

RIDE AGILE!



by **STEVE DOWSE** © 2007

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RIDE AGILE! Motorcycle Control SuperTips for FrontRunners

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WARNING

EXPLORING THE LIMITS OF YOUR SKILL, ATTEMPTING NEW TECHNIQUES AND PRACTISING SO AS TO STRETCH YOUR ABILITY INVOLVE INHERENT RISK. RISK CAN BE REDUCED, BUT NOT ELIMINATED BY:

- CHANGE THINGS A LITTLE AT A TIME
- WEARING PROPER PROTECTIVE CLOTHING
- ENSURING YOUR MOTORCYCLE IS CORRECTLY SET AND MAINTAINED
- OPERATING IN A CONTROLLED PRACTICE AREA

LINKS

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INTRODUCTION

Two skills limit how well you ride:

- What you are **able** to make your bike do
- What you **choose** to make your bike do

In the US, many riders first learn machine control skills on a MSF (Motorcycle Safety Foundation®) course. That gives a great start to novice riders and gets them up to the level to go out and gain practical experience of riding on the street. There are similar schemes in other countries.

You master the basics, learn to survive in a hostile environment where you are the only one without a steel cage as armor and become a competent street rider. What's the next step? How do you go from competent to good? From good to skilled?

If you have deep pockets and no time to lose, go to race school. Heck, some kids start competing so young that they don't qualify for a license to ride on the street. But those kids are a tiny minority. Most riders are not *driven* to race; it's not an overriding goal. If you enjoy motorcycling and want to improve your skills, raise your game without having it take over your whole life... then this guide is for you.

When you can control your motorcycle well, you can:

- Ride with confidence
- Go faster, safer
- Command respect from drivers and riders
- Deal with the unexpected
- Have more options in any situation

- Have a bigger safety margin with the same time and space limits

So it is definitely worthwhile putting some time and effort into improving your skills.

When you see an expert rider, whatever the circumstances, straight away you get the impression of 'man and machine in perfect harmony'. I say man, but when the helmet comes off you may find it's 'woman and machine in perfect harmony'. There are not so many women motorcycle riders but the ones there are tend to be good, very good.

GET FITTED UP

Forget any idea of 'one size fits all'. Your bike has to fit you just right if you want to have precision control. To change down smoothly under braking, your front brake and clutch levers must be positioned right. For smooth starts and slick changes the clutch bite point needs to be set right. A badly set gear-shifter can make you wobble and your changes slow up or down the box. Little things do matter. Even two people the same size may need to set a bike differently to fit differences in arm, leg and trunk lengths as well as riding style and personal preference.

Adjusting the controls 'spot on' gives you optimum control with maximum comfort. Each control action does its own job without disturbing balance or weight distribution, in an emergency that can be the difference between staying in control and coming off.

So let's look at how to do it.



Set that front brake

We want instant braking
Good 'feel'
Easy throttle blipping for smooth down changes

OK, in your normal 'at speed' body posture, reach out for the brake. It needs to be angled so that it 'falls to hand'. Try it eyes closed. If the lever is too high your wrist will bend up uncomfortably and it will be even worse as you lean back into your braking posture. If the lever is too low, it might feel OK in your sit up braking posture but it won't fall naturally to hand at speed.

Once you have found the small range of rotation of the lever that feels right for just braking, [work on braking and blipping the throttle](#) at the same time. Most times you do this, you will be in sit up posture under firm braking, slowing for a curve, but just occasionally you will want to brake and downshift while maintaining your 'at speed' posture. (I find this happens when aborting a passing maneuver and getting ready for the next chance).

Perfect blipping is most critical when under heavy braking because that's when rear tire is lightly loaded you are most likely to break traction with a bad downshift, so bias your final setting to favor this situation.

Set the clutch

Easier than setting the brake lever because your left hand only has one job. For me precision clutch control is most demanding when [maneuvering at walking pace](#), so I want the angle set for that.

The other thing to adjust is the clutch biting point. Two things are important here: low speed maneuvering and quick downshifts at speed. To get quick shifts, I want the clutch disengaged with only a part squeeze on the lever, not have to pull it up to the grip. For maneuvering and stop-start city traffic, you want the 'just engaging' point of the travel at the most comfortable and controllable amount of squeeze. Bikes with a heavy clutch or a long, draggy action can be a pain! One thing is for sure, you'll always ride better with your best compromise setting than the way it came. And if it is still a pain, maybe you should see if there are any upgrades or modifications available for your model.

Riding with 2 fingers covering the brake is a recommended technique – but it may require a different setting.

Set the rear brake

If you thought adjusting hand controls was fiddly, you ain't seen nothing yet!

The rear brake is the third control that needs 'feel' and feedback to the rider. Motorcycles vary in the pedal pressure and travel that's needed. You only need enough pressure to squeal, not lock(!), the rear tire at 70mph. The brake may be capable of more than this but you won't ever be able to use it, even with a failed front brake. If you have the confidence and control to rear tire squeal from 70mph down to 20mph, I congratulate you. You truly are a rear brake maestro. If not, please don't start practising at 70mph unless you are feeling suicidal!

Unless you are a maestro already, set your brake for maximum comfort and control when using it fairly gently for low speed work and slippery conditions.

The correct way to make adjustments may not be obvious, check out the manufacturer's instructions in the manual.

Make adjustments a little at a time. Remember that a pedal set too low could reduce ground clearance and the available lean angle. Look what other settings (peg position for example) are available on your model.

Set the gear shift

There is probably more variation in travel, weight, feel, crispness and adjustment in gearshifts than in any other motorcycle control. Just be glad you are not forced to use hand gear selection that was popular in the old days.

Read the manual to see how to make adjustments. Aim to be able to make quick, clean shifts both up and down

without repositioning your foot or straining your ankle. Be aware of possible ground clearance issues. When you reckon you have got the right setting just do a quick check to make sure selecting first at standstill with your other foot down still feels OK. This move is different because you are unbalanced and out of the normal body position. Sports bikes can be a bit awkward and tiring to ride in the city unless you get it right.

I hope you have got your bike set up to suit you now. I promise it will make a major improvement to your comfort and control. As you get familiar with the new feel, give yourself a little time to settle in, but don't be afraid to make further minor adjustments that get the total package working in harmony.

Setting the bike for precision control is groundwork [advanced riding](#).

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