

ASK THE RIDING COACH

With Rapid Training Coach Ryan Decarteret

'I'm looking to upgrade to a bigger bike. Is it a mistake?'

Q I'M PLANNING ON buying a new bike in the next few months and I'm tempted by the Triumph Tiger 1200. My current bike is a Honda CB500X. I know it's a big jump but I'd really like more speed and power.

From a riding point of view, what do you think? Am I making a mistake?
Stuart Kirkham, Bristol

A You're certainly not crazy for thinking about it, Stuart. For most of us, a bike isn't a sensible choice; it's a passion, so it makes sense to go with your heart. I fully approve of that! But – and I suspect you knew one of those was coming – when the jump is as big as the one you're talking about, you need to go in with your eyes open.

The Tiger is a fantastic bike but it's a

full 100bhp up on your CB.

The problem I sometimes see with riders who have made that sort of jump is that they're not in full control of the bike – it often seems to be in

charge of them. So, for example, it gets away from them under acceleration and then they have to panic-brake to get it back down to a manageable speed. It's difficult to gel with a bike you're battling.

But this shouldn't be quite the problem it used to be because of modern electronics. If you put the Tiger in Rain mode for the first couple of weeks, for example, it will still seem extremely fast compared to your CB, but there's less chance of it taking you by surprise. Also, be aware that the bigger fairing and plusher suspension will disguise your speed so you may approach hazards much quicker than you'd planned.

Another problem might be the extra 50kg. Lots of riders tell me they've dropped their big bike in a petrol station or car park, which understandably saps confidence and enjoyment and can trigger a downward spiral of nervousness about the bike. You need to be realistic – if you're at the stage where you occasionally nearly drop the CB when moving slowly, the Tiger will introduce a new and unpleasant world of low-speed anxiety.

So what's the answer? You don't mention what you want to use the bike for but, assuming it's for Sunday blasts, occasional commuting and perhaps the odd weekend away (ie, not purely

two-up touring),

then there are plenty of lighter alternatives. The Tiger 660, KTM 890 Adventure and Yamaha Ténéré 700, for example, all weigh little more than your CB but have easily enough power to get your heart racing.

The trick is to be honest with yourself and what you want the bike for. Once you're in the showroom, it's all too easy to fall for something like the Tiger 1200 without considering how well you'll be able to ride it. On the other hand, if you find a middleweight you like the look of, you could spend a couple of years honing your skills on something that boosts your confidence rather than chips away at it. And let's not forget, these middleweights are not slow! You'll only really notice the extra power of bikes like the Tiger 1200 if you're two-up or overtaking lines of cars.

My final bit of advice is slightly predictable. If you're smitten on the Tiger 1200 – and as someone with three 1000cc-plus bikes in his garage, I totally get that – one easy way of increasing your chances of gelling with it is to get some quality coaching. A good coach can give you the techniques and confidence to use its performance safely, which means you'll love that Tiger rather than fear it. **R**



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'Is it worth moving my weight around on the bike?'

Q THERE'S LOTS OF riding advice about what to do with your upper body but what about my legs and feet? Should I have the balls of my feet on the pegs? Am I really meant to cover the back brake at a standstill? Is it worth moving my weight around?
Nigel Christian, Epsom

A Starting with your feet, I'd recommend that when you're riding on motorways or dual carriageways, you sit as comfortably as possible, which probably means having your insteps on the footpegs. But on a twisty, technical road, putting weight through the balls of your feet makes more sense because it's easier to

activate your legs and use them as shock absorbers for your body.

Lifting a sniff of weight from the saddle lets the bike move around below you and helps limit how much you're bounced around on top; apart from being unpleasant, it can also cause accidental steering and throttle inputs. Being on the balls of your feet also means that using the rear brake has to be a conscious decision and can stop unnecessary comfort braking. I don't recommend covering the front brake all the time for the same reason.

There is a safety element to having the balls of your feet on the pegs on twisty roads too. If you have your insteps on the pegs and splay them out like a duck, you risk decking out your toes when cornering. The results of that can be frightening; if you're not expecting it, you'll instinctively lift the bike and straighten it up, which is far from ideal.

And don't keep your left foot under the gear pedal. On a bumpy road, it's just a matter of time before the foot bounces up and knocks the bike into a higher gear mid-corner.

You ask about shifting weight, which is a good question. The reason racers move their butt to the inside and hang off for corners is mainly to shift their centre of gravity so the bike can go faster at maximum lean (ie, before anything touches down or the tyres give up). If you need to do that to get round a

corner on the road,

I'd argue you are going way too fast to have an acceptable safety margin. Also, on modern bikes, ground clearance shouldn't be a problem at road-riding speeds, so what's the point in shuffling about and risking destabilising the bike?

Saying that, it is worth leaning your upper body into the bend, so your head moves towards the inside mirror. Besides shifting your centre of gravity in the right direction without affecting stability, this puts you in a strong position to actively steer the bike – but that's a discussion for another day.

When coming to a stop, lots of riders are confused about what order to do things. I wouldn't recommend the Hendon Shuffle (named after the London police training school) where you brake with the right foot, put the left foot down when you stop, then put your brake foot down, then lift your gear foot up and put it into neutral, then put that foot down and the other on the brake.

In reality, the camber of the road is much more important in determining which foot goes down. If the road is flat, I stop on the front brake and put my right foot down. This gives me the choice to nip it into neutral and rest my clutch hand or pop it into gear and get going without the Hendon dance. **R**



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▼ Weight to the inside of the corner is useful, knee-out less so



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'How do I get back into the groove after winter?'

Q **LAST SPRING** I bought myself a new bike but I couldn't bring myself to use it over winter so I guess I might be a bit rusty. Any ideas on getting back in the groove?

Sarah Jessop, Kendall

A **YOU'RE HALFWAY TO** overcoming the first problem because you're aware that your hibernation might be an issue. Winter lay-offs tend to manifest themselves in a couple of ways – rusty machine control and a rusty road-reading brain, both of which can create havoc if you're not prepared for them.

The rustiness probably won't be in basic muscle memory – you'll still manage a smooth pull-away – but it could present as tightness and tension in your upper body, so your elbows

might be locked and it'll feel like your bike isn't steering properly. Coupled with this is the fact that your brain will have gone off the boil after a winter of – I

guess – using a car, so you won't be looking as far ahead as you should and your timing will be out of kilter.

In itself, this wouldn't cause problems because you would just ride to your limits and take your time. The trouble is that at the end of the summer, you were probably floating beautifully in and out of bends using well-honed acceleration sense and judging neat overtakes to perfection. Generally, our memories of these highs are so strong that when the first dry road of spring arrives, there's a risk we try to replicate them, oblivious to the fact that our skills are below par.

And that can be seriously bad news. A lot of Rapid coaches are ex-motorcycle traffic cops and they all talk about the number of bike crashes at the beginning of the riding season. Most of these are bend-assessment accidents, where riders simply went in too fast for their ability, target fixated and binned it.

The first part of the solution is to keep things ticking over during winter. Driving your car with your biker's head on is one way to do it, so instead of just cruising along, monitor the car in front's bend assessment – are they timing their acceleration and braking well? Is yours better? Identify bad cambers, changes of road surfaces, where there's gritty grip and where there's polished bitumen

slip. Driving like a rider will help keep your brain sharp.

I'd also recommend spending £700 or so on a winter bike – something like an old CG125 would be perfect. Riding this will help keep your eye in during winter, albeit at slightly lower speeds than a sportsbike or big adventure bike. And if you get an off-road bike, there's a good chance you'll find your machine-control skills have improved come springtime.

Either way, how you approach your first few spring rides is crucial and it sounds like you're on the right lines: you need to accept you won't be quite the rider you were last September. The skills will return but until then, you'll need your sensible head; going out on your own rather than with mates can help.

You need to get the practical things right too. Put some air in the tyres, check the chain and make sure you've done all your kit up properly – it sounds daft but if you're rusty and also fiddling about with zips, the chances of a mistake are magnified.

And finally, if you want to shortcut your way to post-summer skill levels (or higher), consider some rider training. I know I would say that but I've seen it so many times – just one day with a good coach can send riders into summer with their skills better than ever. **R**



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▲ Take things easy for your first few spring rides. It'll come back like – ahem – riding a bike



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'I seem to get spooked a lot. Is there a way I can turn down the fear?'

Q I was talking to a more-experienced rider the other day and he mentioned that he can't remember the last time he had a scare. I was shocked because I have them on every ride – it's not like I nearly crash, but I get jolts of adrenaline when I suddenly see a car, or think the bend is tightening. How do I ride scare-free?
Jim Clements, Bury St Edmunds

A Jim, you're not alone. Every motorcyclist knows the feeling: you barrel into a corner, something you're not expecting happens and – bingo – you get the fear. Within milliseconds, your heart beats faster, adrenaline is coursing through your

bloodstream, your muscles clench, and you get a mighty sweat on. This biochemical reaction – often called the 'fight or flight' response – was useful when humans lived in caves and had sabre-toothed tigers to worry about. But it's exactly the opposite of what you actually need when a bend tightens up or a car pulls out. But you can beat it.

The best way is to avoid it in the first place. The fight or flight response can be horribly dangerous – when your arms tense, you can't steer properly because you can't make the necessary inputs to the bars and, with blood diverted away from your brain, you literally can't think straight either. A bloodstream full of adrenaline doesn't help the decision-making process.

Vision and planning are the key to avoiding all this because, on a bike, fear reactions are often triggered by surprise – a bend suddenly tightening, a car poking its nose out of a junction etc. The trick is to reduce the number of surprises to an absolute minimum by looking as far ahead as possible and planning your ride – from what you've said, my guess is you could dramatically improve both. As you ride, consciously check where you're looking and, if it's not as far as you can possibly see up ahead, lift your vision. By doing this, you might have picked up clues about the tightening corner from the line of the

hedgerows before you went in, for example.

You can train yourself not to panic too. If you practise enough, you can become hyper-aware of the importance of a relaxed grip on the bars and you'll intuitively relax in a difficult situation. This might sound impossible but it's definitely not – plenty of good riders do it (and almost all racers). And if you develop heightened steering feel – we recommend practising on track – you will naturally look round the bend and apply the correct pressure to the bars in a tight situation. Training can make a massive difference.

Finally, because you mention regular scares, I'd question whether you're pushing yourself too hard – perhaps because you're riding with faster mates. The trick here is to wind down the wick and use what psychologists call acclimation, where you become accustomed and confident with something that had previously triggered fear. On a bike, this means ditching the fast mates for a while and riding at a speed where you never get a fear reaction. If you spend this time developing your skills, you'll find speed will be a natural consequence of your improved technique and you could easily ride for years without a scare. **R**



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▼ Anticipation can help avoid scares and their side-effects

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‘Is there a particular technique for riding in the wet?’

Q THIS WINTER I bought some RiDE Recommended waterproof kit and have been riding a lot more. However, I've realised that I'm riding like I do in summer, just slower. Is there a particular wet-weather technique?

George Yeomans, Cheltenham

A FIRSTLY, GOOD ON you for getting out when the weather isn't perfect. Modern tyres and clobber mean you can have fantastic rides in the wet and that means you get a lot less skill-fade over the winter. Also, it sounds like you've got the basics right,

as all the principles of good riding – vision, planning, machine control and so on – apply whether it's wet or dry. But there are some extra things to think about when the roads are wet.

On a dry day with a road surface like sandpaper, I'll ride on the perfect line for vision, using as much of the road as possible to see through the corner, then creating an apex when I can see the exit. But on a wet road, I compromise that line because my speed will have dropped, so I probably don't need as much vision but I do need better grip. And that will probably mean riding somewhere slightly different to avoid low-grip areas. You need to be able to stop the bike within the distance you can see and, in the wet, that might be easier to do if you're riding on a grippier section of the road than if you have slightly more vision.

One of the things to look for is stone content. It's the stones in the road that give the grip, not the tar – that's just there to hold the stones in place – so you need to avoid parts that have been polished by the traffic. That's probably the biggest difference when it's wet – you're actively searching out the best bit of road to ride on.

It's the same principle with hazards. Around wet roundabouts, for example, you're looking for the line that keeps you the most upright because there's

probably oil and diesel and you don't want to be leant over. And avoiding manhole covers and white lines is important too – you need to see these in the early stages of your scan, make a plan to avoid them and then not look at them again.

How do you feel for grip in the wet? It's difficult. You're looking for feedback, which is what makes the difference between a nice set of tyres and an ordinary set. You usually get a feeling of slight uneasiness, sometimes a mild floating sensation, as you approach the limit. It's really the sort of thing you should only learn on track.

Saying that, most people are over-cautious in the wet. The coefficient of friction of a wet road is roughly 30% lower than a dry one and most riders' speed reduction is far greater than that. Part of the problem might be that you're not fully relaxed. When I'm following someone as conditions deteriorate, I often see tension build in their shoulders, and then they get locked elbows. You can't ride well like that.

When it's wet, it's important to relax and trust your tyres; if you've got modern sport-touring rubber, there is no reason why you can't have a brisk, smooth, enjoyable ride in the wet. Icy roads are a different matter though... **R**



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▼ Relax, stay loose, look ahead and find the grip



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