

Watching rider number 31, nearly holding my breath, I am reminded of kids I've seen racing in Honda's CBR125R road racing series. Too short to sit on a stationary motorcycle, they would put a left foot on the peg, slip the clutch, then throw the right leg over the seat as wheels began turning. It took more desire than sense, I figured, but now, as I stand in the rain watching these Moto-Gymkhana competitors tear-assing away down the field, I see that number 31 is like that. She is in the starting block, awkwardly stretched, trying to reach the ground with a foot that can't get quite far enough away from the rest of her.

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controlled riding at first-gear speeds and whacky lean angles, and they must all be ridden in the correct order, an order that is not apparent when you look at the field. So there are two problems: figuring out the course, and handling the bike.

But she has studied the route, has watched other riders, and even though she is small, she rides with the assurance of someone who cares more about trying it than winning it. She gets through

The starting flag waves, the CBR250R's engine howls, and she's off. The course, laid out on a parking lot at the Honda Canada grounds near Toronto, is confusing; more than one person has run through an obstacle backward, or missed it entirely, just gone right on by it. Each obstacle requires a different manoeuvre, all of them require smooth,



Top: the 250 was not a small bike for some riders; above left: eventual winner shows solid control; above: Honda's Smirniw gives pointers.

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a narrow lane of cones, squirts into a box, tilts the bike, runs the square, then exits, pounds back down between the cones, and heads to the next obstacle. There are nine or 10 of these fiendish things, and they are marked by orange cones that fall over for no reason, they are the size of a child's sandbox, and each one requires a movement so precise and minute that surgeons think about them before operating, just to get in the groove. At least, that's how I remember it, as I watch this little girl perform for the dripping, appreciative crowd. She races to the next obstacle, slows, leans into a figure eight, completes that one, leans the other way for a reversal, and almost makes it, almost gets it done, but then, on the last stroke, silence: the bike has stalled, quit right in the middle of a figure-eight. And she can barely get a foot to the ground without a ladder.

The audience goes as quiet as the 250's engine. The bike leans, seized by gravity. She counters, slides halfway out of the saddle, stabs her left foot onto the pavement, goes rigid. She has it, arms tensed with the effort of holding the handlebar, but that bike is not going down. Not going, it appears, anywhere.

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And now she's in the figure eight with a stalled motorcycle. She is stretched to the limit with one foot on the ground and the other leg over the seat, holding it, and somehow she keeps it from falling. Then she manages to straighten it, and gets it started. From almost certain humiliation she pulls off a personal triumph, getting back into the saddle and completing the figure eight, then moving to another obstacle. Where the bike stalls again, and where, once again, the crowd goes silent and still and she fights gravity, gets back on, gets it started again, and then completes the manoeuvre.

A few minutes after her second run, I see her sitting on the grass, smiling. Later, others will go home with trophies, but I can tell that she has just won something that won't be handed over in an awards ceremony, and that's worth a lot more than any trophy. **CC**

