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A smörgåsbord of Iron Sportsters and K-models

From 1952 to 1985 Harley Davidson built a great machine. Here are a hundred of them.

Harley learned a lot from the technology of WWII. You can see the aircraft engine influence of the 1948 Panhead motor. By 1952 they were ready to unveil the next leap forward, the K-model. It was the same size engine as the W models, 45 cubic inches. The engine and transmission were combined into one case. The K-model was the first Harley with a rear suspension, predating the Duo Glide by 6 years. The engine was a side-valve. In 1957 Harley introduced the Sportster model, the longest-running motorcycle model in world history. Click on the links to the left to explore some pictures of Sportsters of various years.



The 1956 K-model is a beautiful bike. With the displacement enlarged to 900cc on the KHK models, it keeps up with traffic too.



The overhead-valve Sportster came in 1957. Its got the great rounded large tank, and the primary cover is deeper to provide for more plates in the clutch.



The solo seat, the flared rear fender, and the large headlamp give the 1957 Sportster a classic distinctive look that is hard to beat. The bike was mostly sorted, even the 6-volt electrical system. A friend said he could always tell an Indian coming because the lights flickered.



The 1957 Iron Sportster also came in military garb, in the XLA model.



This 1958 XLA incorporates a much larger air filter, mudflaps on the front fender, and that great olive-drab paint, to match the flat-black exhaust pipes.



If you painted an XLA red, it would resemble this 1959 XLH. A great way to end the 1950s, with the chrome headlamp nacelle, a solo seat, and a luggage rack. This bike has the valenced front fender as well. The rear fender has a little flip that just can't be beat.

1960s Iron Sportsters



Many Sportster aficionados prefer the 1960 vintage bikes over all others. These early bikes have clean lines and a certain dignity that later models can't approach. This 1968 XLCH model has the lunch box oil tank, and a stock front end. Yet it still looks like a chopper, or at least a bobber. The dry clutch has the lightest pull of any large-displacement motorcycle. It makes these old bikes a pleasure to ride.

This bike has a magneto, so it does not need a battery. Sitting at a stoplight with dim flickering brake lights might make you think twice about not running a battery. Then again, you can just rev the engine a bit and provide sight and sound cues that you are stopped at the light.

The other nice thing about the 1960s bikes is how much stuff interchanges from different years.



This 1962 XLCH looks similar, but has a horseshoe oil tank and the classic high pipes. Also a magneto bike, there is no battery. The front brake sits to the side of the hub, unlike the 1964-and-later bikes where the drum is the hub.



This 1969 XLH Iron Sportster features the interconnected dual exhaust with the long mufflers.



This 1968 XLH has the less popular front fairing. No problem, early years still fit.



A 1973 disk brake on a 1969 XLH.



The 1960s were the advent of the chopper era, and there are many examples such as this 1965 XLCH.



A girder front end is clean and light on this 1960 chop. There is no battery to worry about on a magneto bike. With a sprung rear end, for those with back problems.



By 1968, the strong drugs had taken hold, and wild choppers like this 68 XLCH started to appear.



The Sportster and the K-model before it were champion racing bikes. The 1961 KR dominated flat-track dirt racing. With no front or rear brake, no wonder they went fast.



The KRTT models were for road racing. The Harley factory sponsored a team, and there were dozens of privateers that kept things competitive.



1960s vintage Iron Sportsters were also great at hill-climb racing. This 1968 engine is almost unrecognizable in the stretched frame and custom front end.



You can restore a 1961 XLH and ride in style with a trumpet horn, valenced front fender, and chrome headlight nacelle.



Or maybe you prefer the 1967 first-year electric start XLH model. It too has the stylish turtle tank, and saddlebags for your stuff. Love those fishtail exhausts.



But its OK if you want to chop a 1962 instead, although some purists might get mad. Its your bike, do your thing.

1970s Iron Sportsters



Sweet. The 1970 XLH with the boat-tail rear fender, and ultra-quiet connected dual muffler. With the turtle tank and bright green paint job, what's not to love?

The 1970s saw Harley adopt disk brakes front (1973) and rear (1979). The engineers also increased the engine displacement from 900cc to 1000cc.

In addition, the boffins put in a wet clutch, and the "cone" ignition system. No more magnetos for running with no battery.

The biggest change was in 1977, when Harley redesigned the engine cases to provide for left-side shifting and to reduce cost.

Enthusiasts have mixed opinions on the progress of Iron Sportsters in the 1970s. Some love the old dry clutch, others hate it. Most prefer the simplicity of the cone ignition, but the flyweights can be a real reliability headache. Love them or hate them, the great thing about Iron Sportsters is that you can change them.



A 1070 XLCH with lunchbox oil tank.



This 1971 XLH has the turtle tank.



The 1971 XLCH has the electric starter hump, but they don't install it. The small battery is a giveaway this is kickstart.



A 1973 XLCH kickstart-only bike.



Here is a clean 1974 XLH Iron Sportster.



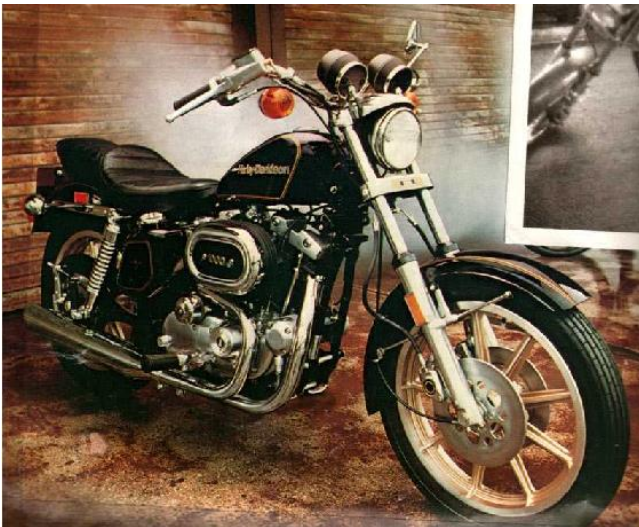
This 1977 XLCR (cafe racer) is one-year-only. It used the triangle frame eventually used on all models in 1979.



This 1977 Confederate model only lasted one year. It was just decals and trim. Note the H12 giant battery.



Some 1977 models got chopped. Hard. Like Jay Leno says, "Don't trust any motorcycle you can't see through."



This 1978 has the collector exhaust and ham can air cleaner, with dual brakes and alloy wheels.



Everyone chides the 1979 model, since it takes different pipes than any other year. The 1977 was the big engine change, and the 1979 has funky pipes so it can have a kickstarter as well as a disk rear brake.



You could fit this 1979 XLS with a kicker.



I first thought mufflers on both sides were weird, but it is pretty cool on this bike.

1980s Iron Sportsters

There was only a half-decade of Iron Sportsters in the 1980s. The Evo engine came out in 1986. But there are plenty of low-mile bikes out there, both stock and chopped.

1980 was a carryover year for Iron Sportsters. Same frame (plus an oil filter on the rear downtube). That means the same oil tank and battery. Same dual-disk front brakes. The big difference is Harley gave up on the kickstarter. This allowed them to move the rear master cylinder down out of the way of the rear exhaust pipe.

The engine casting still has the holes for the kickstarter. But you would need to weld a ring gear on the clutch basket, install all the kicker components, and then get a 1979 sprocket cover to pass the shaft. Then you have to relocate the rear master cylinder. A lot of work, but it has been done by diligent Ironhead fanatics.



The 1980 Sportster has the triangulated frame and dual disks like the 1979. It does not have a kickstarter, and you can see the older Prestolite starter motor.



The 1980 Iron Sportster has the same rear brake introduced on the 1979 model. The handling from the triangulated frame is quite good, and the bike stops well.



This 1982 Iron Sportster has the newer planetary electric starter, and the modern looped frame.



The battery size is similar to the 1979-81 models. The tank is bigger on this model.



This 1982 XLS model has the big ham-can air filter. Harley had a lot of trouble with noise regulations, so big air filters and big mufflers helped them quiet the bike.



The XLX model introduced in 1983 was a stripper meant to attract cost-conscious buyers. No, pink was not a factory color, but the XLX did target women riders with low seat height.



The XR-1000 of 1983 and 1984 had aluminum heads its as spirited as any Evo. Note the dual carburetors.



The XR-1000 had the exhaust exiting on the left side. Keeps your leg warm.



Bikes from the 1980s are prime candidates for chopping. This European bike started with a 1983 XL, you can see the modern looped frame.



The front and rear brake have been completely reworked by this builder. It looks like a custom gas tank and a race rear fender, topped with a nice paint job.



Other Iron Sportster choppers are a bit more radical. The builder of this 1981 chopper dispensed with the factory frame and most of the running gear.



Same radicality goes for this 1982 chopper.



Hardtails are the rage, a 1983 model.



And another wild 1983 chopper.

No matter if you want a stock ride or something to hack on, there are plenty of low-mile 1980s Iron Sportsters out there, so check out Craigslist and eBay and get started. Once you know what to watch out for, an old Iron Sportster holds up fine.