



STREET SKILLS by Jon DeVecchio

Take Control of the Situation

“Street Skills” is a feature to get you reflecting on your riding skills and habits. Each article will give you something to think about or work on to sharpen your riding skills for more safety and enjoyment. The articles are written by Jon DeVecchio, the author of Motorcycling streetSkills Flashcards and host of the streetSkills Motorcycle Safety Podcast. Visit www.streetskills.net for more information.

With the riding season underway in most of the country, riders are taking to the streets once again on two wheels. When reaching for those familiar controls, the rider instantly remembers how to use them. But what are they really remembering?

I considered skipping the topic of basic motorcycle controls operation until realizing that lack of control leads to crashes. If we are so good at riding “basics”, then why are so many of us crashing?

Don't think crashes are that big a problem? Statistics aren't readily available on the annual number of motorcyclist crashes. The data focus on the fatalities, which in the past decade has averaged about 4,500 per year. I estimate that more than 150,000 riders have an incident per year, given that there are about 150,000 emergency room visits per year from motorcycle-related crashes. Many incidents do not result in

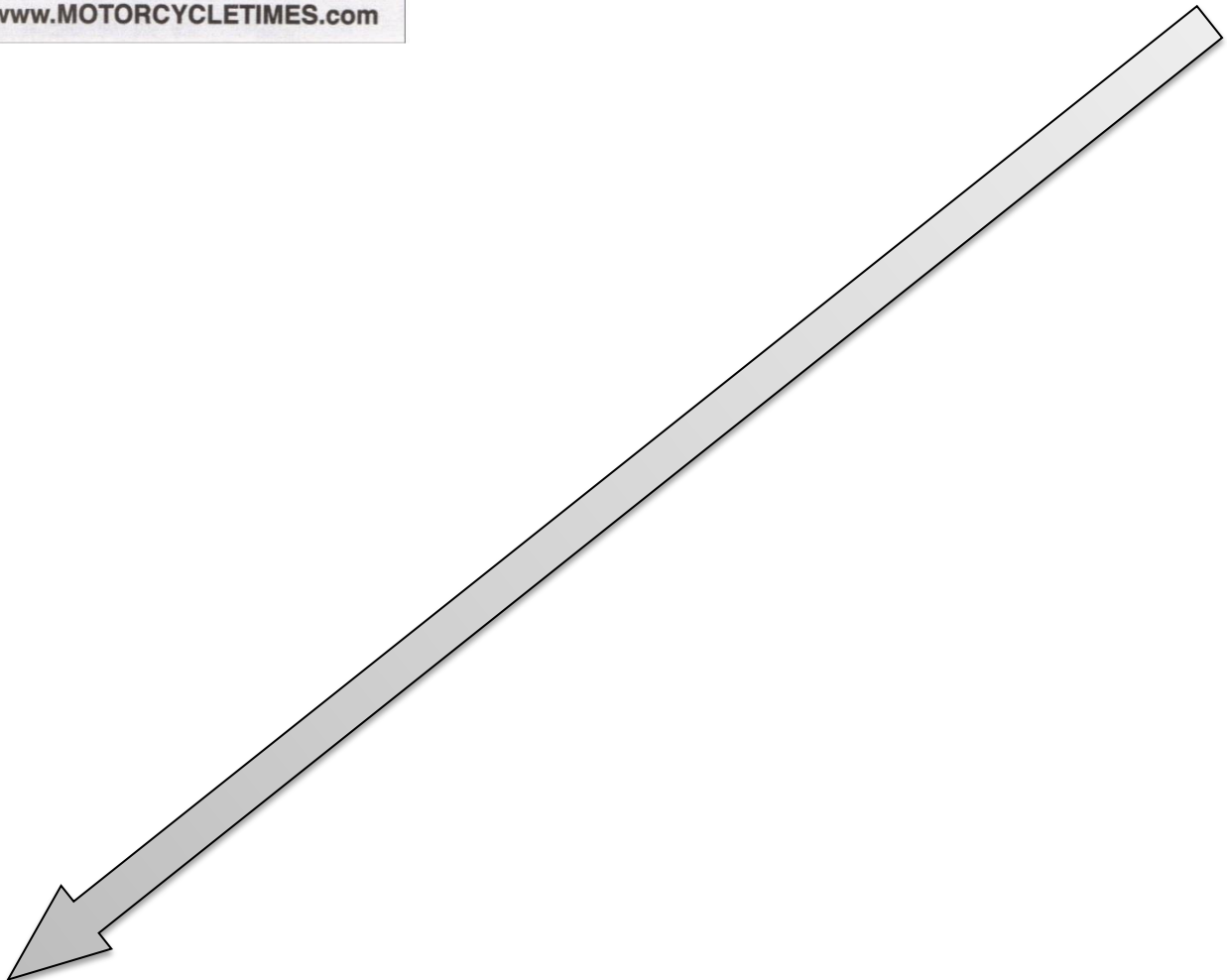
treatment, so that figure could be fairly low.

Could better control of our motorcycles help reduce this number? I think so. Let's run down the list of basic motorcycle controls, how to best operate them and the potential benefits of mindful usage.

Handlebars are the main control item on a motorcycle. We find many other controls mounted there, but we use the handlebars to steer the motorcycle. Steering control is necessary to direct where we want to go. A unique aspect of a motorcycle is that it switches the steering technique on us riders constantly. The technique for steering at low speed is turning the front wheel in the direction we want to go. But then once underway and speed increases, that technique does not apply and riders have to press the grip of the desired direction to go that way (counter steering). The greatest benefits from effective handlebar use are better cornering and swerving skills.

Your brakes are important controls. Be aware that the front brake provides much more stopping power than your rear brake on any surface. Unless overlapping throttle with braking, I recommend four fingers on the lever for greater stopping control. Four fingers may give you better feel to smoothly squeeze in the lever. Good technique includes an initial slight squeeze on the brake until contact is made between the pads and rotor. Then, increase squeezing pressure as required. The front brake demands greater finesse when the front wheel is turned at low speeds. Practice your quick braking skills periodically.

Even though the front does most of the work, rear brake control is essential to effective slowing and stopping. Just remember not to press your foot too hard on the lever initially, as you may lock up the rear brake. Slowing during low speed maneuvers, like in a parking lot, is the perfect opportunity to



use the rear brake. The greatest benefit of proper braking is the ability to stop your motorcycle at any time necessary, especially in an emergency.

Improper clutch control probably isn't responsible for as many hospital visits as embarrassing motorcycle drops in front of onlookers. The clutch is our gateway into the friction zone: the space in which the clutch starts to engage as you release it. The friction zone is where we should keep the lever during most low speed maneuvers, combined with throttle input. It should also be noted that every time the clutch is squeezed in, it is eased out slowly. Proper clutch use gives the rider ultimate control of power delivery.

Probably the most thrilling control is the throttle, which is rolled on and off smoothly. A flat wrist position is ideal. The riding benefits of more throttle include increased motorcycle stability and crisp acceleration when needed. However, many crashes are the result of speeding, so try to use your throttle sensibly.

The gear shift lever is another simple control to use, but more difficult to truly master. Finding the right gear for the situation takes thought and experience. Whatever riding situation, you should be in a gear that allows quick acceleration to place the motorcycle where you want in an instant. Too low a gear and the motor will scream for mercy. Too high a gear and the motorcycle will seem unresponsive. For example, if a car backs out of a driveway unexpectedly you should be in a gear that allows you to zip in a direction of safety. Another example of keeping in the appropriate gear would be when passing a vehicle. If in too high a gear when passing, the motorcycle might lug and take excessive time to pass. Intersections are danger zones for riders. So strive to remain in first gear when waiting at a stop light. This will make it easier to maneuver during any sticky situation, especially one developing behind you.

Lastly, the engine cut-off switch should be used as designed. During proper engine start up and shut down procedures, riders should get in the habit of using the cut-off switch (a.k.a. the "kill" switch). It's easy to use without removing your hand from the right grip. Just thumb it on or off. The first benefit of using the switch properly is that there is zero chance the engine will run without the rider's intent. Using it as directed will create muscle memory. There may be times when you want the engine off immediately. An example of this could be when the motorcycle starts

tipping to one side and your concentration focuses on regaining balance. If you are in the habit of using the cut-off switch, it will be easier to manipulate in a predicament.

If you are a new or returning rider, you simply cannot ignore basic motorcycle proficiency. Experienced riders can also benefit by getting back in touch with the basics. Consider that the majority of veteran riders that complete a basic skills course after many years of riding praise how much they learned over a weekend. There are more controls on your motorcycle not included in this article. I suggest reading your owner's manual for proper use of those secondary controls and practice their opera-

tion.

Current motorcycling statistics reveal that there are more riders on the road today. With increased motorcycle registrations and high gas prices, our numbers are growing. We can expect that basic skills will be more important than ever to preventing crashes. Fortunately, many of us will not crash. So the main benefit to basic control skill is your greater enjoyment and pride in riding.

Have a fantastic 2013 riding season!

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