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### Road Tests

#### Riding Impression: 1999 Excelsior-Henderson Super X Motorcycle

In March 1999, we'd were anxious to experience more than press releases from Excelsior-Henderson, which was finally hitting production with its first model, the Super X. The bike turned out to be a more-than-passable first effort, but it wasn't enough to attract the continuing investment Excelsior-Henderson needed to survive. From the June 1999 issue of *Motorcycle Cruiser* magazine.

*On a sunny Daytona Beach morning in early March 1999, the Excelsior-Henderson Motorcycle Company rolled out its first -- and, as it turned out, last -- model for the press to preview. Within a year, though, the company was in financial trouble and would never produce any other motorcycles. The following was our impression of that bike after two riding sessions in two days.*



Photography by [Dean Groover](#)

For years we've been hearing about seemingly every development in the process of creating the Super X motorcycle, the first model from the new Excelsior-Henderson Motorcycle Manufacturing Company. Now the machine has finally reached production. As of early March, the company had produced approximately two dozen motorcycles. Although it wouldn't provide one for this issue's comparison, we did get to ride some almost-production examples of the air-cooled 1386cc, 50-degree V-twin in Daytona. We say "almost" because all of the bikes provided for the press ride were equipped with loud, factory-accessory exhausts.

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*Excelsior had done a lot of things right with the Super X, though the bike's unusual styling and uncertainty about a product from a new company made riders reluctant to buy, especially at its rather steep price. That caution turned out to be a good thing when the company was unable to secure capital to continue operations.*

who disliked the lines before they saw the actual bike seemed to like it better in the flesh, while those who admired its looks in photos were somewhat disappointed after seeing the real thing. However, all agreed the finish of the bike was better than they had anticipated and better than either of the other American-based brands.

The only fit-and-finish complaint we have concerns the exhaust system. The heat shield doesn't fully wrap around the header sections, making it kind of ugly from the left. The crossover tube has been blacked-out in an attempt to make it disappear, but it doesn't quite work. Oddly enough the company's accessory system doesn't address either point; it just replaces the standard mufflers, which are the prettiest part of the system to our eye. The generally high quality of the finish helps to justify the \$18,000 price, which puts the Super X at the top of the price spectrum.

Climb aboard and you discover a big motorcycle. Even though the handlebar bends back to the rider, the reach to it is longish. There is generous leg room, and the saddle is wide. However, the deep, bucket shape of the saddle locks you into one spot. The saddle seems plenty low, though we didn't measure it. Excelsior lists the seat height as "26.5 inches with a 180-pound rider."

With its port-sequential, closed-loop fuel injection, there is no need to choke the bike to start it. Just hit the starter button and it's ready to go. The engine shudders solidly at idle, an intentional bit of character designed into the bike. However, the vibration characteristics at higher rpm may be changed if customer input warrants this adjustment.

We were warned the hydraulic clutch would take some getting used to. In fact, clutch engagement was flawless -- although the engine had a slight flat spot right off idle which made us appreciate the excellent clutch even more. When we took a brief ride on a bike with stock mufflers later, the flat spot was gone. So it may be the factory's "racing only" exhaust system doesn't mesh with the fuel injection.

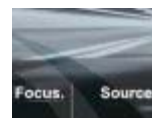
The heel-toe shifter was easy to use, giving smooth, quick, positive and reasonably quiet gear changes. Neutral was

Much of the bike's styling is based on the manufacturer's effort to link itself with the original Excelsior-Henderson company, which succumbed to the Great Depression. You can find these styling cues in major components like the leading-link fork and its routing through the fender. It also shows up in more subtle touches, such as the frame's front downtubes which bend to follow the curve of the back of the front fender.

The distinctive styling has created both admirers and detractors, but an interesting thing happened when people actually saw the motorcycle. Those

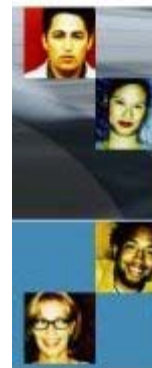


*To make a connection with former and mostly forgotten Excelsior-Henderson, the new version attempted to use styling cues from those bikes of the 1920s and 1930s. The gauge cluster mimics the original Super X. It includes a tach, digital odometer and a fuel gauge (backed up by a low-fuel light). The left fuel cap is a complete dummy.*



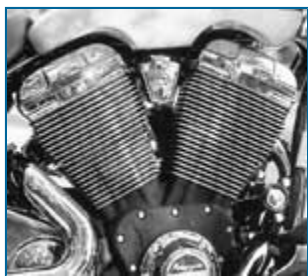
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*Excelsior-Henderson thought that the cutouts on the bottom of the tank, required to make room for the tall OHC cylinders, were attractive. Many potential customers thought otherwise. The ignition lock framed by the cylinders operates with the special key removed, so your key chain won't scratch the finish. The 50-degree engine has four valves per cylinder and dual overhead cams.*

damping as well as spring preload.

Cornering was a pleasure. The bike was steady and stable, and the suspension worked well here too. The response was on the slow side but steering effort was not excessive. The folding floorboards touched down fairly early and if you continued to lean it in, something solid dragged quickly.

Using single discs on both 16-inch wire-spoke wheels, the brakes were adequate but not particularly powerful, despite the dual-piston design.

The gearing is pretty tall in all five gears but the engine makes enough torque down low and horsepower up high to pull it strongly. At 60, the tach shows a bit more than 2000 rpm in top gear. Third gear will run past 80 mph on the speedometer. Even though its displacement suddenly seems slightly puny in an era of 1500cc and 1600cc V-twins, we suspect the Super X will be one of the faster bikes in the class. However, we'll defer any final statement on the subject until we get a longer ride on a bike with a production exhaust.

Throttle response is precise and linear throughout with no abruptness or dead spots -- except that one just off idle with the loud exhaust. It reaches the 5500-rpm redline without drama. Power tapers off; it doesn't stop suddenly as happens on some bikes with rev limiters.

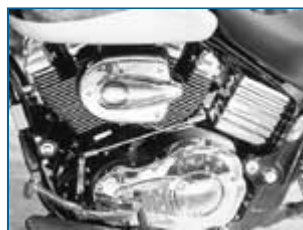


*Excelsior-Henderson felt that the leading-link front suspension was a key element in conjuring up some link to its so-called heritage from the original company of the same name. It worked well and had some advantages over a conventional telescopic*

sometimes elusive, and if we came to a stop in one of the top (fourth or fifth) gears we couldn't get it to shift back down to neutral.

Low-speed handling was manageable, with none of the weight the front suspension might suggest. There is adequate steering lock for tight work, though the outside bar is a bit of a stretch at full lock. The engine also works smoothly and willingly in traffic, with good power through a wide range. It pulls well from approximately 1500 rpm, though you get some belt snatch below 2000 rpm. Riding in town also made us appreciate the single-button, push-to-cancel, self-canceling turn signals and the accessibility of all switches.

Although the ride is firm, the choices of spring and damping rates mean it is rarely harsh. The front suspension in particular was effective in soaking up bumps. The leading-link design doesn't dive during braking, so you still have the full four inches of travel even with the brakes working. Eliminating braking dive also reduces the amount you and your passenger are pitched forward while stopping. And you don't need to adjust for changing front-wheel trail or chassis pitch if you corner while getting on or off the brakes. The single-damper (under the saddle) rear suspension adjusts for



*E-H put its airbox on the left side of the engine and gave it a unique shape. The engine incorporates the gear primary drive and the five-speed transmission in the same unit.*

Vibration intrudes above 4000 rpm. The floorboards buzz pretty hard at that engine speed, causing your feet to slide off. At lower-rpm levels, less troublesome vibration comes at you through the saddle. Even though the handlebar is mounted solidly, it only buzzes at very high rpm, though the mirrors blur a bit above 3200 rpm. The fork's exposed springs shake and quiver at all speeds.

The tall, turned-back handlebar made us work hard to hold on against wind pressure at high speeds. A windshield would get high priority on our accessory shopping list for highway use.

Although it's obvious these bikes weren't high-mileage samples and our ride was limited, we saw nothing to concern us. We did smell something worrisome, however. We were at the back of a group of eight or 10 Super Xs that had been running at an indicated 80 to 90 mph for several minutes.

*fork, but conservative cruiser buyers didn't like it.*

When we turned off the interstate onto a surface street, there was a strong smell of burning oil. We couldn't see any of the bikes smoking but we smelled the oil for the next 15 minutes as we worked our way through traffic. So it certainly emanated from the Super Xs in our group. We have no idea what the problem was or whether it came from more than one bike.

Even though our two rides were both brief (less than six hours total), what we experienced suggests Excelsior-Henderson has put its motorcycle where its press releases were. Handling, ride and engine performance all appear to be comparable with and perhaps better than much of the competition.

With such limited seat time and no side-by-side comparison, it's impossible to say exactly where we would have ranked the Super X among the other big twins. It also remains to be seen if, at about \$20,000 a pop out the door, the Super X has what it takes to sell the 4000 to 5000 units the company plans to build this year.

**Editor's note:** *When we tested a prototype of the American X, the telescopic-fork machine that was intended to be Excelsior's next motorcycle, for [our 2000 Big Twins Comparison](#), some of our complaints, notably that about vibration, had been addressed. However, by that time the Excelsior-Henderson company was already past the point of recovery.*

## SPECIFICATIONS

### 1999 Excelsior-Henderson Super X

Suggested base price: \$17,950

Standard color: Black

Extra-cost colors: Blue/silver, green/silver, add \$565

Engine type: Air-cooled, 50-degree V-twin

Displacement, bore x stroke: 1386cc, 93 x 102mm

Carburetion: Fuel injection

Lubrication: Dry sump, 4.0 quarts

Transmission: 5 speeds

Final drive: Belt

Tires: Dunlops, MT90HB16 front, MU90HB16 rear

Front suspension: Leading link, 4.0 in. travel

Rear suspension: One damper, adjustments for spring preload and damping

Fuel capacity: 5.5 gal

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