

Self Study

Text by Jon DeVecchio

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Not too many people like tests. They aren't much fun and may reveal our ignorance on a subject. Some think it's better to just wing it or cram right before, but that rarely results in high achievement.

When I recently asked my son why he studies so much, he replied, "The worst feeling in the world is not knowing the answer to a test question." So his solution is to adequately prepare for the possibilities.

Motorcyclists are tested constantly on the road. How well would you grade your riding smoothness, control, precision, and crash avoidance skills?

Just like school subjects, riders have a general idea of what's going to be on the test. But what specific problems we'll have to solve on a particular ride is anyone's guess. It would be best to rehearse and practice ahead of time to be ready for anything.

Perfecting a physical motor skill requires intense thought at first, for example, concentrating on sequential steps. From there, learners progress gradually by making slight adjustments that work for them until they are automatically doing the skill without conscious thought. This automation is called muscle memory and is vital to top physical performance.

Like it or not, the transition from novice to expert takes substantial time and effort. As it is with testing, short study sessions over time will produce better retention than one long study session the night before.

The learning doesn't only have to happen while operating a motorcycle, although actual experience combined with proper technique is the best teacher. The following tips and study aids can be used to build riding skills, even from your favorite chair.

Visualization

The easiest technique is called "visualization". By creating mental images of riding through back roads or city streets, we can rehearse our response to stimuli. Your family might think you're nuts, but try sitting at the kitchen table actually moving as if you were riding a stretch of road. In your mind, swerve to avoid a left turning vehicle, cross over obstacles or ride through mid-corner gravel. Get ready for the test, because you know it's coming as you roll along in reality.

Visualization can also be used to refine skills for better performance. Envision skillfully stringing together a series of tight turns or smoothly operating the controls.

Think of all those miles you drive a car or truck. While behind the wheel, try to predict traffic patterns and submerge yourself into the driving task. Auto driving becomes so routine that motorcyclists often miss these opportunities to sharpen their mental riding skills.

Sometimes reminders or study aids are useful to get the brain working. Here are two items you can use immediately to build muscle memory for better riding:

The "Lever Tube"

Look around any hardware store for foam pipe insulation. The material is similar to pool noodles, only smaller in diameter. All you need is about four inches to wrap each hand around. The tube is used to simulate motorcycle lever action. Follow these instructions as you visualize the task:

Clutch Technique:

- Clutch squeeze and release should be smooth *whenever applied*
- For smoother shifting: Squeeze until initial tube resistance is met and release smoothly (simulates slight clutch pull)
 - For smoother shifting, do with slight clutch pull:
 - Upshift:
 - Place upward pressure on the shift lever
 - Steady or slightly roll-off throttle
 - Downshift:
 - Place downward pressure on the shift lever
 - Steady or slightly roll-on throttle

Brake Technique:

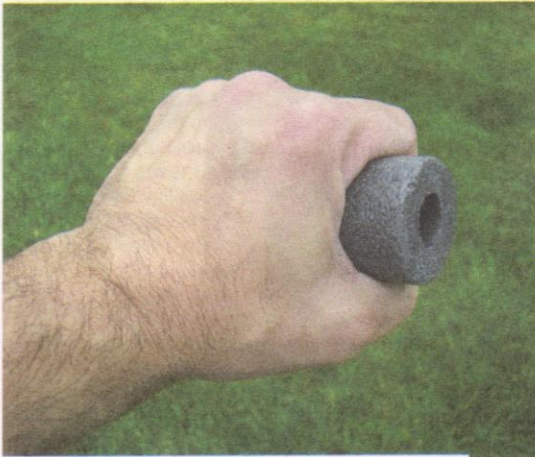
- Squeezing under normal braking circumstances: Once initial tube resistance is met, increase squeezing pressure as needed.
- Releasing: Whenever squeezed, brake should be released smoothly and gradually.
- Squeezing while leaned over: Once initial tube resistance is met, hold. Release smoothly and gradually (this simulates appropriate braking pressure while in a corner, enough to activate brake light).

"Kiss the Mirror" Cues

While not the most masculine of phrases, "kiss the mirror" is a good way to communicate proper body position while cornering. Get your "mug in the mirror" might be an alternative phrase perhaps?

The goal is to place your face in proximity of the inside mirror as you corner. This results in a body position that will turn the bike easier while using less lean angle. In a safe environment, try moving your face closer and farther from the mirror while in a turn and you will see how well it works.

Apply something to your mirrors as a reminder cue for this technique while riding. Small stickers with a mirror-like finish do a stealth job if you want to keep it private. Or get a conversation started with a dab of nail polish or a strip of tape with wording. A little creativity is all you need for this one.



Here are some visual examples of possible ways to use the "Lever Tube" method to build strength and control.

A possible way to practice "Kiss the Mirror" is shown below.



To ace the next pop quiz, preparation is the (answer) key. What have you done lately to study for your test? Invest the time and energy into building your riding skills. Better yet, get some tutoring through advanced instruction and perform at the top of the class.