

Ready for the New Riding Season

Getting ready for the beginning of the riding season is a serious issue - it requires serious concentration and consideration. Don't scrimp on safety - keep the bike in good working condition and your skills in top condition.

Getting yourself ready is very important. Do you need some training or practice? There are Experienced Rider Courses (ERC) offered that some consider to be a starting place to get a mental and physical 'tune-up'. The ERC is like a beginner's course on steroids, starting out at a leisurely pace and push you to your limits by the end. I bet you didn't know a Harley Roadking can do a U-Turn in a 6m space, well it can. Besides, the course can be a lot of fun too.

If you don't want to go on a course, then head to an empty parking lot (by yourself or with a friend) and try your own exercises - do some figure 8's as tight as you can, do a few high speed runs and perform some threshold braking where you take the motorcycle to the maximum braking possible without locking up the wheels - that's the challenging part. Clue - if you lock up the rear wheel, curl your toes up in your boot to relieve a small amount of pressure on the brake.

Moving on to the motorcycle itself - check the bike out completely before you take it on the road. How are the tires? Any cracks, tears, etc. replace them. Pressure! Make sure the pressure is up to the proper level for your motorcycle, load, etc. - check your owner's manual - that thing they put under your seat when you bought the bike that you've never opened. How's the tread wear? By law you must have a minimum of 1.5mm of tread on your tires. There are tread wear indicators on most motorcycle tires - check for a small triangle on the sidewall, then move to the centre of the tire, there's a bump in the groove of the tire, if the bump in the groove is level with the tread, that means your tire needs replacing.

Believe it or not, it is estimated that nearly 30% of all vehicles on the road have under-inflated tire pressure. This leads to poor fuel consumption, overheated tires, and premature wear.

Spokes and rims - in good condition? Use your tire guage to tap against each spoke on both sides of each rim. If you hear a thud instead of a ping, then it needs to be dealt with.

Brakes - check that they work and that there is fluid in your hydraulic brakes between the low and high levels, or if you have drum brakes that the indicator pointer on the end of the cable doesn't meet up with the triangle on the drum itself - this indicates that there's no more pad left on the shoes. On disc brakes look at the pads that make contact with the disc, there's a slot or 2 on the pad and if the slots are gone, so are the pads and they need replacing.

Check your chain or belt drive. Does the chain need lubrication? Lithium grease is better than oil as it doesn't pick up road dirt as much. Are there cracks in the belt - replace it fast. Check the play on the chain midway between the front and rear sprockets. Does it move more than the recommended amount in your owners manual, usually 3/4"? Adjust the rear wheel to compensate. Can you pull the chain away from the rear of the sprocket? That indicates that your chain needs replacing - if you keep going for any length of time you'll be replacing the sprockets too. Drive shafts are pretty well maintenance free - check to see if there's any leaking around the seals to the rear wheel.

Check your suspension. Are the seals on the front forks good, or do you see some oil running down the pistons? When you sit on the bike, does the rear suspension move up and down freely or does it take too much time to rebound back? Grab a fistful of front brake and push down on the handlebars. Does the front suspension rebound as you would expect? While you're sitting on the bike, check the full swing of your handlebars to both sides and see if your cables are rubbing anywhere.

Cables - clutch and throttle cables should be free of any and all snags. Throttles should snap back to zero if you take your hand off it. Peel back the rubber boot where your clutch and throttle cables connect to the levers and inspect for any fraying - this is where it is most likely to happen. There are lubrications available for cables if you need some.

Fluids - is the oil in your bike at the proper level? Check your owners manual for the proper procedure for checking your oil - there are many methods and differ between manufacturers of motorcycles. Some need to be checked hot, some cold, some after sitting for 2 to 3 minutes. Upright or on the sidestand - depends on the model. Dipstick or sightglass - depends. On my Honda VTX, I have a dipstick and the bike needs to be warm and checked after 2 minutes of downtime with the bike upright. Most every dipstick is unscrewed, wiped clean with a paper towel, then placed in the hole but not screwed in, pulled out and checked for level. While you have a few drops on the dipstick, check the colour too - can you see through it (good) or is it black (bad)?

Gas - did you leave it in your bike all winter without putting some fuel-saver additive in it, not good. Drain it and replace it. Gasoline will change its properties over time due to evaporation and really has about a 6 month time from the refinery to the use of it. If your gasoline has been sitting for too long, it will become a bit sludge-like and will foul your carbs or injectors causing serious repair bills. Save yourself the trouble and throw away the \$10 worth of old gas instead of having to pay the \$150+ for cleaning the carbs or injectors. Also, your bike will start up much better with new gas.

Got that far? Check your battery for fluid levels. Top up the cells with distilled water - not tap water. Distilled water can be purchased at any grocery or hardware store for a dollar or two - tap water has minerals that disturb the chemical reaction in the batteries and

will reduce the lifespan of the battery. Another good thing to have is a motorcycle trickle charger (Battery Tender for example), that will keep the battery charged at the optimum level.

Now time to check all of the electrical systems, go ahead and start the bike up and get it idling so that the engine is charging the battery while you perform the electrical checks. Does the neutral indicator show green on the dash? Check the signal lights left, right, front and rear. Check the brake lights when you apply the front and rear brakes separately. Check your headlight on low and high beam. Check your horn - does it actually make a loud sound or has it gotten worn over time and lost a lot of its 'effectiveness'? Any other electrical equipment on your bike? Check all of them too to make sure they're all working properly - heated grips, heated seats, stereo, driving lights, etc.

If anything doesn't work properly, fix it! Do it yourself, get a friend to help you, take it to the garage/dealership, anything... but get it fixed. The worst vehicle on the road to have any problems with is a motorcycle.

Finally, check your riding gear. Any chips in the laminate of your helmet - replace it. Is the energy absorbing foam (the styrofoam type material) inside the helmet smooth and like new or are there cavities? That foam absorbs the energy in crashes only once and doesn't rebound back out. If it has absorbed energy already, then it will not absorb any more energy in the next incident and will transfer all of that energy directly to your head. If the helmet has already done its job once, throw it away and get a new helmet - your life depends on it.

Clean your jacket(s), chaps, boots, gloves, visors, etc. and inspect them for wear and tear. Replace where needed.

Before you get on the bike and take it for a ride, check your insurance, plates, decals, etc. and make sure that you are covered if the unfortunate actually happens.

Let's be safe out there. I don't want to see anyone become a statistic for something that could have easily been prevented.

"Proper planning prevents poor performance."