



MISTI HURST

RIDING IN THE RAIN

As I was sliding along the pavement at a good clip, I remember distinctly thinking to myself, “wow, that happened fast, (and) this is crazy how far I’m sliding!” Somehow I managed to gracefully swivel my body around from a shoulder skid to a butt skid, and then with a gymnastic-like leap (it was very clever) I popped up to my feet and continued running down the street until I felt capable of slowing to a jog, then a walk, and finally coming to rest. It was only then that I noticed the stunned faces of motorists as they realized what they had just witnessed.

I had been riding down a four lane street in the “fast” lane. A light drizzle and some fog made visibility poor enough for the woman in the lane next to me to deem it safe to change lanes right into me as I was carefully cruising past. I tried to slow down and simultaneously move further to the left to get out of her way when the bike hit the center painted yellow line and suddenly I was experiencing a very unexpected slip and slide ride down the center of the road.

The woman driving the vehicle (no female driver comments from the peanut gallery please) continued on her merry way, completely unaware of the fact that she just took out a young girl on a motorcycle (well, ok, not THAT young). Luckily for me another female driver with a station wagon containing four screaming children followed the woman for some distance to retrieve the license plate number, then returned to the scene to divulge that information to the cops.

That was my first ever motorcycle crash, and though it was decided by our lovely Insurance Corporation of British Columbia that it was completely the driver of the car’s fault, I still thought that there may have been a few things I could have done to prevent it from happening, or to have protected myself better in case I slid into a telephone pole, another car, a ditch or anywhere else less friendly than a clear, unobstructed road.

For one, I could have been wearing better gear. I was wearing dark jeans and a dark rain jacket and out of all the research I have done on riding in the wet, the number one suggestion is always about visibility and wearing proper gear. Wear something that is brightly coloured so oblivious drivers have a better chance of seeing you. Wear something waterproof to keep you toasty and dry so you have less attention on the fact that you are freezing your little buns off and more attention on your riding, and preferably wear something with armour or durable fabric that will help keep injuries to a minimum if you should go for a little tumble.

Another thing to take into consideration is to watch out for slippery stuff like painted centre lines, crosswalks, railroad tracks, man-hole covers, grates, painted lines at stop signs and traffic lights, and grated bridge decks. I know this all sounds like pretty basic stuff but it’s surprising how many people don’t realize just how slippery that stuff can be, and how quickly they can play a part in your falling down. I found out the hard way, “hmmmm, that yellow paint sure is slippery!”

There has got to be more to it though right? I mean there

has got to be some “real specific things” you can do to improve your riding in the rain like rider techniques and skills, right? Well, I’m glad you are with me on this.

I recently started perusing some of the internet forums, chat rooms, and discussion boards, that have to do with motorcycles, for the purposes of researching ideas for my articles and to keep up-to-date about what is going on in the industry. I have never been on forums before and I am amazed at the fact that there are dozens of them out there, ones that focus on a specific brand like Kawasaki, Honda, BMW, Harley or Suzuki, ones that focus on types of riding, sportbikes, adventure travel, cruisers, supermotard, and even ones that are specific to an exact make and model of bike, like the R1 forum or the SV650 forum.

While I was checking out these various forums and reading some of the content that has been posted on them I started to notice a kind of trend. Of the forums, most break things down into topics such as; riding tips, riding schools, racing, track days, general motorcycle discussion, women’s forum etc. Being a motorcycle riding coach and racer, I am extremely interested in the areas of rider development, skills training, tips and techniques. It is in those sections of the forums that people write down their tips, thoughts, ideas, experiences (both good and bad) and their questions.

With it being the middle of winter and many areas being plagued by heavy rains

and snow, a recurring topic kept appearing over and over again throughout the different internet discussion sites and that was the topic of riding in the rain. What a coincidence.

The most repetitive question asked was, “What are some specific techniques and tips I can use for riding in the rain?”

In one of the forums I wrote, “I think the most important part of riding in the rain is to do everything you would normally do but do it smoother. People make mistakes when riding in dry weather that can go unnoticed, but if you make the same mistakes on a wet road you will often find yourself sliding down the pavement on your arse. Be smoother with the gas, both rolling on and off, smoother with the brakes (no jabbing or stabbing of either front or rear), smoother releasing of the clutch and be gentler with body movements and steering inputs. It’s a lot like dancing.”

This particular post got a lot of response. People agreed that you need to be smooth when riding in the wet, but wondered “what exactly does being smooth mean?” What are the actual riding techniques you can use to help you be smooth in the rain?

Since that first motorcycle crash I have had a lot of opportunity to ride and race in the rain. I live in Vancouver, BC remember....it rains here a lot and I’ve gotten really comfortable with it, in fact, my best finishes in races are always in the rain.

When riding in the rain I think about



and adjust four main things with my riding in the following order; braking, throttle, steering and body position.

BRAKING

Let's look at braking. Everyone knows that braking in the middle of a corner is not necessarily the best thing to do. But, face it, how many of you have made that mistake once or twice in your riding career? Go into a turn a little too hot, freak in the middle of the turn, grab some brake, pucker, stand it up a little and somehow make it through the corner? Or, approach a turn, brake and continue to trail those brakes into the beginning of the corner letting off just before the apex of the turn? I've done it loads of times. Ever done it in the wet with good results? Unlikely. Why?

Well, let's look at what happens when you get on the front brakes in a turn. Where does the weight transfer to? It goes to the front tire, right. How much weight is the front tire designed to handle? The front tire is designed to handle only 30-40% of the load. You can get away with overloading the front tire sometimes in dry conditions because of the added traction of having a dry road, but try it in the wet and there will be disastrous consequences. It only takes a tap of the front brake anytime the bike is leaned over, or even a second of holding the brakes on while the bike is starting its lean, for you to lose traction.

One other note about using the brakes in the rain, whether using the front or the rear, is to apply them smoothly and consistently. No quick jabs with the lever, no stomping on the pedal. Gradually apply pressure and gradually release pressure.

When riding, either on the street or on the track, I make sure that I get all of my braking done while the bike is going in a straight line. I have also learned through

practice in racing that you can use the front brake in the rain almost as hard as you can in the dry while the bike is straight up and down.

For the final race weekend in the Parts Canada AM 600 Nationals at Shannonville Raceway, we raced in an absolute downpour. There was so much water on the track that we were constantly riding through large puddles, spraying water everywhere, fighting for visibility through our foggy and wet visors. Despite this we still flew down the long back straightaway and braked at almost the same brake markers that we use on a dry surface. I found it amazing how hard I could use the front brake on my Honda CBR 600RR while racing, though I had to force myself to let go of the brakes, so I wouldn't have any pressure on them once I tipped the bike in. A lot of racers crash because they are used to relying on brakes throughout the initial part of the turn, and it's pretty amazing how fast they hit the ground when they do make this mistake.

On the street I'm more inclined to use a combination of both brakes to help come to a stop but I'm always careful of getting on either one with too much force for fear of locking up either tire.

THROTTLE

Now, once you've got the bike tipped in the corner it becomes all about the throttle control, which is the next thing I think about and adjust to some degree while riding in the rain. My number one goal in any corner is to get on the gas as early as possible and to roll it on through the remainder of the turn in order to transfer some of the weight off of the front tire and back to the rear. This is a skill that I have learned through Keith Code and the California Superbike School. It's fundamental to riding and I work on it every time I ride. Getting on the gas to even out the weight distribution helps make the bike more stable in the corner, a valuable goal for any rider.

A lot of people make the mistake of going onto a turn and coasting through most of it before getting on the gas. Coasting means the weight is still forward



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on the bike putting added weight on the front tire that need not be there. Coasting in the wet amplifies all of this; more weight on the front, less traction on the road, more chance of losing grip. So, get on the gas as early as possible and roll it on throughout the entire corner.

Again, as with the use of the brakes, you want to remember to be smooth with the throttle. Don't grab a fistful, roll on too aggressively, or roll off suddenly. A handful of gas in the wet will surely cause a loss of grip in the rear tire while rolling off suddenly in a turn has a similar effect as getting on the brakes, added load to the front tire. Be gentle with the bike, roll on the gas progressively and do the same when you have to roll off.

STEERING

The goal in most corners, whether riding on the track or the street, is to get the bike turned as quickly and efficiently as possible. When it comes to riding in the rain however, this is no longer true. Turn a bike too quickly in the rain and you will be grinding your visor along the pavement faster than you can say "Valentino Rossi".

When you apply steering inputs into the bike, do it gently and consistently with

even pressure and avoid jerky or overly sudden motions, stay relaxed on the bike, especially in your arms by squeezing the tank with your legs for stability. You always want to feel like you are one with the bike, moving with it, letting it do its own thing.

BODY POSITION

Finally, lets talk about body position. I see a lot of riders going around corners with the bike leaning to the left and their bodies leaning the opposite direction. This occurs often because of either a fear of leaning with the bike, a misunderstanding of what that actually does to lean angle, or a combination of both factors. When the bike leans to the left and the rider leans to the right, they are actually **INCREASING** lean angle. Increased lean angle means that less of the tire is touching the pavement. Less contact patch of the tire touching pavements means less traction. You want to have the most traction available to you while riding in the wet, don't you? So how do you achieve that?

Leaning with the bike will help **REDUCE** the amount of lean angle you have. By getting your body over to the side of the bike that you are turning (the bike is turning left, you let your body lean left as well) you can essentially hold the bike more upright. Now, don't confuse this with the idea of hanging off the bike **MORE**, it just means letting your body follow the bike.

I often say to my students, and I'm sure they will attest to this, "be a good passenger on your own bike, be a wet noodle, relax and go with the flow, Zen and the art of the motorcycle."

Basically you want to be in the groove, smooth, relaxed, gentle, predictable and one with the bike, because it really is, a lot like dancing.

MMM

Cheers, Misti

Misti Hurst is a motorcycle racer, an instructor with the California Superbike School, and a freelance writer. More information about her can be found on her website at www.mistihurst.com