

Saddle Time

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Riding skills... *It's all about saddle time!*

You can read until your brain is foggy but if you don't get out there and do it, you won't be gaining skills and improving your survival skills. Consider for a moment the plight of recreational pilot. He/she is obliged to fly a minimum number of hours in a specified period of time just to maintain the privilege of piloting an aeroplane. No competent pilot that I have ever met considers the regulation minimum hours to be even remotely enough air time to maintain their edge and keep on top of the game.

Where does that leave motorcycle riders? The skill set required to stay safe is comparable to flying and the hazards to personal safety just as great – but there is no set minimum for saddle time. There isn't even an expiration date on the driver's permit in some states – once legal, always legal – unless of course you run afoul of the constabulary.

My guesstimate is that an annual mileage of 3,000miles (5,000km) should be a minimum considered for keeping one's self in the game. Physical skills, mental aptitude, awareness of traffic and time; the old adage of "use it or loose it" applies equally to riding skills as it does to languages. Not just our bodies need the practice – our minds do too. Riding skills are perishable goods.

Too many of our fellow riders have a single season of experience which they keep repeating year after year. Their bikes have never seen rain – so the rider doesn't know how to ride on wet pavement. Likewise an aversion to gravel roads means that the occasional stretch of highway construction is met with angst and white knuckles and frequently a sliding motorcycle. The sudden necessity to swerve around an object in the line of

travel can cause grief as the instinct to direct-steer takes command over the ability to counter-steer (if indeed the individual understands counter-steering at all). Everyday occurrences that should not be

cause for concern for the skilled and practiced motorcyclist repeatedly cause crashes. These are almost always avoidable crashes that unfortunately get labelled "accidents" by all concerned – and very little is learned.

Somehow the maxim that "we learn from our mistakes" does not seem to sink in below the beanie for far too many riders.

For the novice rider, the tasks of shifting/braking/steering can

be all-consuming and leave very little brain capacity left for attention to the surrounding

scene. This is normal. Until the mechanics of operating a motorcycle are hard-wired and unconscious actions, then the focus of the ride cannot be thoroughly shifted to the ebb and flow of traffic around you. But mastering the basics of clutch and throttle is just the beginning – and there is no end to the learning curve! Skills development, whether undertaken under the tutelage of an instructor or not, is a lifelong commitment. If we close our minds to learning new techniques and better ways to keep ourselves safe, then we have already opened the door to potential calamity. And learning new skills is only part of the equation – we must constantly hone those skills which we already have, or they too will be lost.

In our world of seasonal riding we are doubly at peril of losing skills during the long winters. Not only can our skill set get rusty over winter, but in spring we have to contend with automotive traffic that has completely forgotten that motorcycles exist! Riding to and from the donut shop just isn't sufficient mileage to keep anyone in the game –



Allison in the saddle with her favorite passenger, her dog Cassie.

and doubly so if you dress to impress rather than dressing for safety conscious riding. Too many bikes have become fashion accessories or ego enhancements, without the commitment of the riders to really learn how to ride. This isn't doing the sport of motorcycling any justice – nor our insurance rates. On the plus side, many of these 'fashion accessory' machines have seen very little road-time and there should soon be a treasure trove of low-mileage, never-ridden-in-the-rain bikes for sale. Maybe this isn't such a bad thing...
Want to buy a nearly-new metric cruiser with ultimate chrome? Ride safe and ride often! --

Alison Green