

# Scotts Steering Stabilizer

RATING ●●●●●

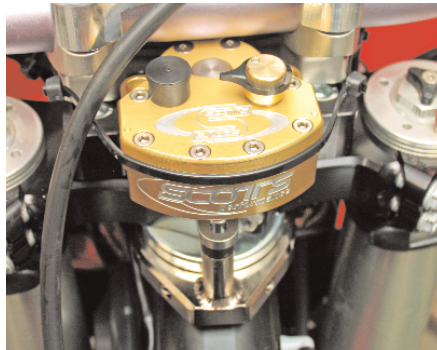
review by Mark Barnes

**I**F YOU THINK steering stabilizers (often called steering “dampers”) are just for the really fast guys, think again. It’s true that the faster you go, the more you’ll appreciate the way these devices soak up impacts that could otherwise knock you off course, but they also provide significant benefits at lower speeds, too. In fact, because non-expert off-road riders (us included) are not as smooth and efficient as those faster guys, we tire more quickly. We aren’t always ready to compensate for jarring encounters with surface irregularities, and we can be caught off guard when the front wheel touches down off-center after being lofted. So, if a steering stabilizer can help us conserve energy, while making our technical errors and concentration lapses less costly, it’s worth considering.

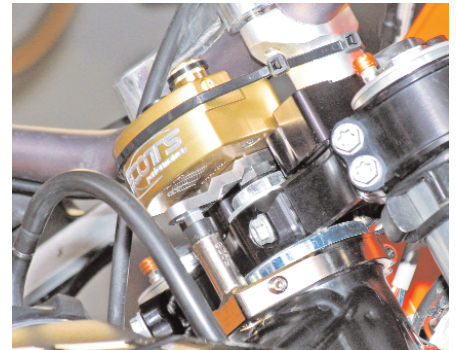
Scotts is a long-time leader in this market segment. Many racers use its stabilizers, and a multitude of recreational riders will testify to the effectiveness of its products and the professionalism of its customer service. We decided to see if one of its stabilizers would improve our experience out in the woods, and chose the sub-handlebar mounting option because it locates the stabilizer in a more protected position and also makes the unit less threatening to the rider in a crash.

Scotts offers two additional mounting options, one above the handlebar and one in front of the lower triple-clamp, with the damper jutting out above the front fender. It also sells kits that include their own upper triple-clamp with built-in mounting points (at a higher price, of course). The sub-mount includes a billet aluminum riser that fits in-between the upper triple-clamp and the stock handlebar mounting posts. On our 2009 KTM 250 XC-W test mule, it came stock with four handlebar mounting possibilities. The asymmetrical posts could be rotated 180° to fine-tune the fore/aft location of the bars, and they could each be mounted in either of two holes in the triple-clamp. Since the Scotts riser only reproduces the triple-clamp’s forward mounting holes, the rearward positions were sacrificed. The bars also wind up higher, since the riser is about 1” thick. Scotts sells handlebars with a shallower bend for those who wish to maintain stock grip height.

In addition to mounting the riser and eventually bolting the stabilizer to it, installation involved securing a stout “tower” to the frame (see photo). It’s this tower that links the stabilizer’s rotating arm to the bike’s relatively stationary chassis. We



**The bike’s throttle cable sometimes caught on the damper’s left corner when the bars were turned right. A zip-tie wrapped around the damper and the handlebar mounts prevents this.**



**Notice the stout construction of the tower clamp and the damper’s rotating arm; a lot of force travels through these pieces. Center of rotation is right above the steering stem nut.**

used a kit with a bolt-on tower, but Scotts also offers one with a weld-on alternative. Ours had a circular clamp that hugged the steering tube above the frame’s backbone. Mounting it required removing the upper triple-clamp and doing some very light filing of the local frame welds to achieve a snug, straight fit.

Installation was straightforward, but there were quite a few steps involved for something that ends up attached to the bike by only a few bolts; careful attention to detail was essential. Allow about 90 minutes; subsequent installations will go more quickly. Note: You can easily move the damper unit from bike to bike, assuming all the mounting hardware (available separately) is in place on each motorcycle. Once installed, the muted gold finish and precision craftsmanship of the Scotts unit added instant techno-bling to our KTM.

One of the things Scotts dampers are known for is their adjustability. A knob (right of center on our unit) allows the rider to increase or decrease the “base valve” damping resistance on the fly. The base valve is what restricts oil flow within the damper at relatively low speeds (“speed” here refers to the speed of handlebar rotation, not ground speed). Next to this knob, a black cap covers the high-speed valve adjuster, which is simply a flat-head screw, much like those on adjustable suspension components. Two more adjustment screws can be found on the sides of the damper; each controls the “sweep” of damping influence on its respective side. Less sweep means the damping action fades out closer to the steering centerline; more sweep extends the range of damping influence outward toward the steering stops.

As the bars are turned, the damper’s rotating arm is held still at one end by the tower, while the other end turns a central shaft within the damper assembly.

Adjusting the base valve changes the resistance routinely encountered at the bar; too much will make steering feel heavy. With proper adjustment, damping should be transparent, without any discernable change in resistance from before installation. Even though the bars aren’t any harder to turn, they end up feeling easier to keep straight. All sorts of micro-corrections you didn’t even know you were making drop out of the riding equation. This is a subtle change that’s only noticeable over time as you realize you’re expending less energy.

The high-speed circuit kicks in when there’s a sharp jolt to the steering, like when the front wheel receives a glancing blow from a root or rock. Instead of careening off to one side or at least feeling a sudden jerk at the bars, the bike simply stays on course without any fuss. We’ve been content to leave the sweep at the default setting, which is 22° to each side of center.

Fit, finish and workmanship are all top-notch, and functionality is excellent, though not dramatic—in fact, it’s all about the removal of drama, which is a good thing. This probably isn’t the first modification you’ll want to make to your dual-sport or dirt bike, but once you’ve ridden with one, you won’t want to go without. Sub-Mount Steering Stabilizer Kit, \$489.95 (prices vary by application; damper unit alone is \$330). ■

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