



STREET SKILLS by Jon DelVecchio

It's All About The Ride Text by: Jon DelVecchio

"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 DelVecchio, the author of Motorcycling streetSkills Flashcards and host of the streetSkills Motorcycle Safety Podcast. Visit www.streetskills.net for more information.

Have you heard the cliché in motorcycling: "It's all about the ride"? This expression suggests that the ride itself is so exciting that all other thoughts get lost in the wind. But is it really all about the ride? Many of us get distracted behind the bars.

Common riding distractions include weather, daydreaming, listening to music, conformity, electronics use, discomfort, and bugs just to name a few. The increased availability of low cost wireless headsets make phone conversations more convenient. So it is about more than just the ride for most of us.

So why are distractions so important to confront? The answer can be found in crash statistics. It is estimated that 80% of motor vehicle crashes are the result of a distracted operator. If it were truly "all about the ride", we would be more focused on the ride itself and crash rates would be lower. Be aware of your distracting behaviors.

Last week I was riding back roads to a motorcycle rally. My usual practice is to follow posted speeds diligently in small towns where the speed limits are set low. Off the beaten path places interest me and I find myself looking around at things. This day, heading through town I recall noticing a hot dog stand when a huge bug splattered on my face shield at the exact moment I rolled on the throttle. As I processed all these distractions a trooper passed going the opposite direction. I

looked down at my speed in horror and then in my rear view. Whew, that was close! But shortly thereafter I was having a roadside chat with the officer. My distractions only cost me a traffic stop. Had a more serious hazard appeared it could have been worse.

Here are some tips to keep us all more attentive:

- Double check traffic before pulling out and consider your timing. Be patient and wait for a larger gap in traffic so you begin your trip with an appropriate space cushion.
- Shift smoothly and deliberately. Make sure you're in a gear that allows for quick response if necessary. That could mean riding at a higher rpm than you are used to.
- Strive for a minimum 4-second following distance. The standard minimum is 2-seconds but 3-4 gives you a much better margin of safety. According to research, a rider has less than 2 seconds to avoid a typical collision. Why cut it so close? Give yourself 4 and you'll double your reaction time. And if you do get distracted by something, the extra second or two will be appreciated if needed.
- Create a 360° space cushion around you. Along with following distance, make sure to maximize your space cushion on the sides. While we can't fully control behind us, we can change lanes or encourage a tailgater to pass us.
- Ride as if you are "invisible" to other roadway users, but take a position where you will best be seen. Play "what-if" as you ride along. For example, "what if that car pulls out" or "what if there is gravel in this corner". Your mental exercises might pay off if a prediction comes true.
- Practice what I call "alert enjoyment". Alert enjoyment can be used to describe a mindset. Riders should strive to enjoy the sensations, but maintain a low level of adrenaline for heightened situational awareness. Make the choice to ride with precision. Various riding situations require matching levels of alertness and enjoyment. In other words, sometimes I'm being more alert (i.e. heavy traffic) or enjoying more (i.e. back road), but I'm always seeking a high balance between the two. The goal is to constantly confront the risk and experience joy.
- One other great tool to help us prepare for what lies ahead is a typical Global Positioning System (GPS). Set to the right zoom scale, a GPS can show you a live contour view of the road up ahead. For example, if there is a sharp right coming you'll see it from a quick GPS glance before you enter the curve. Many GPS units now include real-time speed limit information and additional features. Just be careful not to get too distracted using them!

Remember, it isn't always "the other guy's fault" when we crash. Half of motorcycle crashes are single vehicle events—just the motorcyclist is involved. And when a crash does happen with another vehicle, regardless of who was at fault, could it have been avoided if the rider were paying a bit more attention?

What is your reward for staying alert on your motorcycle? You might get back to the real reason you ride: for the unique experience of it. Try leaving the distractions behind and focus on the road ahead.

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