

Tips for Club Riders, Especially First-timers with MSR

Ride your own ride. You are riding *with* a group, not necessarily *in* a group.

If you've not ridden with a group before you may feel either pressured or distracted or both. The key is to stay within your comfort zone for the first few rides and *don't* feel pressured to keep up with this group of spirited riders. There is no shame in bailing out at the morning break, reflecting on what you've seen and what you've learned about yourself and then deciding to come back, or not, for another shot.

Here are some points about feeling the pressure or distraction:

- You're tensed up, or you feel you're taking too many risks, or you're trying too hard to keep on the tail of the rider in front, or you're often correcting your line mid-corner or lastly you're looking in your mirrors to see if someone is on your tail. When you're tensed up, *you won't ride well*. Slow down.
- If you're just following the rider in front, you're letting them make the decisions. Don't. They might be a complete idiot and you'll follow them off the road. Or they might have 30 years' experience, three grand's worth of aftermarket suspension, and know the road better than the back of their hand. They'll be skilled and confident beyond your levels and you'll get into an 'oh sh*t' moment in the next tricky bend and lose it.
- Each time you check your mirrors you'll lose a second or two of data about the road in front. You can't afford this.
- If you feel pressured to keep up with the group just bear in mind that the fastest riders behind the leader get to do corner marking and that puts them at the back of the pack after each corner. Of course they'll fang past you after that; fine, let them.
- If you feel you're slowing the whole group and your riding has been unconfident and ragged, then speak to the tail rider at the first rest stop about leaving the ride.

Here are some other tips:

- Don't come out on a ride when you're tired or hung-over or have meds in your system. Your judgement and reaction times will suffer.
- Come out with tyres at the right pressure and with plenty of tread left.
- Come out with good protective gear. Denim jeans are useless. Tests show them to offer about half a second of protection when sliding down the blacktop. Get quality textile pants, kevlar lined jeans or leathers.
- Ask questions. There are *no* dumb questions. There's a lot of experience in the group about negotiating tricky conditions. Folk are happy to share it.
- Keep the liquids up and don't eat a heavy or fatty meal at lunchtime; that'll just make you sleepy.
- Tinted visors or sunglasses? Good in bright sun. But many of our rides go in and of shady areas. You may not see patches of damp or moss or fine gravel. Best not to use them.

The rides we do are wearing on rider and machine. They usually take 100% concentration for 100% of the time. It will likely take you a few rides to build up your stamina. As you do, while riding your own ride watch, what other riders do and learn from it. See how they set themselves up for a bend and how they power out of it.

Another tip is to ***look up and down the road ahead***. Don't just fixate on a spot the same distance in front. Keep your eyes moving. Check the long distance view to get a general idea of where the road is going. Are the road shoulders narrowing? Normally indicates a tightening bend. If zig-zagging from gullies to spurs, see if you can get a quick look across the other side of the gully to check for on-coming traffic and where the road is heading.

This longer distance view will set your maximum speed. Then rake the road with your eyes from the furthest view to something closer to check the road surface. This will decide your actual speed.

If there's a stick or rock or echidna on the road, register it and immediately look for ways around it. Don't fixate on it. ***You go where you're looking***. You may have to lean harder. If your bike is well fettled and you trust it, counter-steer hard and lean in. Evidence indicates that in these situations fixated riders are more likely to give up than their bikes are.

At speed on narrow roads with a centre-line, beginners tend to look at that line and that's where their wheels go. The bike will be on the wrong side of the road, unintentionally. So the trick is to look at an imaginary line between the centre line and the left shoulder. This isn't hard but takes a bit of practice.

For your first few months of rides, keep a generous margin of safety. Don't ride at ten tenths of your capacity. Bear in mind that many of the corners on our routes are blind, so keep some reserve in hand to deal with a road hazard. This applies to those new to the Club as well as old hands.

Riding the way we do has to be learned. It's not going to happen in the first few months. Give yourself time; watch, ask questions, practice. Doing one or two instructed track days is a very good investment.

Some days are good days; might be the weather, the moon, the roads or just our feeling on the day. Respect your feelings.

Note: all this is by way of ideas for you to think about. Your safety on the roads is your responsibility; you should learn, practice and have your bike and safety gear in top condition.

Ern Reeders

Honda Fireblade 954 and rider of 40+ years now.

Thanks for the comments made on a draft of this by John Rousseaux, Mark Rigsby, and Liz and Pete Weyemayr from which I've drawn liberally.

Created: 1-1-2009

Last updated: 1-6-2013