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Tips from the Safety Officer

Periodically, I will provide you with safety tips and riding techniques that I have learned from my training and years of being a Police Motor Officer. This episode covers....

Avoiding a Crash in a Curve

I wish I had prepared this about a month ago and given it to Probate Mark "Slider" Allen. If you don't know what I'm talking about I'll fill you in. On this years AFR, Mark crashed his motorcycle in a curve. Even though he bled enough that I thought we were going to have to call an ambulance, it turned out that neither he nor his beautiful Harley were injured badly. I think the biggest bruise he sustained was to his ego. Mark was on a 2 lane country road approaching a sharp (almost 90 degrees) curve to the right with loose gravel in the road. Mark was unable to make the curve and ended up going off the road to the left and crashed in the grass. Why did this happen?

First, let me tell you that this is the most common single vehicle accident involving motorcycles. In just about every case, the cause of the crash is too much speed coming into the curve, and the riders inability to handle it. Usually when a rider is going too fast into a curve, he panics, straightens up the bike, and as he starts heading for the ditch, he starts looking straight at the ditch...and of course, he ends up in the ditch. He does this because he fears that if he leaned over too far, the motorcycle would slide out from under him. That is very unlikely to happen. A motorcycle is built to lean, and it will lean a lot farther than most riders realize. At speeds over 20mph, a motorcycle turns by leaning, not by steering. If you've never scraped your floorboards in a curve, you have never even gotten close to the limits that your motorcycle will lean. Your motorcycle *is* capable of making the curve. You just have to trust it...and yourself.

Always look where you want the bike to go. Your bike will follow your eyes...

...keep your eyes out front where you want to go. DO NOT look down, or you will go down. DO NOT look at the ditch, or you will go in the ditch. Just focus on where you want to go, focus on the lane, look through the curve, don't panic, and your bike will make the curve. You may scrape your floorboards or pegs, but that is ok. You can definitely maintain control while scraping your floorboards...it is not a reason to panic.

Another technique that will get you through tight turns is called “counter-steering” or “push-pull” steering. The principle basically is that if you need to turn quickly to the right, you push your right grip forward. This will cause the bike to go to the right. And conversely, push left to go left. When doing this you should lean in the opposite direction of your bike. You should practice this in a parking lot, and start slowly, like at about 20mph or so, and work your way up in speed.

At the next rest stop after his crash, Mark told me that he was going too fast for the curve, lost road position, and felt like he was either going to crash **in** the road, or in the grass **off** the road, so he opted for the nice soft grass. It worked out ok for him, but he was very lucky a car was not coming from the opposite direction. Obviously, running off the road to the left should always be your last option. The wildcard in Marks crash was the gravel in the road. With a clean pavement, I think had Mark done what I’ve discussed, he would have easily made the curve, even at the speed he was going. But with all the loose gravel in the road, I can’t say that he wouldn’t have fallen in the road...so maybe he did the best thing given his situation. The key of course is to control your speed, slow down prior to starting your lean, especially on unfamiliar roads, and then get back on the throttle as you power through the curve.

Next – Slow Riding and Turning Tips