

SEND LETTERS TO THE EDITORS OF MCN

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Breakdown Lane A Legal Gray Area

I question the solution outlined in the Street Strategy column in June. I was always under the impression that passing a vehicle on the right in a breakdown lane is illegal in most states. Ken also indicates that breakdown lanes offer little traction. Associated with this, I've found that they often have debris that is perfect for picking up and causing flats.

So, unless I have someone bearing down on me from behind who is obviously not going to stop in time, I'm going to stop and wait for the Jeep to clear the lane.

Since the Jeep is stopping and turning left, one should be surprised if the Pontiac was *not* pulling out. If my only option were an emergency maneuver to the right around the Jeep, I'd be planning on avoiding the Pontiac as well. Proper scanning ahead and behind would avoid the emergency situation.

In other words, using the breakdown lane for anything other than an emergency situation is likely illegal and usually unwise.

Mike Powers
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Mike, thanks for the response. Many of the states I researched say that using the shoulder is indeed illegal. However, here in Massachusetts (and in most of the northeastern states), using the breakdown lane to go around a vehicle that is stopped to turn left is a common and expected practice.

Through interviews with a local police chief as well as a Massachusetts state trooper, my understanding was confirmed: Going around a car waiting to turn left is perfectly acceptable, if it is safe to do so. This puts this maneuver into the category of "not precisely legal, but tolerated," much like lane splitting in California.

Of course, you will be considered at fault if anything goes wrong, resulting in an accident.

As always, it's the rider's responsibility to know each state's traffic laws and to evaluate whether performing a maneuver is in your best interest. Be absolutely sure that the surface is clear and that you aren't riding into a hazardous situation.

But it's also important to evaluate whether your riding decisions are in line with the local behavior. If you visit New England and choose to wait behind a vehicle turning left instead of going around, you may be putting yourself in danger as the surrounding traffic questions your intentions or assumes you are also turning left.

—Ken Condon

Great Riding Boots

Regarding an inquiry about heavier boots for riding (Letters, March 2007), the Aerostich boot that you mention has a similar but 3" lower and lighter construction variation called Combat Lites (\$247).

There are also lighter variations of dirt bike boots with lugged hiking soles at much lower prices (around \$140), like Thor ATV Quadrants or Fox Offroad Tracker boots. The Aerostich boot would probably be easiest to get a pant leg over, as any dirt bike-type boot usually has protruding buckles.

Don Christenson
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Miles Traveled Better Stat

David Hough's *Motorcycle Fatality Rates* was a decent stab at attempting to reveal the root cause of motorcycle fatalities, but maybe not fatality rates.

"Rates" is the key word in the title and the analysis. A denominator is required to obtain a rate. The quality of the denominator is as important as that of the numerator (fatalities). Dave's article mentions that NHTSA finds denominators "complicated" or unavailable. Dave does not do much better when he dismissed miles traveled as a denominator.

Miles traveled is by far a more useful rate than registrations. Registrations are an indicator of risk: the more bikes out there, the higher the risk. However as he says, some registered bikes may travel very little, while others cover tens of thousands of miles per year. Miles traveled depict risk much more accurately than registrations. Dave may have dismissed miles traveled because the technique to establish them is poor, not because of the nature of the numbers. If so, readers need to know that.

Even miles traveled need to be more specific for a good analysis. Could it be that miles traveled vary by age? I have owned a registered bike for 37 years. During most of those years my wife and I raised three kids. Now, as an empty nester, I have much more time for riding. I put on many more miles now than when the kids were home. I'll bet a lot of older riders put on more miles than younger riders.

In fact, I wonder if older riders have lower fatality rates (per mile) than the rate for all riders. Apparently it's the "complicated details" like denominators that prevent us from knowing. My suspicion is that the miles traveled numbers are fudged from gasoline tax data or some such roundabout source.

Funding is needed to obtain quality numbers and tear down the walls of ignorance. Failing that, NHTSA and anybody doing fatality analysis should clearly state the limitations of the analysis. Are registrations serving in lieu of better data that are unavailable? How are the miles traveled numbers established? What is known about the habits of riders by age? What is the impact of the weather on miles traveled? If the answers to these and other questions are unknown, fine, but authors of such studies need to state the areas of ignorance up front.

So far, the insinuation that older riders have higher fatality rates has not been proven.

Thomas J. Duffy
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Thomas, I very much agree with you that fatalities per mile traveled would be a much better measure of what's happening. But I have very little faith that the current "miles traveled" statistics are reliable.

Who determines how many miles a motorcyclist rides in your state? Have you ever been asked for your annual mileage by anyone from your state government? Do you report your annual mileage per bike to the licensing department? I suspect that each state is asked for an estimate of miles traveled, and someone takes an educated guess.

But until there is some mechanism in play to determine real mileage per motorcycle per state, I will continue to be suspicious of a "fatalities per x miles traveled" rate.

Let's also note that the numbers that NHTSA looks at are the fatalities, not crashes. Although there are a number of educated guesses about the ages of (live) motorcyclists, the only numbers that are provable are the fatalities. No one seems to know how to track the age groupings of live motorcyclists, or their crash frequency.

I also understand that the fatalities per x number of motorcycles rate is not black and white, either. However, registrations are tracked fairly well, and I am reasonably optimistic that we have a relatively accurate count of street motorcycles. For that reason, I use motorcycle fatalities per x registrations as the most accurate rate we have available.

—David L. Hough

BMW RT vs. Moto Guzzi Norge

As a BMW R1200RT owner, I was very interested to read your report and comparison on the new Norge. I was, however, disappointed about several inaccuracies for which I believe you owe BMW an apology.

Suspension: The rear torque arm on the RT is above, not below, the swingarm. At least it is on my '05 model. Kind of debunks your theory.

Brakes: Both these bikes have braking systems by Brembo (BMW puts their own name on the calipers). And both have ABS. I have the "old" BMW power brake system that you and others pan. However, I have never experienced the "lock up" you mention. Neither do I have to "turn my ankle to cover the rear brake pedal." It falls directly under my untwisted foot.

Seating: You unfairly compare the relative seat heights. Did you know that, at no extra cost, BMW offers a lower seat, adjustable for two positions?

Styling: It's in the eye of the beholder, right? The greater width of the RT is occasioned by two things. Larger screen (you panned the narrow Norge screen) and the RT's built-in mirrors, which do not blur at any speed and provide excellent rear visibility.

Controls: I have very small hands. On the shortest adjustment I have no problem whatsoever in fully covering the handlebar levers.

In sum, I will stick with the RT. Sure, the Norge appears to have a smoother gear shift, though I have no problem making smooth changes. However, I would miss the extra power, cornering clearance, clearer instrumentation, ESA, smooth box interiors, and efficient tankbag system.

With all the deficiencies you remarked upon on the Norge, I am curious at the overall rating you gave it.

Bob Tomlin
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Bob, you're right BMW's torque arm placement was moved to the top when they went to the latest EVO Paralever design. My mistake. However, the link geometry is not identical to Moto Guzzi's design.

BMW does actually manufacture the brake calipers although the design may be under license from Brembo. I've seen them being produced in the Berlin plant.

"Lock up" was not a problem with the Integral power-assisted ABS, but rather a non-linear feel at the lever and the potential for sudden loss of power assist (and count yourself lucky that you've never experienced that).

You mention lots of good reasons for choosing the BMW, but the two were so close in so many ways, it seemed worthwhile to make a direct comparison.

—Dave

GPS Safer Than A Paper Map

On the strength of the various motorcycle GPS articles you've run recently, I put a crowbar to my wallet and finally purchased the Garmin Zumo 550. After using it for a short time, I'd like to chime in on the issue of safety brought up in your articles.

For many riders who get pegged as the "map guy" by their riding buddies, the GPS unit is a big safety improvement. Somehow I became the "map guy" in my riding group.

As the "map guy," I've found that I was always glancing down at my direction sheet on my tankbag. This is bad since the good roads are usually the bendy roads where you don't want to be looking down. Also, where I live (New York metro area)

you have to work hard to piece together the best riding, so there's always a poorly marked turn to look out for. Finally, I like novelty so the routes are usually on new and unfamiliar roads.

With the GPS, I just program in the good routes and let the little voice in my helmet tell me when to turn. I rarely look down at the unit while moving. This is a big improvement over reading a map or a directions sheet.

One final rebuttal to the idea that a GPS takes away the joy of randomly discovering new roads by wandering: How many times have you wandered onto a great new road and then not been able to find it later on a map so that you could go back someday (or just tell your friends about it so they can try it)? The GPS unit I purchased keeps a running track of the entire trip as long as it is turned on.

You can wander without a planned route and then later review your track and snip out the good parts to save and share. Better yet, I find myself less worried about getting lost since I can always tell the GPS to take me home and it helps me get there quickly and easily.

Mike Pagan
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Helmet Guidance

It's time to shop for a new helmet. The features I value most are noise reduction and weight. I want the lightest helmet due to a neck injury and the quietest since it makes for a nice ride. I wear earplugs and a head sock and I would think the protection issues are a given.

I've used Shoei for years but am thinking of trying Arai. Do you have any recommendations? If you counted helmets at the office, which one is most popular?

Keep up the good work. I've been reading you for over 10 years and riding 40.

Charlie Speight
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Charlie, for light weight, the HJC AC-12 carbon fiber model would be a great choice. It's much cheaper than other carbon fiber helmets and very comfortable. Both LT and I regularly wear HJC helmets.

A good helmet doesn't have to be expensive. Noise comes largely from the open bottom of the helmet, so something as simple as a bandanna tied around the neck makes a real difference.

I like the flip-face style so that I can pull the helmet over my head without aggravating my neck, which sometimes gives me pain. HJC's flip-face Symax is not terribly heavy, but many of this style are too heavy for long-term comfort, like the Schuberth.

—Dave

Humbling Crash

I had a unique and humbling experience yesterday that I hope will encourage other riders to take a minute to reflect.

I returned to riding again about five years ago after a 25-year hiatus. Recently, I hooked up with a nice group of riders in my area who have been riding together for more than a decade. They frequently ride through the local twisties. Yesterday, five of us met up for breakfast and then went for a brisk ride through the country roads.

This was my second ride with the group, and I knew my skill level was not on par with theirs. However, I rode my own ride and pushed myself to improve my technique. I knew the other four riders would wait for me whenever there was a stop sign or change in direction.

After our midway stop, I began feeling a little more confident. I was working the gearbox fairly well and, I thought, braking nicely to set up my entry speed. As the ride continued, I was trying to speed up so the group did not have to wait too long for me.

At the last 90° right turn, I got in over my head. My entry speed was too high, and I had no idea what my line should be. Worse, instead of looking where I would exit the turn and accelerate away, I was transfixed on the dirt shoulder at the outside of the turn. Sure enough, that's where I ended up.

Fortunately, the shoulder where I ran wide was dry dirt and tall grass. I did brake but not hard enough to lock up the brakes. The soft surface and grass slowed me down quickly and then I fell over.

While I was lying there, feeling like an idiot, two nice folks stopped and helped me pick up the bike. I checked myself and the bike for damage. Everything seemed pretty much where it had been before the crash, so I thumbed the starter. The bike fired right up, and I quickly caught up with the group.

Later, reflecting on things, I realized there were a lot of things I did wrong and a few things I did right. Major items in the "wrong" column were my failure to brake to the slowest speed I would feel comfortable with prior to tipping into the turn and not looking through the turn. This was the result of poor braking and scanning technique. In addition, I was not familiar with the road and did not allow enough margin in my riding to handle unknown turns.

The one major thing I did right was to dress for the crash. I had on a full-face helmet, leather jacket, mesh riding pants, gloves and boots. Since I had the good fortune to fall in the soft dirt, nothing was torn up or damaged. But I could have just as easily gone down on the pavement.

What did I learn? Don't let your ego push you harder than your abilities, practice in a controlled environment (read: Go to a track school). And always wear all of the gear all of the time.

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Great Tour, Despite A Few Hurdles

Fred, your last two articles had perfect timing for my wife and me. The last article, *Weather Vs. Attitude*, was smack on. We planned a trip to Italy for 11 months—just the two of us and a BMW GS.

Your article really helped us develop a pre-trip attitude that we were going to have fun no matter what the weather, conditions, or whatever. We had a fantastic trip: 10 days in Italy, just the two of us celebrating our 35th wedding anniversary!

We had our first attitude trial just outside Milan. We planned to go north to the Lake Como area. Well, on Saturday afternoon, I think every local had the same plan. Traffic was stopped on the Autostrada! At first, I was disappointed that the plan was flawed within the first two hours. Then, thinking about your article, I punched in the address of the first night's hotel into the Garmin and followed that route. Good move.

Second challenge: The GPS did not work in the narrow streets of many towns. The streets are only one car and one pedestrian wide and often one way—the wrong way! So, I constantly got a no satellite error. My wife did the navigating from the back seat then from a map in her neck pouch.

Third challenge: There was a downpour in Venice, and of course we had left the rain gear back at the hotel. Well, I decided I needed a shower anyway. We also got heavy rain in Pisa. This time we were ready to leave anyway and put on the rain gear and took off kinda laughing about it, since the bike needed a wash too.

I just wanted to thank you for the attitude column. You are right: we need to develop an attitude that we are going on an adventure.

David Major
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Correction: Hypercycle staff member Alan Rodriguez was misidentified in the July issue on page 24. The caption should read: Hyperclub owner Jaret Ramirez (seated), Ernie Snair, sales manager at Glendale Harley-Davidson/Buell and dealership/Hypercycle liaison Alan Rodriguez chat before the track day begins.