



Smooth Operator

Text by Jon DeVecchio

“Eeeeease out your clutch...
squeeeeeeze the brake...
smooooothly turn your bars.”

These are a few of the basic skills required to operate a motorcycle. To witness the birth of a new rider, just visit your local motorcycle training facility. I guarantee you will see motorcycles lurching around the parking lot. As a skills coach, my first goal is to get each student relaxed and smooth in the saddle.

Benefits of Smooth

Smooth riding improves operator control and skill level. By being relaxed and focused on smoothness, a rider will process information more clearly and become in synch with the motorcycle. Stress and abruptness tend to separate the rider from the motorcycle, resulting in sloppy control.

Riders that seek to be smooth on dry pavement have an advantage when the riding surface becomes challenging. All riders will encounter water, sand, gravel, ice, or other slippery surfaces. Graceful movement at all times will ensure that you are prepared for a surprise beneath your tires.

Finally, riding smoothly gives the appearance that you are skilled and in control of your machine.

Motor Skills and Smooth

It is expected that riders in training may briefly ride with less than total control. To develop motor (muscular) skills, a person must have many opportunities to physically

explore the task at hand. New riders lack the experience to have smooth skills upon demand.

Other factors contribute to the new trainees' clumsy riding. When building a new motor skill, learners tend to think deeply and process vast amounts of information. Initial training focuses on building gross motor skills, which are those related to balance and basic controls operation.

High expectations of a novice to ride correctly can create stress. High stress is a barrier to learning. Riding a motorcycle for a long period of time also conspires against a new rider's smoothness. When beginners get tired they tend to deteriorate in the performance of a new skill.

On the other hand, experienced riders are better equipped to demonstrate smoothness and precision riding. This is because they have moved beyond the initial deep-thinking stage of motor learning and into the fine-tuning and automatic stages. Seat time provides opportunities to develop fine motor skills like smoothness.

But unlike the newbies at the training site, experienced riders don't have the instant feedback from a coach to make immediate improvements. They must actively seek opportunities to benchmark their skills and provide their own feedback for development.

How to Ride Smooth

Using any motorcycle control should be done with a gentle touch. Abruptness may lead to haste, which may lead to mishaps. Make smoothness a riding technique prerequisite.

Handlebars and Steering: Even if you

have to quickly maneuver around something, make sure you do it gently. At any speed try to envision your hands are pushing through water in a swimming pool as you turn the bars. Smooth head turning will also lead to smooth steering.

Throttle: To be smooth on the throttle, first make sure you do not have too much play in the throttle cable. A properly adjusted throttle will react to slight initial movement. Roll on and off the throttle smoothly, never abruptly. Consider that any abrupt revving at stops may communicate to others your lack of control, immaturity, amateur skills and obnoxiousness.

Clutch: After squeezing it in, always ease out the clutch lever smoothly. This is true when starting the motorcycle, moving forward from a stop, or shifting gears along the way. Using all four fingers will reduce hand fatigue resulting in better control. When overlapping throttle with clutch at low speeds in the friction zone, remember to be smooth as well.

Shifting: New riders learn to shift by distinctly separating the different actions. Experienced riders learn to blend the actions into a seamless procedure. "Preloading" is the secret to smooth shifting. When using this technique, put some tension on the lever in the direction of your next gear shift. As you perform a slight pull on the clutch lever and relieve the throttle, you'll be delighted to find the lever magically slide into the gear of choice with little effort.

Braking: Abrupt brake application can lead to major problems. To smooth out your braking, begin by applying the controls with just enough pressure to turn on your brake light. After this initial contact is made, begin to apply the brakes with increasing pressure as needed. Envision gently squeezing the juice out of an orange as you apply the front brake. For the rear, envision that you are slowly trying to crush an orange under the ball of your foot. Release the brakes as gently as you apply them.

Final Thoughts

Do you consider yourself a smooth operator? Regardless of how long you have been riding, practice the techniques presented in this article. And while there are many resources that adequately praise the benefits of smooth motorcycle operation, the best I have found is "Smooth Riding," by Reg Pridmore.

It's extremely satisfying to watch a non-rider gain in two days the skills necessary to pass a motorcycle course. Basic riding skills can be acquired in a weekend. However, smooth and precise riding skills can take years and perhaps even decades to master. A journey of a thousand miles begins with one smoooooth clutch release.