

# Commonsense riding practices...

## ***For riding in The Gorge or anywhere else for that matter***

Having ridden in and out of The Gorge extensively since 2000, I've seen my fair share of crashes. Enough so that I have plenty of statistics logged on circumstances involving many of the crashes. Having run a rally in The Gorge since 2003, I get to write up about a half dozen injury crash reports each year which must be sent back to the American Motorcyclist Association for insurance purposes. Not one of my favorite jobs, but it's a telling tale.

We now have hundreds of photographs of people riding motorcycles in The Gorge. They are also a telling tale. The pictures provide us a chance to look at how people are riding, what they're doing correctly and what they're doing wrong. No doubt they're going to ride the same way whether they're in The Gorge or somewhere else.

So I couldn't get into writing the third edition of this book without touching on the subject of rider safety and skills. During our rally each year we experience about a 3% crash rate, with about half those resulting in injuries. The most common are low sides and high sides due to overriding one's abilities, T-bones typically involving cagers, group crashes due to riding too closely and failed quick stops in general. There will always be crashes, but the more we can do to reduce them the better it is for everyone.

Through a basic motorcycle safety class provided by all States we learn...the basics. And in some cases that

keeps us out of trouble on the road. In others it does not, as we'll soon see. Skills authors and advanced riding instructors like Keith Code, David Hough, Lee Parks, Reg Pridmore, Doc Wong and Freddy Spencer teach advanced skills you can't get from a State-run course. Digging in deeper and constantly honing your skills will make you a better rider and more prepared for potential circumstances before they happen. What I'm going to cover here are some techniques they teach as well as a few I've come up with on my own for dealing with the twisties and groups of riders.

## **RIDE WITH A PLAN**

Before I get started, I have a little motto to take with you each time you ride. This one comes from my friend Bruce Scott, who got it from Freddy Spencer, who got it from...well, who knows? The motto is "RIDE WITH A PLAN!" Remember it every time you ride.

I'm going to cover about a dozen things in this chapter and like any motorcycle instruction book or class it's just not possible to ride away and work on each point all at the same time. So take one thing from this chapter and focus on it next time you ride. When you've mastered it and it becomes second nature to you, move onto the next tip and work on it. I sometimes spend a few weeks just working on one element of my riding. All of a sudden you realize you're doing it without thinking about it and an ear-to-ear grin ensues.

## **RIDING BEYOND YOUR ABILITY**

Are there times you scare the hell out of yourself by riding over the center line when you didn't mean to, stopping too short or you feel the bike starting to slide out from under you? You are riding beyond your ability.

We've all done it.

Your bike is capable of doing the things you want it to do, but you may be lacking the technique required to get through a turn without having a heart attack, make a quick stop or avoid an obstacle when it appears. If you're having these experiences with regularity, it's time to figure out why these things are happening and what you can do to curb such circumstances. Every time you don't do something about it you're one step closer to your next crash and you may be endangering other riders around you as well.

Have you taken a basic riding skills class? If you answered 'no,' sign up for one sooner rather than later. If you answered 'yes,' ask yourself the next question – 'Have I taken an intermediate riding skills class and do I take one about every two years to brush up on skills I may be letting slide?' If you answered 'no,' sign up for one and get an instructor's point of view on where you can improve your skills. If you answered 'yes,' then ask yourself – 'Do I read riding skills books, take additional classes such as instructional track days and other classes offered in my area. If you answered 'no,' it's time to move your skills to the next level through the various educational opportunities available to you.

Whatever your skills level and wherever you plan to take yourself next, it's important to remember one thing. If you get a notion that you are over-riding your abilities, it's time to slow down, relax and work more on your technique.

## **TECHNIQUE BEFORE SPEED**

Take the three words above and let's reverse them. Speed before technique. Ouch. That's a recipe for a crash right there and it's one of the most common reasons why people crash.

Everyone can go fast but not everyone has the technique to enter a corner without grabbing a handful of brakes along the way and getting into a high side or low side incident. Work on your technique at slower speeds and before you know it, your comfort level will increase and you'll start seeing higher numbers on the speedometer as you leave turns.

I'm not endorsing any sort of high speed antics here, mind you. With the right bike, the twisties along a State Route like Washington's Highway 14 are quite fun even at the legal speed limit. And yet we've seen numerous crashes where riders were too hot for their own abilities in turns. They had not developed basic skill sets to handle simple cornering maneuvers.

Using 'technique before speed' as a guideline, I find cornering much more exhilarating, safer and, overall, much more fun.

## **NEVER RIDE FASTER THAN YOU CAN STOP**

Never ride faster than you can stop. The concept seems to make sense. But have you ever recited the statement... at 60 mph in a blind turn? Try it and you'll see what I mean.

There are going to be times in your motorcycle riding history when you'll need to make a quick stop, avoid the unexpected and make it through the situation hopefully without crashing. If you can do that at any point during your ride, then you're probably having more fun riding your motorcycle and doing it more safely than others around you who may be having a tough time.

For one of my 'ride with a plan' exercises, I ask myself the question 'am I riding faster than I can stop?' whenever I think of it. It seems to naturally come to mind when I notice I've overridden a turn so I slow down for awhile and focus on the question for the next few miles of

twisties. At that point, I fall back into the ‘technique before speed’ scenario and begin enjoying the ride again. The smile returns to my face and I’ve had a better ride for it.

## **ELBOWS BENT, DOWN AND RELAXED**

So let’s get into a technique at this point. Have you ever gone into a corner, felt like you were having to work to keep the bike on track and feeling a bit overwhelmed coming out the other side rather than exhilarated? I was having this issue so I had an instructor watch me ride and it all became clear. I was extending my arms in turns rather than leaning forward bending my elbows. David Hough calls this ‘riding with your shoulders’ because essentially all the pressure and commands to the handle bars are emanating from your shoulders, rather than your wrists and hands, leading to less control and less confidence as a result.

Bending the elbows in the turns will transfer all the work of controlling the bike to the wrists and hands which is right next to where the action is anyhow – in the handle bars.

On some bikes, bent elbows are often a natural occurrence, such as on a Goldwing, a cruiser or maxi scooter. On a sportbike or sport touring bike it’s less likely the ergonomic norm. Sit on your motorcycle upright with your spine straight up and down and see if your elbows are bent or fully extended.

If they are fully extended you have two choices. You can lean forward to get them bent in the turns, or you can add a set of bar risers to the bike to get the handle bars where they need to be so you always have a bend in your elbows while sitting upright. You’re looking for about a fifteen-degree bend here.

The next question is where are your elbows when

you have them bent in a turn? The correct position would be down which will once again allow the wrist and hands to manage control of the bike. If they are up, say at shoulder level, that will tend to lock your wrists.

Finally it's time to do the flapping test. As you ride through a turn you should have your elbows bent, down and so relaxed that you can flap them a bit like a bird. This would be your final check to know that the wrists and hands are in control.



*Getting these elbows down will greatly enhance the riders confidence in the corner. Photo by RJ Myrup (rjs-s.com)*

## **FIXATION AND INATTENTIVENESS**

Fixation is what happens when you're riding along in a group and you realize you've been spending copious amounts of your riding time looking at the brake light and license plate of the rider in front of you...instead of noticing that 15 mph warning sign...you just passed...too late...you just crashed.

Whether you're in a group ride or just following a four-wheel vehicle in front of you it's easy to get fixated

and it's one of the top reasons people crash. They lose sight of what's going on around them, miss important warning signs and the next thing they know there's a tow truck driver on the scene pulling their bike from a ditch with a cable winch.

Keep your head up and constantly scan ahead and around you as you ride.

Inattentiveness occurs when the road hasn't changed much in a while such as riding on an interstate or slabbing on a straight section of a State highway. It's one of the most common crash reasons listed on State crash records. Staying alert can mean the difference between avoiding a T-Bone collision with a left-turning car or going to the hospital.

We all have those moments when several miles of road goes by and we have no recollection of the scenery we just passed through. If this happens it may be a signal that it's time to stop, take a break, have a little hydration and snack and start anew on your journey.

## **PEER PRESSURE TO KEEP UP**

Are there times when you feel like there are a number of riders in your group who can outride you but you need to keep up with them no matter what? Either they or you are creating a bit of pressure on you and it's time to take stock in the situation and end it.

Never feel like you have to keep up with riders who ride better or faster than you. If you need to, drop back to the back of the group and let them go ride their own ride while you ride yours at your own pace and ability.

If you plan to ride in the back, it's a good idea to have an understanding of the route and stopping points before you leave. That way you won't have to stay up with the group to know where to go next.



*This is a prime example near Mt. St. Helens of what can occur if you fixate on the rider in front of you. While the rider in front completed the turn, this bike and its rider did not focusing on the rider in front, rather than the 15 m.p.h. sign.*

## **SMALL PODS RATHER THAN LARGE GROUPS**

One day during our rally, we had scheduled a group ride to Larch Mountain in Oregon. Forty people arrived and were supposed to follow the ride leader. The first challenge was getting forty motorcyclists over the Bridge of the Gods through the toll booth on the Oregon side. Sitting on the Bridge of the Gods isn't such a bad deal... until you look down. Through the grated bridge you can watch the Columbia River moving swiftly forty feet below. Not so fun if you're not fond of heights. The ride leader got the group to the final road and let the group

sort it as to who was going to go first, second and so on. Inevitably friends want to stay together and before you know it you've got a lesser-skilled rider sandwiched between a half dozen better-skilled riders in front and behind. Passing antics ensue, fixation occurs and before you know it someone goes down. This is nothing new in the world of motorcycling and it often ends with several riders going down trying to avoid the accident ahead.

Today during the rally we offer maps for suggested rides and encourage like-skilled riders to ride together in small pods of six or less. There's no specific departure time and we want everyone to ride at their own pace, not someone else's. By moving to this format we have managed to cut our accident percentages in half.

You can do the same thing with your own group whenever and wherever you ride.

But here's another added benefit to this format. Food establishments loathe it when a dozen or more motorcyclists enter the doorway all at once. Space the pods out by five-to-ten minutes with the faster group in front. When the first pod arrives it allows them time to get seated and put their order in before the next pod arrives. As a result, you'll be better received by the wait staff and cooks when it's meal time.

## **THE FOUR SECOND RULE – *THAT'S RIGHT - FOUR***

In State-run motorcycle safety programs, we are taught that when riding in a group it's good to space ourselves out by one to two seconds. I suppose that's nice but frankly I get a little fed up watching riders in my rear view mirror, seeing the group unsafely bunch up in corners without enough space for everyone to effectively execute a proper delayed apex maneuver safely.

So one day I pulled my riding group over and went

back to the rider behind me. I began the conversation by applauding him on his group riding abilities to stay a few seconds back and stay staggered. I then noted that by doing things the way they teach us in an approved motorcycle safety class wasn't allowing him to have the best ride. He agreed. I suggested he get four seconds behind me and see if anything changed. He was happier and so was I. Now we were having a great time.

By putting four seconds between you and the rider in front of you allows you to have all the room you need to enter and exit corners, not fixate on the rider in front of you. You are riding your own ride rather than someone else's.

It also allows the rider in front of you to feel less pressure to keep moving by always seeing a rider directly behind in the rear view mirror.

But someone might get lost? No. As long as each member knows to pause at the next critical turn until they make eye contact with the rider behind them before turning (also known as leap frogging) no one is going to get lost.

## PAVEMENT CHANGES

The Gorge area covers several counties. Each county maintains their own pavement. This means that pavement can change in an instant from sweet asphalt to gritty chip seal at the instant of a county line. Or vice-versa.



*Riding this close together is truly a recipe for disaster. Where would you escape if you were in the middle and needed to avoid a potential obstacle?*

There are also sections where the road can change to gravel with little advance warning. It's a common occurrence on Forest Service roads, throughout the Northwest and elsewhere. If you're planning to ride a street bike on Forest Service roads, use a good atlas such as those produced by Benchmark Maps to determine if your proposed route is doable on a street bike. All pavement routes in this book were verified 100% pavement at the time of publication.

## **THE DELAYED APEX AND TWO OTHER CORNERING TECHNIQUES**

There is a lot of information available concerning cornering technique and use of the Delayed Apex technique. Essentially if a rider goes wide in a turn and crosses over the center line this typically indicates the rider started the turn on the inside of the lane close to the shoulder.

Over the years, the Delayed Apex technique has been developed and refined by riding skills masters like David Hough. The concept is to begin your turn on the opposite side of the lane in the direction you plan to turn – i.e. begin a right turn near the center line, begin a left turn near the shoulder line, then focus your line of travel toward the inside edge of the turn reaching the inside of the corner just past the midway point of the turn. Didn't comprehend what I said? Read it again slowly and imagine the layout.

For more details, there are three things you can do. Pick up a copy of David Hough's *Proficient Motorcycling*, search the term 'motorcycle delayed apex' on the internet, or discuss the topic with someone who understands it already.

Another critical technique that will keep you out of trouble in the turns is looking through the turn. If you've

ridden motorcycles for a while, you've no doubt heard the term 'look where you want to go, not where you're going.' Eye's up and looking to the next place you're headed will help keep you from having a low side crash because your eyes went to the wrong place.

Keeping your eyes level is also essential to staying on course. As you turn your motorcycle and lean into the turn, your head will have a tendency to go on the same angle as your lean. But your brain is better suited for making the calculations of your next move if you keep your head level and don't lean or tilt it into the turn.

Combine these three techniques together (if you don't already) and you will most likely find yourself having much more fun in the twisties and doing it with more confidence.

## **THROTTLE/BRAKING CONTROL**

There are reams of verbiage about throttle and braking control. If you've never studied the topic, start with the initial basic concept. It's a good idea to get your braking done before you enter a turn. If you're still braking in the corner there could be two reasons for it. The first is the most common – you've entered the corner too quickly. Doing so can lead to the bike sliding out from under you and leaving you in a bit of pain.

The other reason could be that you understand the more complex ways to utilize brakes and throttle together in cornering to reduce weight transfer between the front and rear of the motorcycle. For someone interested in moving their skills toward an advanced level, this is one method worth checking out more, but won't be covered here.

## **BIKE SWAPPING**

Not the same as wife swapping, but the results can

sometimes be just as disastrous. On more than several occasions we have seen crashes that involved bike swapping. The reason is obvious: rider gets on a bike they are unfamiliar with and attempts to do more than they are comfortable with on a strange steed. The next thing that occurs is often a low side or high side crash. Not good. Think before you swap. Really.

## **GEAR UP**

I'm impressed with the way people at our rally gear up. For the most part, attendees are dressed for the crash they don't plan to have and as a result injuries are reduced greatly for those who do go down.

But that's not the norm. In fact, in a recent study we found that 83% of riders in the Northwest aren't dressed for the crash. They may be wearing tennis shoes, blue jeans or one of those helmets that looks more like a soup bowl. Let's look at what proper riding attire is in this new day and age where technology and economics make it affordable for everyone to dress for the crash.

***Start with the helmet.*** You like your chin? If you don't wear a full face helmet, seriously consider upgrading to one. Those half shell and three-quarter shell helmets will do little to protect your face and chin if you launch off your bike unexpectedly. They take a little getting used to, but once you've worn one a few thousand miles you'll feel naked with anything less.

***Riding jacket.*** A good riding jacket should have CE rated armor at the elbows, shoulder and over your spine. Levi, letterman and stylish bomber jackets do not. CE rated armor can often mean the difference between having a broken or fractured bone in a crash or not. In a minor crash having CE rated armor often means the rider

will walk away from the crash with little pain. Without it your chances of injury can greatly increase.

**Riding pants.** Ditto on the jacket sermon above. Add chaps (horse pants) to the list of gear that doesn't come with CE rated armor. Hey if you want to protect your legs, and why wouldn't you, might as well get some decent protective gear. But there is the question about "why wouldn't you" and the reasons are varied. Too hot, too sticky, too stuffy, too bulky are a few of the common ones. The solution is simple. Wear only a wicking base layer under your riding pants and all these symptoms disappear. Blue jeans and other cotton pants are the cause of these symptoms once you dump them you'll be far more comfortable in a pair of CE rated riding pants.



*The boots are a start but there's plenty of road rash to be had for these two if they come off the bike today. All the gear, all the time.*

**Gloves.** The choices are many. Look for gloves that offer good protection across the knuckles and palms. Garden gloves don't. When travelling for long distances, carry three sets at all times. A light set for riding in the heat, a medium set for typical days and a heavy set for fierce rain and cold moments. Regardless of the weather when you leave, you'll often be glad you've taken all three each time you ride.

**Boots.** Not tennis shoes, not sandals, not Birkenstocks, not cross trainers. When you ride you can greatly reduce your chance of injury to your ankle and feet

by wearing a quality pair of over-the-ankle boots specifically designed for motorcycling. A stiff ankle area means you're less likely to twist your ankle in a crash and for those who have done that very thing, they may be happy to tell you the dramatic details of their recovery. It's no fun.

## ADDITIONAL READING

- Proficient Motorcycling, David Hough
- More Proficient Motorcycling, David Hough
- Street Strategies, David Hough
- Sport Riding Techniques, Nick Jenatsch
- Total Control, Lee Parks



*Blue jeans or camo pants will do little to protect your legs in a crash.  
Photo by RJ Myrup (rjs-s.com)*