

Open Road

Shopping

TODAY, A FRIEND asked me, “What’s the best way to buy a new bike; should I get a new one or a used one? What would you recommend?”

Our quarterly Used Bike Value Guides (the Spring Edition is in this issue) provide the depreciation numbers on hundreds of bikes. Invariably, the first year causes the biggest drop. After a few years, some will continue to decline in price and others will level out, refusing to depreciate further, often premium-priced models like BMWs and Harley-Davidsons. Some bikes tend to be garage queens, like Ducati superbikes, and rarely accumulate high miles, so used ones can be an especially good buy. Remember that a high-priced used bike can still be a smart buy when you consider its resale value. A very few develop cult followings and will actually begin to rise in value after many years (like BMW’s early R80GS Boxers and Honda’s Hawk GT, GB500 and Transalp).

The Guide’s prices make a convincing case that near-new, low-mileage bikes are a great buy. But financing makes a big difference. If you can’t buy for cash, a dealership can sometimes offer low rates that can make a new bike a better buy than a used one that must be financed at a much higher rate through an S&L.

If money is tighter, you could identify bikes that plateau in value after a few years, like Kawasaki’s KLR650 (also a bike with the benefit of huge aftermarket support), and specialize in those.

“What kind or style of bike should I buy?” is a tough question because it’s so personal. But if you’ve been riding long enough to have favorite roads, I’d say buy a bike that’s perfect for riding those, and you really can’t go wrong.

A question that’s easier to answer is, “When buying used, how do you examine a bike’s condition?” First off, make sure to ride an excellent example first, even if it’s one you can’t afford. Without this knowledge, you won’t know if what you’re considering is in good condition.

Other tips: A multi-cylinder engine that idles very smoothly with crisp throttle response will usually have good ring seal, as there’s more time for leaks to affect compression at low rpm.

You can check chassis alignment by sighting down the tires with your eyes close to the ground (either lying on your stomach on sighting between your legs about 10–15’ behind the bike). With the machine on a centerstand or held straight ahead by a friend, slight adjustments to the steering may be necessary to make the



wheels line up, but if they won’t, the chassis is bent and needs alignment. Another test: When you ride the bike, does it swerve left the same as it swerves right? If not, it’s probably bent.

Good service records show who has taken maintenance seriously. Check the color of the oil. Is it black, or does it still have a honey color, indicating it’s not worn out and causing unnecessary wear? Smell the gas. Old gas has a distinctly rank odor. The light, high-octane components of the gas evaporate over time, and what’s left is hot-burning and low-octane, making starting difficult. Rust in gastanks is very bad. Besides fouling the carbs or fuel injection, you don’t want to introduce iron oxide to your engine’s bearings, roller bearings particularly.

Old dried-out tires, while they might have deep treads, indicating limited use, should be replaced. Tubes too. It’s a false economy to run tires that have hardened with age and that lack the grip you need.

Fork tubes that have pitted with rust will need to be replaced, and the cost of parts and labor isn’t minor. Leaking fork seals can be evidence of rust you can’t see.

Brake fluid will darken with age, and once it’s absorbed a lot of water (glycol is hygroscopic), it will cause the brake pistons to stick in their bores, so they fail to retract and drag on the discs, making braking weak and often causing disc warping.

A clutch that won’t release to let the machine idle in neutral can have its plates varnished together from sitting in contaminated oil. Either refinishing or replacing the friction plates will be necessary.

You can check for suspension problems by pressing down and slowly

releasing each end, measuring from a point of extension to the ground for reference. Next lift and slowly release to see if the suspension returns to the same position. If you have more than 10mm of stiction on the fork, you have a problem to correct. At the back, because everything is mounted in bushings or needle bearings, if there is any noticeable stiction, there’s a problem. Maybe the linkage just needs greasing, but, more likely, new parts. If you can lift the bike on a stand, you can feel for play in the steering head bearings or rear suspension.

Shifting problems can be very expensive. Damaged linkage can create damaged dogs and slots on the gears. And most engines require extensive disassembly, like removing the entire top end and splitting the cases, to reach the gears.

Badly worn sprockets mean the chain and both gears will need to be replaced. And a dry, rusty chain is a telltale sign of neglect that probably says the whole bike has been treated badly.

A bike that needs a battery charger to be disconnected before you ride it may not have just a low battery, it may have charging system problems that a full battery will mask for a few miles.

An engine that’s been pre-warmed in advance of your visit may have difficulty starting or maybe it blows smoke for a few minutes before clearing out, caused by leaky valve guide seals.

A strong flashlight can help you see into oil filler holes, to identify baked-on oil, a sign of overheating that has serious implications for accelerated wear.

Pitted chrome, rust and heavily oxidized aluminum tell you the bike has been stored outside for a long time. Even what’s called cosmetic damage can be very expensive to replace or refinish.

Bikes that have been modified should ideally be sold along with the stock parts that were removed. Resale value to the next buyer can be better, and you may not like overly-loud exhausts, for instance.

If you are spending a lot of money, and a proper diagnosis of engine health is beyond your abilities, be honest with yourself and have a trusted mechanic check out the bike for you.

Spring is almost here, time for cleaning and upgrading—bikes included!

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink that reads "DAVE SEARLE". The letters are bold and somewhat irregular, with a cursive-like flow.

—Dave Searle
Editor