

Riding Impression

By Kit Palmer
Photos by Nelson and Riles

Looking for an entry-level middleweight sportbike that is affordable, comfortable and stylish, yet still offers “R”- (as in R6-) like performance? Evidently, many of you are, according to Yamaha’s research department. In the entry-sport segment (750cc or less), industry sales are at a five-year high, as more and more people are discovering – or, in many cases, rediscovering – the economical value of riding streetbikes, more specifically entry-sport bikes. These bikes tend to appeal to a broad range of motorcyclists because they are generally lighter in weight, smaller in size, easier to ride, and less expensive to purchase and operate than larger higher-end streetbikes. Plus, most middleweight sportbikes offer excellent supersport bike-like performance and, perhaps best of all, supersport styling. (By the way, Yamaha defines “sportbike” as entry-level performance-minded streetbikes, and “Superport” as high-performance [i.e., R6/R1] streetbikes.)

2009 Yamaha FZ6R

MISSING THE BOAT

Up until now, however, Yamaha didn’t really have that ideal entry-level sportbike that fit into this rapidly growing segment of motorcycling. Yamaha does have the R6 and FZ6, but for many, the R6 is just too racey and hyper and too uncomfortable to be an everyday commuter. Plus, the racetrack-ready R6 isn’t cheap!

The somewhat tamer “half-naked” FZ6 comes closer to hitting the mark but is still a bike designed for the more experienced rider. For many first-timers, the FZ6 is too closely related to the older-generation R6 on which it is based. And to make matters worse, the FZ6 doesn’t have the R6’s aggressive and sporty looks, which so many people in this country crave.

PURPOSE-BUILT

The new FZ6R, which is loosely based on the FZ6, is quite possibly Yamaha’s first attempt at building from near scratch a middleweight entry-level sportbike specifically designed to be both practical and sporty – sporty enough to please even the advanced rider. In the past,



Yamaha believes the entry-level rider deserves a stylish motorcycle, too.

Yamaha has normally relied on filling this niche with one of its own aging high-end supersport models that had been replaced and kicked down by a newer model. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. These days, it seems, it’s more of the latter, since supersport bikes are just getting too trick to ever be practical, no matter how old they get.

In designing the FZ6R, Yamaha focused on five main areas: torque, comfort, adjustability, styling and price. Of these five, styling was one of the most important. The bike simply had to look cool.

After all, while it might be okay to be practical, it’s not okay to look it. In a survey, Yamaha asked entry-sport customers why they did not buy the FZ6, and three of the top 10 answers involved styling – they simply just didn’t go for the FZ6’s more conservative clothing, or lack of it. So the FZ6R took on a more aggressive, sporty and modern look, like the R6.

Pricing was a big deal, too. It had to be affordable, which it is. With an MSRP starting at \$6990, the FZ6R is about \$300 less than the FZ6 and about \$3000 less than the R6.

Cheap Thrills

The new FZ6R is proof positive that it is possible to be sporty and practical at the same time.



It might be designed for the entry-level rider, but the fuel-injected FZ6R has a lot to offer the experienced rider, as well.

HOW'D THEY DO THAT?

When it comes to engine performance, a lot of effort went into giving the FZ6R's 600cc inline four-cylinder motor as much torque, low-end, and midrange power as possible – and these are things 600s aren't really known for. Done right, good torque and low end can make a bike easier to ride for the newbie, while still providing something for the more experienced rider to chew on. To find more torque, the FZ6R's EFI has been retuned and the air-box enlarged, and the cylinder head, which has a narrower intake port shape, has been significantly redesigned.

The modern-looking 4-2-1 exhaust system, which incorporates a three-way catalytic converter, is tuned to achieve maximum bottom end and midrange while still providing stimulating sound (which it does). Similar to the R6, the exhaust is almost unnoticeable, as the tip barely peaks out from underneath the right swingarm. This new-wave design offers a lower center of gravity to improve handling.

The six-speed transmission is pretty much the same as the FZ6's, including gear ratios, but the clutch has been reworked for easier operation. The main difference now is a new inner- rather than outer-push design.

The all-new steel tubular frame (the FZ6's frame is aluminum), which uses the motor as a stress member, is compact, yielding a seating position that is rather low, not to mention adjustable. The stock seat height is just 30.9 inches, making it easy for more people to plant their feet onto the ground, but if that's a little too low for you, the seat can be raised 20 mm. Handlebars are also adjustable. If

The FZ6R is offered in four colors: all-black, yellow, Pearl White and Yamaha-racing blue.

you rotate the bar mounts, you can buy another 20 mm of reach. And you can even raise the bars another 20 mm if so desired.

Whereas high-end and pricey Kayaba units are fitted to the R6, midrange and less-expensive (though still very effective) SOQI suspension components have been assigned to the FZ6R. A conventional 41mm fork is used up front, which offers 130 mm of wheel travel, as is a standard single shock in the back, it, too, yielding 130 mm of wheel travel. Neither end provides damping adjustments, however – just seven preload settings in the back.

Brakes are plenty capable. The bike is fitted with hardy dual 298mm discs with dual-piston Akebona calipers, while the back end is fitted with a single 245mm disc clamped by a single-piston Nissin caliper.

LIVING WITH THE FZ6R

Ever since we took delivery of our FZ6R test bike a few months ago, the bike has, for many reasons, become a commuter favorite around here and has quickly racked up some serious miles on it. So why do we like it so much? Simple: It's just so darn easy to ride (not to mention f-u-n).

Unlike most 600s, the FZ6R offers excellent torque and bottom end, just as advertised. More grunt off the bottom means you're not constantly revving the thing to the moon just to get to the fun part of the powerband, or to get it off the line smoothly like you do on more traditional 600s. Light turns green, you just crack the throttle, slip the clutch, and away you go – it's just that easy. And so is clutch pull, which is probably the lightest and smoothest-working we've ever felt on a 600cc machine.

The FZ6R is sufficiently fast. It's apparent right away that this bike was not built for the track, nor was it meant to win the Daytona 200, but don't think for a moment that this bike is slow – it's not, just a bit slow-revving, perhaps, and a bit tamer overall. But the trade-off is a much easier to work with and more forgiving motor for real-world use.

It's also one of the smoothest 600s we've ever ridden. It doesn't seem to matter whether you're turning 1000 rpm or 10,000, little vibration can be felt through the handlebars or footpegs. And that also goes for when the bike is humming along at highway speeds, as there is little sensation of traditional 600cc buzzing, even at 70 mph with the tach indicating a steady 6000 rpm.

Thanks to the generous bottom end and midrange, the powerband is rather wide and robust and, again, ultra smooth. There's no hard hit anywhere.

If there's one area in which maybe the FZ6R isn't so smooth, it's shifting. The feel on the lever is a little notchy, both upshifting and, more so, downshifting. We didn't notice this when we first rode the bike.



Check out the MotoGP-inspired exhaust system.

A slightly taller windscreen better matches the more upright seating position.

Adding to the FZ's excellent livability is comfort. Compared to supersport 600s, the FZ6R has a more upright, spacious and just plain relaxed seating position – perfect for long hauls, and even short ones, for that matter. The seat itself is comfortable and low to the ground, which helps out, too. Seat height is just 30.9 inches, so just about anybody can get their feet firmly planted on the ground, which is a huge bonus if you're new to riding. Taller riders, however, might feel a little cramped on the bike. Luckily, you have the option of raising the seat 20 mm, which actually helps quite a bit. And, as mentioned, you can move the bars forward and up 20 mm, too.

Cockpit comfort is top-notch as well. We found the small windscreen to be just big enough to offer some windblast resistance without the buffeting, and the mirrors are actually quite functional. So is the clean-looking instrument cluster, which features an easy-to-read digital speedometer and analog tach. It also has all of the usual information, which is delivered to you digitally.

The FZ6R feels remarkably light and nimble, even though it's six pounds heavier than the FZ6. It just doesn't feel that way. It takes almost zero effort to get the little FZ leaned into the corners, or to maneuver it through traffic, which probably has something to do with its somewhat narrow tires. It comes fitted with a 160/60x17 rear tire compared to the FZ6's 180/55x17. (Fronts are the same 20/70x17 rubber.) The bike comes from the factory with either Bridgestones or Dunlops.

Even though the bike is so light and responsive, the FZ6R is surprisingly stable

at speed and even while leaned over in the corners. Overall, it's a great-handling machine with no real quirks.

The SOQI suspension is quite good, too – maybe a tick on the soft side for aggressive riding, but for casual romps, the ride is quite nice. You can bump up the spring preload a bit on the rear if you want, but that's all the suspension adjustment you get. Luckily, it's set up pretty good from the factory.

Brakes are plenty strong and very compliant, too.

Perhaps most important of all, the FZ is quite economical when it comes to sucking fuel. Doing everything possible to extend our fuel mileage, we managed to squeeze out 48 mpg on our mostly free-way commuting.

CHOOSE YOUR FLAVOR

Yamaha gives you four color options to choose from: all black, Cadmium Yellow, Pearl White, and traditional Yamaha-racing blue. The all-black FZ sells for \$6990, while the other three cost \$100 more.

THE VERDICT

The Yamaha FZ6R is definitely a winner with us. It's super easy to ride and very user-friendly, making it an ideal bike for beginners and novices. But don't let the "entry-level" label scare you off – this bike performs! Even if you're an experienced rider, the FZ6R is worth considering as long as you don't mind sacrificing some high-revving power and having a few grand left over in your pocket.

Overall, it's the right bike at the right time. **CN**

SPECIFICATIONS

2009 YAMAHA FZ6R

MSRP	\$6990 (Black); \$7090 (Yellow/Blue/White)
ENGINE	600cc liquid-cooled 4-stroke, DOHC
BORE X STROKE	65.5 x 44.5mm
COMPRESSION RATIO	12.2:1
FUEL DELIVERY	Fuel-Injection
CLUTCH	Wet multi-plate, cable actuation
TRANSMISSION	6-speed
FRONT SUSPENSION	SOQI 41mm nonadjustable conventional fork
REAR SUSPENSION	SOQI single shock, 7-step adjustable spring preload
FRONT-WHEEL TRAVEL	5.1 in.
REAR-WHEEL TRAVEL	5.1 in.
FRONT BRAKES	298mm discs w/ twin-piston calipers
REAR BRAKE	245mm disc, single-piston caliper
TIRES	Dunlop or Bridgestone 120/70-17 in. (front); 160/60-17 in. (rear)
WHEELBASE	56.7 in.
LENGTH	83.5 in.
WIDTH	30.3 in.
RAKE/TRAIL	26.0 degrees/4.1 in.
SEAT HEIGHT	30.9 in. (low)/31.7 in. (high)
FUEL CAPACITY	4.6 gal.
CLAIMED WEIGHT (wet)	467 lbs.