

Traffic Safety Newsletter



Issue 27

**Backseat
Rider**

**Spring
Cleaning**

**Our Tools,
Our Skills,
Ourselves**

**Visibility
Tips &
Tricks**





BACKSEAT RIDER

Safety Techniques for Riding with a Passenger

by Alan Tyson

It's not uncommon for motorcyclists to give friends or family members a ride on their bike. When you love something, it's natural to want to share it with others. Of course, there are plenty of differences between riding with a passenger and riding solo. A rider should be aware of these differences, and know how to compensate for them.

The rider should first make sure that they themselves are ready to ride with a passenger. Passengers affect almost every aspect of riding, from the acceleration and braking to the cornering and suspension. The motorcyclist should already be a competent, experienced rider before they offer anyone else a ride. A rider's first passenger should be someone with experience riding motorcycles, ideally as both a rider and a passenger. A great place to practice is an open parking lot. This will let the rider get used to the weight and momentum differences without worrying about a panicking passenger or oncoming traffic. Once a rider learns to compensate for the effects a passenger may have on the motorcycle, they may consider more complex roads and less experienced passengers.

Before riding with anyone for the first time, the rider should explain to their passenger how a motorcycle works and what the passenger's role is on the bike. They should know where to hold (around the rider's waist or on passenger handholds, if the bike is equipped with them), where not to put their legs (the hot, moving parts of the engine), and what they should do in a turn (hold tightly onto the rider's waist, and look over their shoulder in the direction of the turn). During this instruction, you should watch your passenger's reactions, answer their questions, and at the end, make an honest judgment about whether this person is ready to ride with you. Remember that the passenger is at far greater risk of injury than the primary operator, and that you are solely responsible for your passenger's safety.

Not all motorcycles are equipped to handle a passenger. Check your manual for your bike's maximum carrying weight, and make sure the suspension and tires are adjusted to support another person's weight. This will improve the bike's handling and keep you from hitting the suspension's bottom range, which can cause both a loss of balance and injury. The seat should have

enough room for another person, and the bike should have passenger footrests installed. Also be sure that your passenger's legs are long enough to reach the footrests.

The passenger should wear all the same gear a responsible rider would; including a DOT-compliant helmet, riding jacket and pants, armor, boots, and gloves. If the passenger is not used to wearing PPE, the rider should inspect their gear to ensure it is fitted and adjusted properly. Some passengers may not understand the importance or use of PPE, and the rider is responsible for explaining this important facet of riding to their passenger.



An easily-overlooked aspect of taking a passenger is finding a way to communicate with each other while underway. A common method is to use touch signals, either a tap on the chest or back, a squeeze of the rider's waist, or whatever works best for both the passenger and rider. A more expensive option is using helmet communication systems, either aftermarket or built into some bikes. Regardless of your method, the two most important signals a passenger should be able to give a rider are "slow down" and "stop." Make a habit to review these with your passenger before every ride.

One very important rule that should be communicated to any novice passenger is that once they are on a running motorcycle, they don't get off until the rider instructs them to. Passengers should, at least for their first few rides, focus entirely on not interfering with the bike's balance and following the rider's instructions implicitly.

If your passenger becomes interested in someday switching places on the bike, suggest that they take a training course. Who knows, maybe after they take the course, you'll end up with a new riding buddy!





SPRING CLEANING

...and refilling, and lubricating, and testing, and...

by Mark Davis



Your bike's wiring and electrical system, including lights, should be inspected after a long winter. The battery also needs some attention.

When the days get longer and the temperature starts to rise, motorcyclists get spring fever. They want to get on their motorcycle and ride. It's not always as easy as that if your motorcycle has been laid up for the winter, though. Even if you are ready to go, your bike needs a little attention first. There are plenty of steps that a rider can take to keep their motorcycle in good condition during the winter months, and if you've taken those steps, it will probably make your life a lot easier when spring arrives. Regardless, you should still take some time to examine your bike in detail, just in case.

Every piece of the motorcycle should be examined before riding. The tires should be filled to the normal air pressure level listed in the owner's manual (the pressure listed on the tire itself is the maximum pressure, and shouldn't be referred to when refilling the tires), and the tire's tread should be examined. A good trick for checking tread depth is to stick a penny, with Lincoln's head pointing down, into the tire tread. If you can't see the top of Lincoln's scalp, you have enough tread. If you can, you'll need to invest in a new tire or two. While you're looking at the wheels, check your brakes as well, including the pads, shoes, rotors and drums. Again, refer to your manual for the recommended measurements for these components.

All of the control cables, hoses, and wires should be tested to make sure they respond properly and haven't suffered from any fraying or chaffing. Mice and other garage pests will sometimes chew on cables and wires, which can lead to serious problems. The hoses and throttle may need to be cleaned and lubricated. The throttle in particular should be tested to make sure it is neither too loose nor too tight. You don't want to lose control of your motorcycle's throttle just when you're getting used to riding again.

Test all your light bulbs, including the often-overlooked license plate lights, and replace any that don't come on or which have dimmed significantly. Many motorcyclists keep their batteries on a tender or maintainer over the winter, as this will prolong the battery's life. If you have done this, you should still take a voltage and load reading from the battery; even good maintainers can't guarantee that a battery which has gone unused for a long time will hold a charge.

It's a great idea to start fresh with brand-new fluids for the engine, transmission, and drive shafts. Make sure your levels are correct and that your bike hasn't sprung any leaks over the winter. Inspect your chassis, including your forks and shocks, looking specifically for leaks or binding. Check

the bearings in steering necks and swing arms. You'll also need to check the drive components, including the chain, belt, and drive shaft. Look all over the bike for excessive rust or corrosion that may have eaten away at metal surfaces. Last, but not least, inspect the side and center stands for loose bolts or bearings. Lubricate if required, then check the springs for proper tension. You don't want either of your stands to drop down in the middle of a tight corner. Finally, inspect your muffler to make sure nothing has built a nest in it. You and the critters will get an equally nasty surprise if you try riding with a clogged exhaust.



The kickstand, chassis, and all other metal parts should be checked for rust and corrosion



Checking your tires and shocks will ensure better stability and control as you take your bike out for that first spring ride.

This maintenance and inspection session is also a great opportunity to re-familiarize yourself with your motorcycle's parts and processes. Your skills and knowledge as a motorcyclist have been in storage just as much as your bike has, and while you're getting your vehicle ready to ride, you should be doing the same for yourself.

When you're testing the brakes, you're also reminding yourself to use the back and front brakes together, smoothly and progressively. When you're examining the tire tread, you can also review the best ways to maintain traction on roads which might still be slippery. Even if your bike has remained in pristine condition over the winter and you barely have to do anything at all to get it ready, it's still a good idea to re-learn how your motorcycle works and how to ride it smoothly. You'll be doing yourself as much good as the bike – probably more.



OUR TOOLS, OUR SKILLS, OURSELVES

"If the operator is not in working condition, then neither is the rest of the vehicle."

by Alan Tyson


Technology can make our lives easier, simpler, more efficient, or more fun; motor vehicles are perfect examples this. Technology can also make us safer, but even with advances by auto manufacturers and new safety legislation, cars and motorcycles have never really been considered "safe." Or rather, we the operators are the ones with the bad track record.

It seems that the prevailing attitude among many motorists is that our techniques, skills, and experience are meant to kick in when our technology fails. As long as all the safety features are working properly, we can allow ourselves to be distracted or convince ourselves that we can multitask while we drive or ride. We end up trusting our vehicle to keep us safe. This is entirely backwards. Automotive safety technology can make us safer, but it cannot, by itself, make us safe. Even the most advanced brakes are useless to a driver who isn't paying enough attention to know when to use them, and all the protective gear in the world will do no good for a motorcyclist who doesn't know how to put it on properly.

When you operate a vehicle, you become part of that vehicle, as important as the engine, steering, or tires. If any one of those were outdated, faulty, or simply didn't work most of the time, you'd replace it with another, better piece of equipment. Why, then, would you ride with rusty cornering skills, or drive on winter roads without knowing how to keep from fishtailing on



slippery surfaces? Keep in mind that if the operator is not in good, working condition, neither is the rest of the vehicle.

We trust our technology to do its job, to keep us safe and keep us going, but the people who make that technology are entrusting us to use it properly. Taking a refresher training course is a great way to brush up on your skills. Avoid distractions and keep alert while you are driving or riding. If your vehicle is equipped with advanced safety technology, take the time to learn how it works, and what you can do to work with it. Technology is always getting better, and it can help us stay safe. Can and will, however, are not the same thing. If our airbags, brakes, armor, and mirrors are all improving, shouldn't our skills be getting better as well? 

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Visibility tips & tricks

by Alan Tyson

Many traffic accidents happen because one or more motorists could not or did not see a dangerous situation developing. Maybe this means a driver didn't check their blind spots, maybe a motorcyclist's visor was too dirty to see through, or maybe a pair of broken taillights made a car all but invisible at night. Improving your visibility, both your ability to see and others' ability to see you, can prevent a potentially serious accident. Here are a few tips on how you can do this.

Angling your side mirrors just a few more degrees outward can help dramatically reduce your blind spots. The Society of Automotive Engineers suggest that angling your outside mirrors so that they just barely overlap with the inside mirror will offer a driver much better side visibility. Being able to see a wider area behind you can greatly aid you while switching lanes or slowing down. This will also give you an improved view of pedestrians and other obstacles in a parking lot when you're backing up or pulling out.

This setup may take a bit of getting used to because you'll just barely see your own car in your mirrors, but in the "traditional" mirror setup, what good does being able to see your own car really do for you? While turning your head to check your blind spots is still necessary, adjusting your side mirrors for a wider view will improve your rear visibility while your head and eyes are pointed forward, as they will be for most of a drive.

Your headlights are critical to safe night time driving. Over time, the assembly holding your headlights, high-beams included, can start to loosen and fall out of alignment. Thankfully, this process is so slow that it can be counteracted by tightening the screws and bolts that hold your headlights just once a year. You'll need a screwdriver and a little free time to do this, but it's really not much different from changing a bulb, except you can skip right to re-tightening the screws. This simple procedure of an annual headlight adjustment check can improve your visibility significantly and will allow other drivers to see you better.

Perhaps the simplest thing you can do to improve your visibility is to clean all your transparent surfaces regularly. This includes your windshield, windows, mirrors, headlight housings, and for motorcyclists, your helmet visor.

For your windshield and windows, be sure to clean the inside, as well as the outside, to reduce glare. There are plenty of different cleaning solutions on the market, but with few exceptions your best, and certainly cheapest, option is to just use water and auto wash soap.

If you use a glass cleaner, be sure not to use it on any transparent plastic, such as light housings and helmet visors, as glass cleaner can actually warp and permanently fog them. Fortunately, there are plenty of good cleaning products on the market specifically for these parts. If you want to save a little money, toothpaste does a pretty good job as well. Spread a little toothpaste, say two morning brushings' worth, on a lightly damp cotton rag and gently wipe the surface with a circular motion. Let the toothpaste dry and sit for a minute or so, then wash it away with water. The toothpaste will not only clean the housing or visor, but it can actually help repair scratches and scrapes, as well, which will help with the glare problem. Follow up any use of toothpaste with a good buffing.



Finally, a use for all those little "travel tubes" of toothpaste you can never get rid of.

Finally, make sure all your lights are working, including your turn signals and taillights. Letting other drivers know where you are and what you're doing will help you as much as it helps them, because they will know when to give you room to pull into their lane or to put on their brakes right after you do.

Making good decisions starts with having as much information as possible, and most of our information comes to us through our vision. Why shouldn't you make your own vision as good as it can be? 