

Choices

BELIEVE IT OR not, “What should I buy?” is possibly the hardest question we ever get. Bewildered readers will constantly call or write, hoping we can narrow down a dizzying array of choices to a single model. And as much as I enjoy such personal interaction, a full answer takes so much time away from our primary goal—to put together the best magazine we possibly can every month—that I often have to give only the sketchiest response or set the e-mails aside with a sigh, hoping more time will be available later. It rarely is.

So, if you are one of those readers, please understand our situation, and let me try to give it my best shot here. And if you’re already the “expert” to your friends, maybe this effort will assist you the next time you’re honored with such a request.

First, there is no such thing as one perfect bike that will satisfy everyone. Not only are there bikes for every distinct kind of riding, but we also have very personal reasons for buying what we do. And if we were honest enough with ourselves to admit it, many of the most compelling reasons have more to do with how we’ll be seen by others than how well the bike works in an objective sense. If all your buddies ride cruisers, and you really want to enjoy riding with them, you should probably buy a cruiser yourself. This reflects well on the group, reinforcing their choices, and you’ll fit in. There’s nothing wrong with that. The social aspect of riding is very important.

On the other hand, if you buy a high-performance sportbike and learn to ride it well, you won’t enjoy the same pace as a cruiser rider. In fact, if you think about it, you won’t enjoy the same pace as the great majority of automobile traffic, either. Everybody will seem to be moving in slow motion, and it can be very frustrating when you’re capable of warp speeds and they’re not. I believe this is the reason why sportbike riders are so frequently seen to “take chances” or “speed recklessly.” It’s largely a matter of perception. Of course, this can be a sportbike’s most dangerous fascination, too. Thinking you can stop Time, you can be tempted to twist the throttle even harder, but like a speeding particle in some video game, you may eventually find yourself going so fast that you’re unable to react in time to avoid a collision. High speed crashes hurt.

Of course, the image of a sportbike has great appeal too, and may be more important than actually accessing its performance. “Sleek, sexy and fast” are words used to describe sportbikes, but they might also describe the image you want for yourself. Admit it. Many sportbike riders like being



seen on sportbikes more than riding them fast. Does that make them poseurs or just mature? We should avoid labels, but an assessment of riding skill will usually determine who gets called what.

These opposite ends of the spectrum are easy to caricature, but no less valid for it. In between are so many other variations, Power Cruisers, Sport-tourers, Standards, Muscle Bikes and more—many very good bikes that each say something about their riders. Small volume imports or rare used bikes send the message that you’re a rare individual, one-of-a-kind. You get it.

The fulfillment of such personal reasons is beyond the scope of our objective testing here at MCN. A voice on the phone or the words on a video screen don’t give us much in the way of clues about how you view yourself. But let’s say the questioner has narrowed it down to a certain class of machine. Here is where we can help.

Let’s say you’re a new or returning rider who hasn’t ridden in many years. My advice is to buy a bike that isn’t too hard to handle. The biggest of any type may be the “baddest” but it’s also usually the heaviest, and the most ponderous to ride. Wrestling a pig is something best saved for rodeos.

Next, pay close attention when we rate handling. A poor handling bike will sap the confidence of any rider, but if the rider is new or doesn’t have better handling examples in his or her personal database, they will blame themselves for a lack of ability and may eventually give up riding altogether, believing they lack the talent to do it well. If your current bike makes you feel this way, consider that it might not be you.

Brakes are also very important. Brakes

that are too grabby and powerful can be just as bad as brakes that are too weak. On our recent trip to Laguna Seca, we came upon an accident where a rider had attempted to overtake a truck on a straight road. But when the truck started to turn left onto a hidden side road, the rider grabbed the front brakes so hard, he flipped over forward, hurting himself and the bike without ever colliding with the truck.

Comfort is often an overlooked factor. Cruisers with fashionably low ground clearance usually have short travel suspension, heavy wheels and tires, and a feet-forward seating position that puts all your weight on your tailbone. Throw in a rough road, and you’ll be seeing stars, making a hundred miles feel like a thousand. You’ll wonder how anyone could ride farther, and you’ll think it’s you again.

Good mirrors are absolutely critical, too. If you can’t see behind yourself adequately, the only way to change lanes is to turn your head and take your eyes off the road. Many of us have learned the hard way what can happen in a single second in traffic. And if there is no way to correct the problem on an individual bike, and often there isn’t, I’d advise you to pass on that machine, whatever its charms.

Engine driveability, the way it responds to on/off throttle, the smoothness of its running at light throttle (which is how you’ll ride the majority of the time), its controllability during take-off from a light or stop sign, the smoothness and release of the clutch action, all make a big difference to your happiness. No matter how much horsepower it might make, you’ll only get a handful of opportunities to brag about it. The rest of the time, you have to live with it, and if it’s hard to ride, you’ll find other things to do rather than ride it.

Wind protection is another often overlooked quality. At freeway speeds without some form of wind protection, you won’t want to ride more than half an hour. You’ve consigned yourself to slower roads or shorter trips. But some windshields are barely better than none at all, the turbulence they create can be so fatiguing.

We may need subjective fulfillment, but objective functionality still counts for a lot. That’s where we come in. Keep reading!

Cheers,

DAVE SEARLE

—Dave Searle
Editor