



STOP the Confusion

Text by Jon DeVecchio

“Don't use the front brake. You'll fly over the handlebars.” “Rear brakes are useless on modern motorcycles.” “I only use two fingers when I brake.” “Anti-lock brakes aren't as effective on a motorcycle.” “Never use your front brake on gravel.” These controversial statements all relate to stopping a motorcycle and have been circulated widely.

If conflicting advice from riding buddies weren't enough, professional motorcycle training can further confuse the aspiring rider. Basic courses teach simple braking techniques, while advanced instruction teaches the rider to bend rules learned at a previous level. For example, basic training requires a separation of braking from cornering. It also stresses separation of braking from throttle. These basic techniques can provide many happy miles of skillful riding. However, more advanced concepts advocate some overlapping of braking, throttle and cornering.

Learning a new riding skill can be overwhelming, even to an experienced rider. So pursue knowledge and try new techniques gradually. Braking and stopping skills are difficult to truly master, especially for owners of multiple motorcycles. With focus and commitment we can make improvements to our braking for more safety and enjoyment.

The vast combinations of rider experience, motorcycle types and road conditions dictate that any of the information presented here is disputable. Even the pros debate over proper braking technique, so you will be the ultimate judge on what works for you.

Build good riding skills and habits by practicing good technique. Here are some tips:

• **Keep your head up and look forward as you slow.** This will improve balance and get the motorcycle in a vertical position for maximum control.

• **Use both brakes to slow or stop.** The front brakes provide the majority of stopping power on modern motorcycles. However, front alone will not stop you most effectively if that is your goal. Advanced techniques do encourage front-only or rear-only braking applications. During slow speed maneuvers rear-only is a good example. Front-only braking can deliver a quicker turning response. It is also appropriate to trail (taper off) your braking into a corner once a rider becomes smooth and seeks a more aggressive riding style. Rear-only trail braking can help balance the suspension upon corner entry. Use extreme caution when braking in a corner, as your tires might exceed their traction limits. Any of the advanced riding books are a good place to begin study of sophisticated techniques. Please don't overestimate your skill level on public roads as you experiment.

• **Apply pressure increasingly.** Use the brakes gently on the initial application. Once the braking components have mated, you can then apply more pressure as necessary. Resist sharp braking inputs, as they may lead to a wheel lock up. Anti-lock

Braking Systems (ABS) on motorcycles have been proven to shorten straight line stopping distances on all types of surfaces. However, owning an ABS-equipped motorcycle is no substitute for becoming a braking expert.

• **Use four-finger braking to stop.** Four fingers may provide you with better leverage and dexterity on the lever. This could produce more effective stops and less hand fatigue. Some motorcycles stop just fine with two fingers. However, forming a habit to use four fingers when coming to a stop might create better muscle memory for emergencies.

• **Two-finger braking may be used when overlapped with throttle during a downshift.** Basic riding technique dictates a rider roll-off the throttle, complete a downshift, and then roll-on. An advanced method to smooth out a downshift is applying some throttle to raise engine rpm along with front brake. In this case, the first two fingers would pull the lever while the palm and last two fingers manipulate throttle.

• **Downshift as required and be in first gear when stopped.** Most riders learn early to downshift into first for stops. What some learn the hard way is that neutral is a bad gear choice when waiting in traffic. Remain in first gear when stopped for quick launch if necessary.

• **At stops put your left foot down first.** This is a good habit because your right foot should be actuating the rear brake pedal until the stop is complete. To release the rear brake before the stop is complete would increase stopping distance. While this may not be vital for routine stops, in an emergency this small skill refinement might make a big difference.

If you want a riding challenge, braking skill is a good one to pursue. Not only is proper braking a life-saving skill, it also can increase your fun factor. At first you may not find certain techniques comfortable or currently applicable.

However, an understanding of various braking concepts will encourage you to develop your skill when the opportunity presents itself.

So pick up a book and start exploring. The next time you hear a controversial braking comment you will be able to decide for yourself its worth. You just might be able to respond in a way that validates your braking expertise or saves a life.