 2.5 coils from the front springs (they now recommend only cutting two) and replaced the stock 5 wt shock oil with 20 wt (they suggest 10 wt now to smooth the ride just a bit). Rebound spacers were put in the shocks and ½ inch cut off the rubber suspension stop to allow for more travel. In back the work was even simpler. They added a ½ inch lowering block and modified a set of Koni motorcycle shocks (medium setting) to replace the stock tubes. The Konis, by the way, act as a stop to keep the tires from hitting the wheel wells. Springs were left alone. The net effect, with the wide tires is to lower the front end two inches and the rear end one inch. There's another more interesting measurement. Front track from the outside of one wide tire to the outside of the other measures 53 inches — about 4 inches wider than the stock outside width of about 49½ inches. No wonder it corners.

They couldn't just do the suspension and leave the engine stock, so they dipped into the increasing supply of hot parts for the Honda car engine. Cylinders were appropriately rebored to take a set of one mm oversize pistons. The new pistons are not an available item quite yet, being made by Russ Collins Engineering in Torrance. Collins added a slight dome to the pistons, increasing the compression ratio from the stock 8.5:1 to 10:1. He also ported the two-piece head, cleaning away any ledges caused by the two-piece construction. A Sig Erson cam was used, Paine going with the much needed torque cam rather than the high rev cam, to bolster that torque curve that falls off so quickly. The stock 36mm Keihin carburetor was changed for a 40mm unit. Timing was advanced one degree and colder plugs torqued in. That was the extent of engine work.

A difference in performance is very apparent to anyone used to slugging along in the stock machine. Acceleration at the bottom end picks up to the point of making the car a lot more enjoyable and useable in traffic. You don't have to huff and groan up long inclines. But even more important, you don't have to have a hundred yards of space to make a lane change and you can dart into and out of holes in traffic in a manner similar to one of the earlier Mini-Coopers. The ease with which we could negotiate cross-town traffic on surface streets was amazing. The mouse was now a tiger.

When you combine the handling and engine modifications, you turn the Honda Coupe into a Junior Jack the Bear. All those innocents who bought VWs and added the gingerbread but no engine pieces are fair game. The price for the work is moderate. The cam, pistons, and carb run about $45 each and installation would be in the $85-95 range. Boring is the usual $8-10 per cylinder and an excellent job of porting the head runs $80. Pos-A-Traction's wheels run $150 a set, the Bridgestone tires are $120 for four. Front suspension work's only cost is for the shock oil and the rear requires Koni Motorcycle shocks at $45. You'll have to modify it yourself. That totals up to $615 if you have all the work done by others. Now $2,245 begins to sound like a lot for a 600cc super car that will only run the quarter in 20.5, even if it does handle. But for getting around on surface stoplight-to-stoplight streets, it's dynamite.

In modern urban America, fun driving is a thing of the past. The fast, twisty, country roads which used to be 20 minutes from downtown are now subdivisions. So, take on a 440-6 Pack in traffic with the Honda and you'll leave him trying to squeeze between an old lady in a Valiant and a mail truck turning right. And that's where it's at. The mini, even micro-car is the direction in which we're headed; smog, safety, and the economy dictate it. /MT