

RECKON YOU
KNOW IT ALL?
HOW MANY
RULES DO YOU
FOLLOW?



12

THE

GOLDEN RULES OF RIDING

Want to improve your riding? Better remember the golden rules

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YOUR PANEL OF EXPERTS



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Former police instructor Mike is a RoSPA examiner and runs regular advanced riding courses on the Isle of Man including stretches of the mountain circuit. www.micacademy.co.uk



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Former head of the Met's motorcycle training school IAM chief examiner Peter was part of the team behind the IAM's new *How to be a Better Rider* book. www.iam.org.uk



Riding a motorcycle is a complex task demanding a high degree of skill. Mastering it is difficult – and while there are short cuts to becoming a better rider, as with all short cuts the worry is that it misses something out. So how can you check that you've truly acquired the necessary skills?

Ah, you say, poised to turn the page, I've been riding for years – I'll know this stuff. Very probably. Yet one thing advanced instructors see time and again is good riders being held back not by their failure to master a sophisticated riding technique, but by a problem with something basic. Something they already know, but

have neglected while concentrating on acquiring more advanced skills. Sometimes, it seems, experienced riders are more inclined to be careless about the basics than newer riders, who've only just mastered them.

We asked four of the most experienced riding instructors in the country to share their golden rules – the fundamental principles that underpin better riding. The result is an invaluable checklist for every rider. Whether you've been riding for six months, six years or 60 years, they're a great way to check your riding. If you already follow these rules, you'll be riding to a high standard. If not, you'll know which areas you need to work on. 

1 MAKE SURE YOU'RE FIT TO RIDE

Had a few beers last night? Feeling ill? Sleep-deprived? Physical factors such as sickness, exhaustion or being over the drink-drive limit may slow your reaction time, make you clumsy with the controls and can affect your judgment. Stage-one hypothermia increases aggression at the same time as it limits control, while getting dehydrated on hot days reduces the ability to concentrate and make decisions. Make sure you have the right kit for the job – it'll make a huge difference.

2 CHECK YOUR BIKE

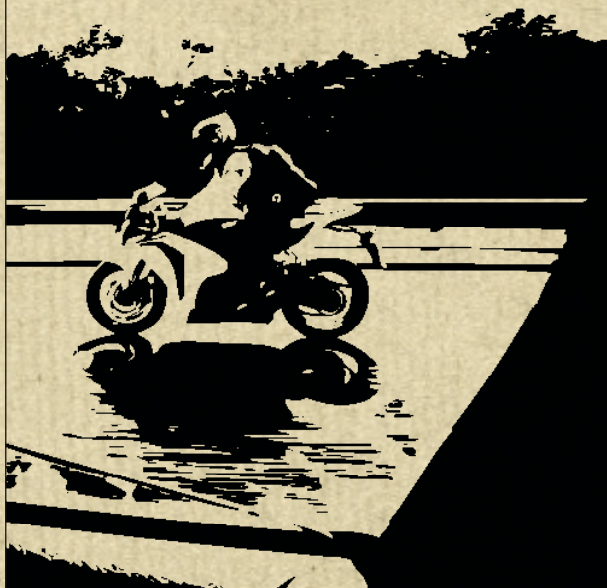
Before you go anywhere, check that your bike is roadworthy (especially if it's been a while since you last took it out). Check the tyre pressures are as recommended by the manufacturer. Check there's sufficient tread – at least 1mm deep across a continuous three-quarters of the tyre radius, all the way round. Check the chain is correctly adjusted and lubricated. Check the brake pads, the lights, the horn and the kill switch. Look for signs of damage or leaks, and make sure the engine has enough oil and you have enough fuel.

4 STAY RELAXED

Keep a light grip on the bars, with your elbows loose and back relaxed. It's best to lean forward

3 MAKE SURE YOU'RE IN THE MOOD

If you're relaxed and concentrating on riding, you'll ride well. If your mind's elsewhere – dwelling on trouble at work or home – you won't be giving the road your full attention, so you could easily get caught out. Much worse is riding after an argument, as this is likely to lead to an increase in dangerous risk taking. Even more important is avoiding the red mist provoked by other road users. If another driver does something stupid, shrug it off – don't take it personally and never get provoked. Three of the most dangerous words you can mutter in your crash helmet are: "I'll show you..."



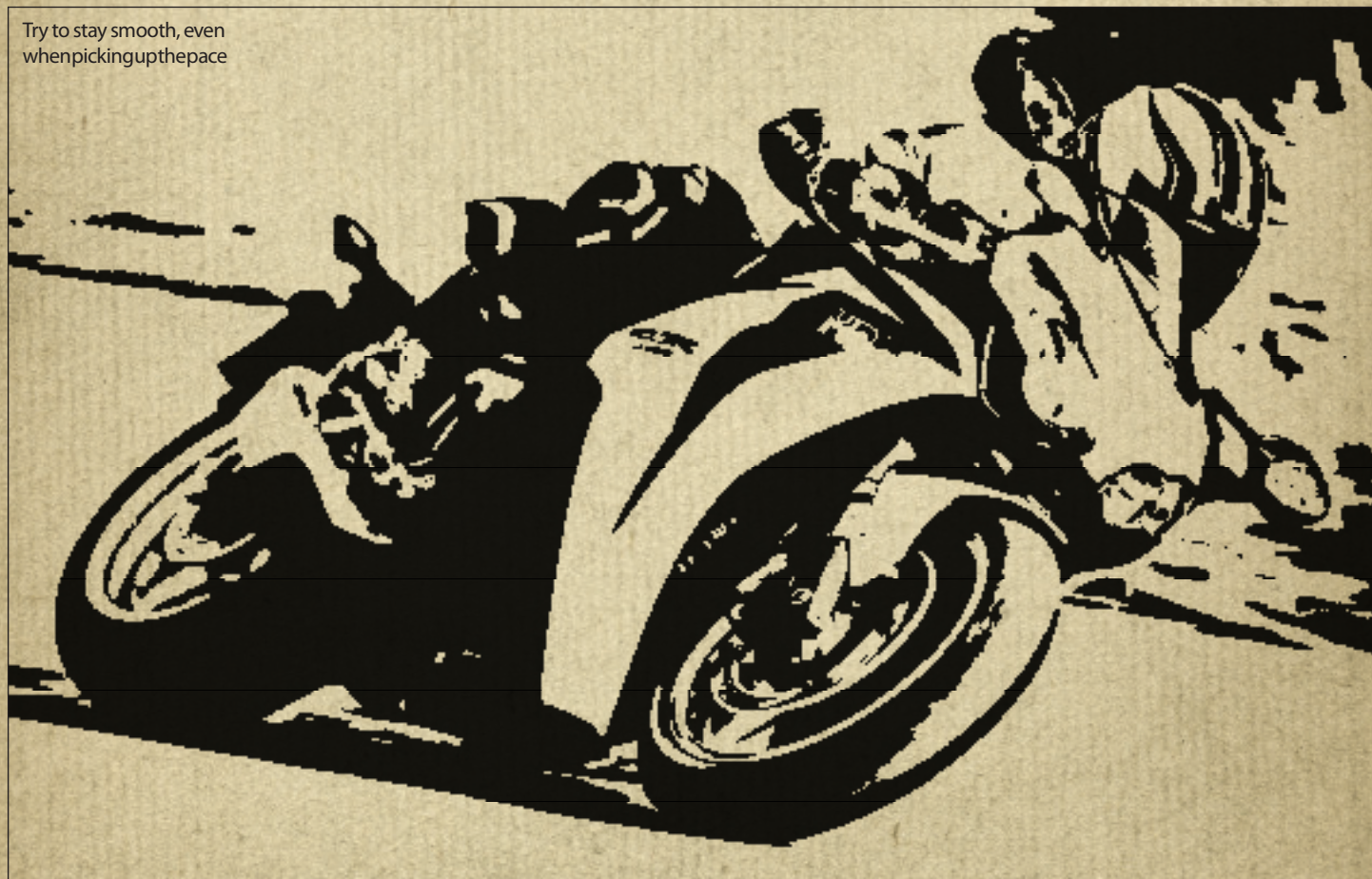
"GOOD RIDING IS EFFORTLESS AND BLISTERINGLY EFFICIENT"

slightly, but don't put weight on the handlebars. If you need to hold onto the bike, use your knees to grip the tank. Keeping the weight off the bars lets the bike steer better and, crucially, self-correct better. If you're upright and tense, with locked arms and white knuckles, you'll be fighting the bike, not riding it. Keep your breathing deep and slow and keep your body as relaxed as possible.

5 BE SMOOTH

Especially with the throttle and the brakes. One of the most commonly mentioned problems facing experienced riders is a lack of smoothness on the throttle – when trying to go faster, ragged and slower riding can result from trying to get on the gas earlier or harder. Keep it smooth, even when picking the pace up. Similarly, ragged or uneven application of the brakes can actually make braking less

Try to stay smooth, even when picking up the pace



Stay relaxed on the bike and try to look as far ahead as possible



efficient. Good riding is smooth, effortless and blisteringly efficient, but it's the result of hard work, practice and concentration.

6 LOOK WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

And not at where you don't want to end up. When coming up to a bend, turn your neck to get a good view into the turn. Especially if you think a corner's coming up a bit quick, don't stare at a tree on the side of the road or you'll ride straight at it. Look to the piece of Tarmac just round the corner and you'll get there.

7 LOOK AHEAD – AND AROUND YOU

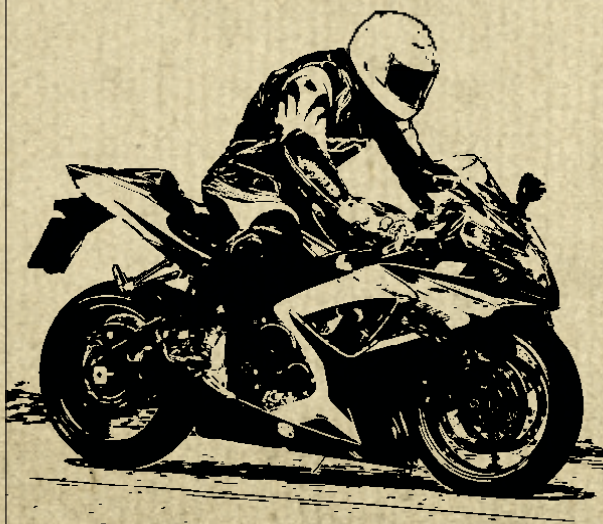
It's important to look as far ahead as you can, but without neglecting the space between the bike and the distance. Check the road surface for potholes, mud, diesel, dead badgers and anything else that could cause you problems. As you approach side roads, check there's nothing waiting to pull out in front of you. Check your mirrors regularly and consider giving a lifesaver – most riders could benefit from giving a few more.

8 BE ABLE TO STOP

One of the absolute basics: you should always be able to stop,

9 GET TO KNOW YOUR BIKE

Understand how the bike responds to the controls and take your time getting to grips with a new machine, or when getting back on after some time off. Build up your feel for the power delivery, braking and handling of the bike gradually – don't jump on and go straight for 100 per cent. Even when riding regularly, always give yourself a few miles to warm the tyres and get a feel for the bike before picking the pace up. It's a good idea to practise hard braking regularly, so that if you do need to perform an emergency stop, you can do a good one.

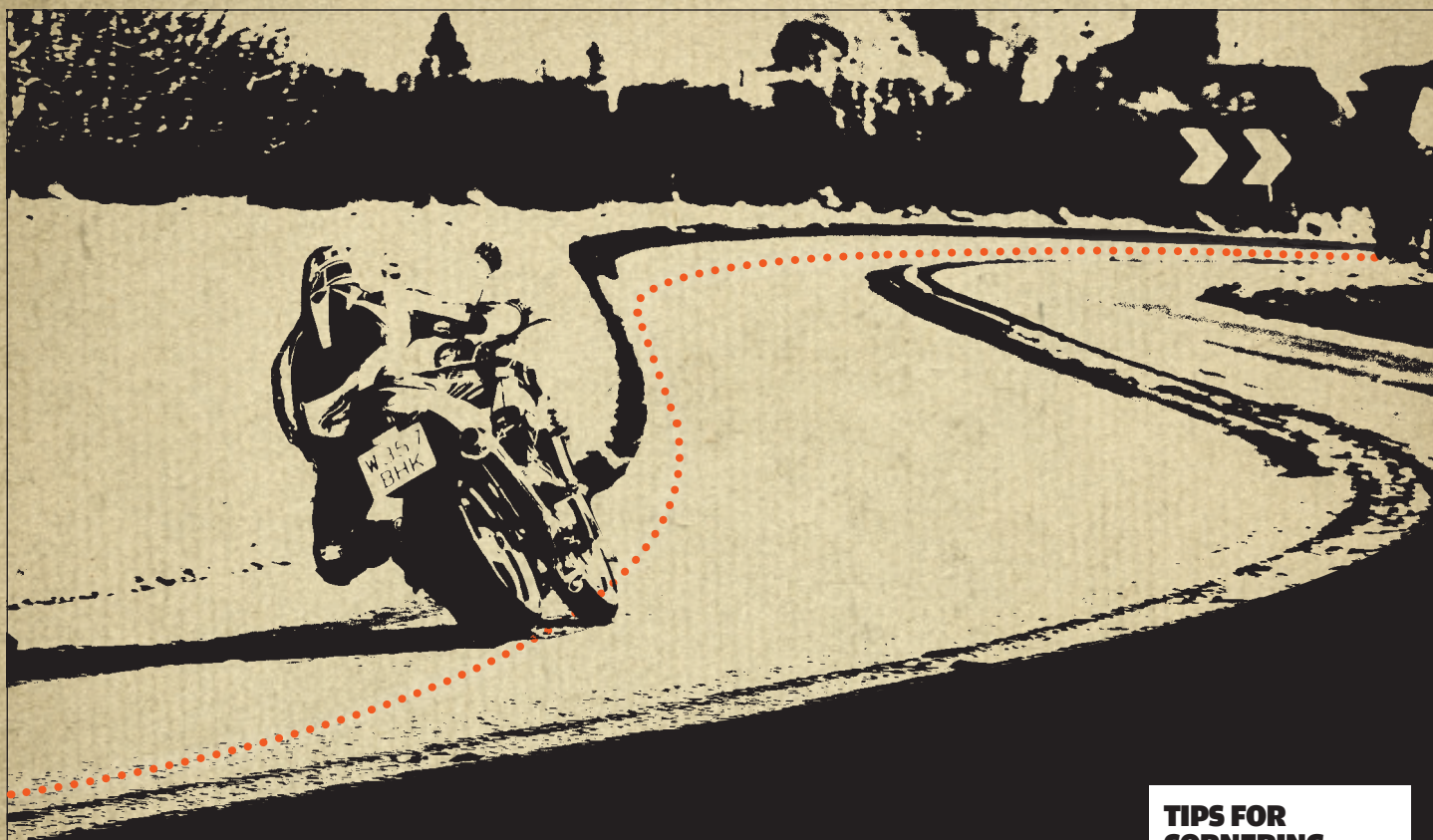


"GIVE YOURSELF A FEW MILES BEFORE PICKING UP THE PACE"

under control, in the distance you can see on your own side of the road. And it's one of the basics most often forgotten as experienced riders pick up the tempo. Especially when making a bit of progress, ask yourself if you could stop if you had to. It's the kind of thing that you can get away with a million times, but it only has to go wrong once for it to be a tragedy.

10 GIVE YOURSELF SPACE

Space on a bike means time: more time to plan, more time to make decisions, more time to stop if you have to. Creating a bubble around the bike, with space ahead and behind you, will keep you safer and make everything easier. Every corner will be easier to read and every overtake easier to plan. Check that you



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USE MORE OF THE ROAD

The traditional bread-and-butter of advanced riding: moving about within your lane to get a better view of the road ahead, as well as to get better lines through corners.

- Take a dominant position between the centre of your lane and the white line, but be flexible and move a little to the left if there's oncoming traffic.
- As soon as you see a corner, get into the best position for it. The earlier you're in position, the more time you have to assess it, adjust speed and fine-tune your position. For right-handers, that's as far to the left as you can safely and comfortably go.
- Don't commit to the corner until you can see where it goes – it's better

to slow more and turn later than carry too much speed into a corner.

- Too fast in and you're likely to run wide.
- If you're smooth with the throttle it can be gently applied from the mid-corner point, but it will push the bike out towards the far edge of the road. Not much throttle is needed when stringing two bends together.
- Assessing left-hand bends is the same: get into position early, ideally close to the white line (but not too close if there's oncoming traffic). Give yourself as much time as possible to adjust your speed on the approach.
- Turn in when you can see the corner exit. Again, slow in, fast out is better than piling in too hot.
- Running wide on left-handers is especially dangerous as it can put the bike into the path of oncoming traffic.
- When exiting onto a straight, more throttle can be used, building speed as the bike gradually resumes its normal, dominant road position.

"DON'T COMMIT TO THE CORNER UNTIL YOU CAN SEE WHERE IT GOES"

TIPS FOR CORNERING

1. Relax. If you're tense, sitting up with locked arms and a straight back, you'll be making it harder for the bike to do its job.
2. Look where you want to go. Turn your head – dip your shoulder towards the corner and crane your neck to point your chin at the corner exit.
3. Push on the inside bar. You don't need to apply much force, but smoothly building pressure on the bar will help the bike turn.
4. Push down on the footpegs. Crucial off-road, but also helpful on the road. Pressure on the inside footpeg will help the bike turn. On the other hand, if you're concerned that you may turn early, pressure on the outside footpeg will help you stay out wide until you decide to turn.

don't ride up close behind other vehicles. The acceleration of a bike means you can sit safely back, but if you reduce the gap you may not have a safe braking distance if they stop unexpectedly. If you're too close, you'll have to concentrate on the distance between bike and bumper, not on looking past for an opportunity to overtake safely.

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KEEP TO SAFE POSITIONS

The flip side of using more of

the road (see 11) is even more important: knowing when not to move into a different position. Never put the bike in a position that you cannot already see to be safe, even if you think that getting there will provide a view that will confirm you're in a safe place. It might not – you could get there only to see a truck heading right for you. The most important consideration is to keep to safe positions. If in doubt, you need to slow down and settle for a reduced view. In other words, don't be rigidly governed by

set-in-stone 'rules' – assess each situation individually, be flexible and stay safe.

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RIDE FOR YOURSELF

The only person who knows how your bike and your tyres behave is you. The only person with your view of the road is you. So the only person able to make informed decisions about how you ride has to be you. Always ride at your own pace and don't be pressured into trying to keep up with quicker riders – they may

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NEVER PUT THE BIKE WHERE YOUR MIND HASN'T ALREADY BEEN

Looking well ahead is important, but you have to use the information you

gather effectively. This is how you keep to safe positions – by planning where you're going. If you see the left-hand side of your lane is full of potholes, you can't go there to set up a right-hander. If there's traffic coming in the other direction, you can't sit on top of the centre line to set up a left-hander. If you can't see where you'd rejoin your lane after passing a truck, it's not safe to start the overtake. Planning your ride is fundamental to keeping you safe.

**OVERTAKING SUCCESSFULLY**

1. Keep a good distance back from the target vehicle and match its speed with the bike in a low, responsive gear. When you can see it's safe to cross the centre line, pop out, confirm that it's safe to pass and go by quickly. Don't start accelerating when you're on your side of the road, though – if you do have to call the pass off, you'll be running out of space as you approach the back of the target vehicle.

2. Can't see where you'd return to your lane? Then call it off. Return to your lane – just don't creep up to the back of the target vehicle while waiting for your opportunity to pass.

3. When there are gaps in the traffic, take care to assess the speed of oncoming vehicles. You may be able to make progress from gap to gap, like jumping from one stepping stone to another. When planning such passes, allow for you need to lose speed after passing vehicles – there's no point overtaking on a truck only to run into the back of the next one.

"TRY TO ANTICIPATE WHAT OTHER ROAD USERS WILL DO"

have a faster bike, grippier tyres, years of club racing experience or a nascent death wish... you just can't tell. Just because the guy ahead can make an overtake or go round a corner at a particular speed, it doesn't mean you can or should. Assess your own risks and ride so you are safe.

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DON'T GET COMPLACENT

Be confident but honest about your ability and ride to your own limits. If you want to improve, find a decent trainer to work with. If you're happy with your riding, just make sure you keep your

standards high. Keep concentration levels up on every ride and always be ready to learn. Identify any weak areas and make a real effort to work on them – for instance, you can't improve your wet-weather riding by taking the car every time it rains.

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HAVE A PLAN B

Try to anticipate what other road users will do – and be prepared for them to do the worst possible thing. In other words, don't assume they've seen you. Don't be paranoid, but do be cautious. If you've spotted a potential hazard like a dog running loose or a car

waiting to pull out, chances are you'll take whatever it does in your stride if you've already worked out your options.

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ENJOY IT

There's no point riding if it's not fun, so have fun. Don't hit silly speeds or take risks just to get a buzz: that way lies madness, or at least A&E. But if you're not enjoying it any more, ask yourself why. Are you riding faster than you really want to? Do you need a different bike, a better-fitting crash helmet or just some new roads to explore? Find ways to enjoy your bike and you'll be on the road to riding well.

**A FINAL WORLD: FLEXIBILITY**

Underpinning all these rules is the need to assess each situation as it arises. The rules are great guides, but if they're treated rigidly can become a straitjacket. The secret is to master the principles they represent and apply them flexibly.