

HOW TO FIX BIKING'S MOST COMMON RIDING MISTAKES

The new season means many of us are coming back to regular riding a little rusty. These hints and tips will help any rider get more from those first few rides back – as well as be a refresher for hardened winter warriors

Words John Westlake Pictures Adam Shorrock



▲ Don't expect your riding to flow as smoothly as it did if you had a lay-off over winter

OVER THE LAST 25 years, Rapid Training's coaches have watched hundreds of riders making thousands of mistakes over hundreds of thousands of miles. But here's the thing: the same errors keep cropping up. If you've been riding for a while, it's easy to assume you won't be making these mistakes but Rapid's experience says there's a good chance you will. Even when they train serving police motorcyclists, they often see the exact same errors creeping in. The uncomfortable truth is that unless you're getting constant feedback from an expert, you may well have picked up a few bad habits. And maybe a few dangerous ones. Here's what you need to do to help make your riding mistake-free and full of fun this spring.



YOUR EXPERTS



RiDE's favourite motorcycling training organisation, thanks to its realistic approach to how we ride, is staffed by a combination of trained police instructors, emergency riders and former racers. Designed to meet the needs of real bikers rather than ticking boxes, we like their attitude and instructor Ryan Decarteret is our riding skills columnist. You can find out more about Rapid Training at www.rapidtraining.co.uk

WHAT'S GONE WRONG HERE?

The rider isn't shifting his weight and the result is stiff arms, more lean than there needs to be and a strange feel to the bike. You don't need to get your knee down but shifting your upper body into the inside make a real difference, relaxes you and helps you to turn

1 LOOK UP, LOOK AHEAD

“I can almost guarantee that you’re not looking far enough ahead,” says Rapid coach Clive Shepherd, a vastly experienced ex-police motorcyclist and instructor. “This is the single most-common blocker to competent, confident riding. By not seeing what’s coming next, we are not giving ourselves time to do something about it. And it’s not just about spotting the bad stuff; it is also about identifying the overtaking opportunities or the wide-open straights where we can safely exercise that 200bhp we paid a lot of money for.”

Fellow Rapid coach Giles Lamb agrees. “Lines? Overtaking? Planning? Bend assessment? They all depend on good vision. It’s the foundation that all our other skills are built on. Before trying to fix anything else on this list, I’d suggest concentrating on this one – once you’re really good at scanning the horizon and reading those limit points, then you’re ready to move on.”

“To get better at this,” says Clive, “I’d recommend knocking your speed back by 10% and working at seeing just how far in front you can see. If the road goes right, for example, look right over the hedge, through the



field gate or whatever and spot the articulated lorry that you’ll meet in the middle of the next bend. You’ll be amazed at just how much extra information is out there once you give yourself the chance to look properly. And don’t worry about the speed you knocked off – once you get the hang of this, you’ll effortlessly go a lot faster.”

3 FOOLS RUSH IN

“I see a lot of riders waste time rushing into areas where they haven’t a hope of efficiently carrying speed safely,” says Clive. “Challenging bends, nasty crossroads, blind crests and slow-moving large vehicles are just some of the situations where it’s easy to go in too fast and feel uneasy. Of course, this prevents you from getting back to the gas and makes you slower over any given piece of road.”

“A lot of experienced riders, especially ‘advanced’ riders, try to carry too much mid-corner speed,” says Rapid coach and ex-National Crime Agency surveillance rider Ryan. “Lean angle is ultimately risk,” agrees Giles. “While we all enjoy the buzz of cranking a bike over, expert riders understand that the sooner they take away lean, the

sooner they can exploit the massive performance of a modern bike. If your mid-corner speed is too high, you add risk – compromising your ability to stop quickly if you need to – and you’re probably killing your exit speed. Follow an expert road rider and they’ll make their pace safely on corner exit, rapidly pulling away from riders whose mid-corner speed was higher. The plan is to use the slowest part of the corner to turn the bike and tee-up a monster of an exit.”

Clive sums up: “As any decent track or road rider will tell you, slow in and fast out (if it’s safe) is the way forward.”



2 TURN YOUR HEAD

“Many riders struggle to detach themselves from the front of the bike and always look straight ahead,” says Giles. “Whether cornering or pulling out of a junction, you often need to look at 90° from the front of the bike while leaning, and a lot of riders struggle with this.”

► **Keep your head on a swivel**
– hazards aren’t always directly in front of you

“It’s because humans are predators,” explains Clive, “so our eyes are in the front of our skull rather than the sides. That means we need to turn our head to get the maximum information – which on a bike is often not directly in front. Moving your eyes is rarely enough.”



► **Understanding how the throttle affects the bike as a whole can help when it comes to stability**

4 UNDERSTAND THE THROTTLE

“I coach many riders who regard their throttle solely as a control to go faster or slower. These riders tend to have little understanding of how their throttle affects weight transference, geometry, grip, turning in or standing up, so they end up fighting their bike rather than working with it,” says Clive.

“They often say they can’t understand why sometimes turning is so hard and other times, it’s so easy. The answer is to learn and understand how a bike works and why.

“For example, being off the gas helps a bike to drop into a turn and conversely, why getting on the gas again helps lift the bike out of one.”



BE CAREFUL WHERE YOU GET YOUR RIDING ADVICE FROM

"There's a lot of nonsense on YouTube," says Clive, "with people saying they have a brilliant system for getting round corners quicker. Most of it is unhelpful and some of it is plain dangerous. I know I would say this, but the single most effective thing you can do to improve your riding competence and confidence is to pay for a professional, highly-trained riding coach. A good one won't be cheap but they will develop skills you'll have for life."

WHAT'S GONE WRONG HERE?

Our rider has turned in too early and is carrying too much corner speed, so they have run wide on the exit and stand a good chance of a crash. Turning in later, carrying less speed and getting out better is way safer and quicker, too!

5 TURN IN LATE FOR MAXIMUM VISIBILITY

"An old school classic racing line on the road can be a very poor choice," says Giles. "By peeling in early, you limit your 'see and be seen' vision and there's a chance you will run wide on your exit – the line in generates the line out." Ryan sees this a lot when he's coaching, too: "It's often due to riding too fast. Riders will turn in early because they're worried about making the corner at the speed they're doing, then get into bother on the exit. If they reduced their entry speed a touch, they could wait for a late apex – when they can see the exit – and then get the bike turned and then blast out." This way you're using the key part of a bike's armoury – acceleration. It also makes for effortless, safe and fun progress and you're stressing the tyres less, too."

Practice makes perfect when it comes to achieving this and we'd recommend trying it again and again on a bend you're familiar with. A 90° right-hander is a good place to start. Firstly, approach the corner as you usually do and note the point that you change direction. Now try entering the corner a little bit slower and starting the direction change a fraction later, but turn in harder than before. See how the corner opens up, allowing you to get on the gas? This also improves the visibility on blind corners and works well in the wet. Slow in, fast out is the key.

6 DON'T CLAMP YOURSELF IN

"I see many riders who unwittingly hamper their bike's ability to turn because they're clamped on to the handlebars like a human steering damper," says Giles. "Relaxing our grip on the bars is one of the best things we can do to improve handling."

7 DON'T LEARN TO RIDE BY WROTE

"There are some great books out there with comprehensive lists and instructions on how to ride," says Ryan. "But some riders go overboard on applying it in every situation. The problem is that riding is a flowing and ever-changing risk assessment and you haven't got time to keep thinking about what rule applies where. Great riding is based on certain principles but how you interpret them differs for every rider and situation."

8 SHIFT YOUR WEIGHT A LITTLE BIT

"A lot of riders instinctively push the bike down into corners, so their body is more upright than the bike," says Ryan. "Either that or they don't move at all and remain in line. I'm not suggesting we should all be hanging off and trying to get our elbows down, but a slight lean into the corner with our upper body can make a big difference. The bike will stay more upright for a certain speed, meaning your tyres have more grip and you have more safety margin."

Turn in late for maximum vision and to avoid exit issues

9 USE YOUR BRAKES

“Riding on acceleration sense alone is not efficient or ‘advanced,’” says Ryan. “Showing a brake light isn’t a sign of poor planning as long as braking was part of the plan. As the old adage tells us; ‘Gears to go, brakes to slow.’”

Giles explains the upshot of this mistake: “I see riders who tie themselves in knots because their default bend approach is ‘do it with engine braking’. All too often, they arrive at corners having taken a couple of gears and are still going too fast – cue panic braking and scrappy riding. If they’d got on the brakes 200m earlier, there would have been no drama at all and they would have been quicker – and smoother and safer – overall.”

“Braking touch is important too,” adds Giles.

► By now, any braking should be done. But be smooth...



“Plenty of riders grab and dump their brakes instead of starting and finishing smoothly. For maximum performance, the front tyre and suspension need to be eased into their work under braking, not jolted.”

10 ALWAYS HAVE A PLAN

“Once riders have worked on their vision and are seeing hazards or opportunities for fun nice and early, the next mistake is not acting on that information and just carrying on at the same speed they were going before,” says Clive. “A really competent, fast road rider is constantly re-assessing what’s next and doing something about it – they don’t just float along. That’s why they are fast where it’s safe to be fast, and why they always look so effortless.” **R**

► Make sure you keep looking and assessing the hazards constantly

