[Skills]

Be a gizmo master

Bike festooned with 'rider aids'? Rapid Training's Ryan Decarteret explains how to get the best out of them – and your riding

Before we get into the many advantages of electronic rider aids, let's be clear about one thing: they play a minuscule role in making you a better rider. Put a great rider on an analogue Honda CB500 and they'll ride circles round an inexperienced rider on an electronic-laden Ducati Multistrada V4 S. Semi-active suspension and cornering braking are no substitute for looking in the right place and making a plan.

That said, electronics can definitely make life easier. Mostly that's because they do certain jobs so well that, once you trust them, you can devote more brain power to other matters – ideally things like assessing hazards rather than pondering your tea options...

PIC: JASON CRITCHELL

ABS

You can use ABS to practise hard braking on a quiet stretch of road, safe in the knowledge that if you overdo it the ABS will stop the front folding. Just be very careful there's nothing behind you. More generally, ABS is a safety net. If you're pushing so hard that you set off the ABS, you're riding too aggressively and have nothing in hand should something unexpected happen – you've already used your reserve parachute.

MODES

It's worth exploring these to discover what works for you. Don't dismiss Rain mode – I had an S1000RR in my old job [as a surveillance rider for the National Crime Agency] and Rain mode was brilliant in town in bad weather; it let me concentrate on the job rather than how to deploy 200bhp on greasy tarmac. Personally, once I've found my favourite mode, I stick with it – there's a lot to be said for your bike feeling like it always does so you don't have to expend brain power acclimatising. My S1000XR has been in Dynamic Pro mode for 40,000 miles.

ANTI-WHEELIE

Theoretically this could be used as a performance aid, but like TC (below) the advantages are mostly mental – if you know you're not going to flip the bike you're more likely to have the confidence to accelerate faster out of corners. And for most of us, we'll still be nowhere near a corner exit wheelie even when we feel like we're really on it.

TRACTION CONTROL

Some riders say you can use this to test the level of grip by deploying a handful of throttle in a straight line and seeing if the TC kicks in. I'd question how useful this is, because grip changes so much even on a short stretch of road – you'd have to do it all the time to be sure. What TC can do is allow your brain to concentrate more on other things. If you trust the TC you can devote slightly less brainpower to precise throttle control on a wet road, and more to vision and planning, for example. But it's a marginal gain – I wouldn't recommend just whacking the throttle open everywhere.

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RAPID SINCE 1997

> 'If you're pushing so hard that you set off the ABS, you're riding too aggressively'

CORNERING ABS

You could, in theory, practise hard braking in corners using this. But I certainly wouldn't risk it. It's there to save you when that tractor suddenly appears on the wrong side of the road, not help you get round bends faster.

SLIDE CONTROL

Primarily used in pubs, where mates will be impressed that your bike has it. If anyone asks if it's ever been triggered, change the subject.

QUICKSHIFTERS

Fantastic, but they don't add much to road riding performance. In fact, with auto-blippers [which match revs to road speed on down changes] if you go to a bike without one, remember you'll probably have skill fade and won't match revs to wheel speed on downshifts like you used to for a couple of hours.

SEMI-ACTIVE SUSPENSION

This is fantastic, but like modes, I find it's best to find the setting you like and leave it there so the bike feels familiar. Obviously use the pillion and luggage settings when necessary so the bike stays level.