

# Season Startup

by Ken Condon

SOME MCN READERS are lucky enough to ride year-round. However, as I write this installment, there is a thick accumulation of snow outside my New England home, rendering my riding season inactive. My motorcycles have been in hibernation for several weeks, and I can assure you from past experience that my skills are dormant, as well. After more than three decades of “new seasons,” I have learned a few things about how to prepare for the spring thaw so that risk is reduced and frustration, averted.

## Motorcycle Prep

Hopefully, you put your machine(s) away in a manner that ensures a smooth start to the season. Adding fuel stabilizer, lubricating the chain, levers and foot controls, changing engine oil (it’s a good idea to store your motorcycle with fresh oil to flush toxins), and ensuring correct tire pressures are just a few things that should have been done before you closed the garage door for the final time to end the season. Also, hooking your battery to a trickle-charger helps to ensure a quick startup. In my neck of the woods, mice are notorious for nesting inside airboxes. Knowing this, I put a screen over airbox inlets before storing the bike over the winter. If these things were taken care of, then the chances are good that your first ride of the season will start off easily. If you failed to take these precautions, then your first ride might be delayed by hours, days, or even weeks.

Even if you followed the standard storage protocols, there are some maintenance tasks that you must perform before thumbing the starter for your first ride. Look in your owner’s manual for a list of routine maintenance tasks, which include replacing the oil and filter (if you didn’t do it before putting it away), cleaning or replacing the air filter, and flushing the brake and clutch fluid. If you are not comfortable performing these tasks yourself and need the service department of a dealership to do the work, then schedule an appointment early so your bike will be taken care of before the season gets fully underway.

We all know the importance of making sure our tires are in top condition. At the very least, tires will need to be inspected for obvious cracks in the sidewalls. And, of course, you must check tire pressures—even if you inflated them before storing the bike, because tires lose pressure just from sitting over time.

While you’re preparing for your first ride, make note of any parts that need replacing in the near future, such as chain and sprockets, brake pads, tires, etc. Get a rough idea about when these parts need replacing and order them sooner, rather than later, to ensure they are on hand when you need them.

## Rider Tune-up

So, your fluids, brakes, and tire pressures are taken care of; that’s great. But, before you venture too far, it’s smart to take



**This year, start your season off right with a careful pre-ride check.**

some time to knock the rust off your skills. It’s naïve to think that you can simply pick up where you left off last year with the same level of riding competence and confidence. Your physical skills and mental processing ability will not be nearly sharp enough after many weeks or months of hibernation.

To get your physical skills up to snuff requires some purposeful practice. A half-hour’s worth of braking and cornering practice in a clean and clear parking lot can have a huge impact on confidence and safety. Unfortunately, planning visits to a parking lot to practice isn’t very appealing to most riders. This reluctance is common...and understandable. People ride motorcycles to feel the wind and road rush beneath their feet as they roll down the boulevard or carve the back roads. Few riders want to devote precious riding time doing circles and stops in a parking lot. Besides, developing riding skills can sound a lot like work.

However, this small investment in time will pay off with a safer and more enjoyable start to the riding season. It’s helpful to have a plan, so that your time is focused. I designed several parking lot drills that can be found in my book, *Riding in the Zone*, but you can also find drills in Lee Parks’ *Total Control* book and Dave Hough’s *Proficient Motorcycling* books. You can also design your own. The primary skills to target are braking, swerving and cornering. As always, be sure to wear all of your protective gear, just in case.

To rediscover your bike’s braking potential, perform several quick stops from all speeds. Increase the intensity of each stop, eventually working up to controlled emergency stops from about 30 mph. The goal is to be able to stop your motorcycle in as short a distance as you safely can, without locking either wheel. To do this, you must squeeze the front brake smoothly to avoid a front tire skid! If you abruptly grab the brake lever, you are not allowing the weight of bike and rider to smoothly “load” the front tire. The extra weight pressing the front tire into the pavement increases traction so the front tire can handle the brake power. Conversely, load decreases at the rear, which means that there is an increase in the likelihood of a rear tire skid. To avoid a rear brake skid, press on the rear brake pedal; firmly at first, and then with less pressure as load shifts forward.

Cornering can be practiced by making large and small circles in both directions. Strive to achieve lean angles that you expect in typical riding conditions. But, for maximum benefit, learn to lean your bike at more extreme angles to condition your body, mind, and senses to handle more extreme situations. Increase lean angle slowly to prevent anxiety. Be sure to look well ahead to help direct the motorcycle and to spot any hazards early.

While you’re at it, do some slow speed turns. Reduce speed before making a tight U-turn, but don’t slow so much that you



**Get your rusty braking skills back in shape through practice.**

bike becomes unstable. Maintain steady rear-wheel drive to avoid abrupt speed changes and a possible tipover. Rather than adjusting speed using just the often-twitchy throttle, drag your rear brake lightly. It's smart to avoid using the front brake to avoid an abrupt stop. It's important to look over your shoulder when executing the turn. The ability to perform slow-speed maneuvers is not only useful during every ride you take, but it also goes a long way toward increasing overall confidence in your ability to handle your motorcycle.

Finally, practice evasive maneuvers. Place a small marker, such as a bottle cap, on the pavement and ride toward it. Just before reaching the marker, swerve to one side. To swerve, press hard on the handlebar on the side in which you want the motorcycle to go. This will countersteer the bike in that direction (press right to go right and vice versa). Once you have maneuvered far enough away from the virtual hazard, press hard on the opposite handlebar to recover.

When performing swerves, your front tire becomes unloaded as the motorcycle flops from side-to-side. This means that traction is reduced, so it's important that you avoid touching the brakes while swerving. Repeat the drill, this time swerve to the other side. Next, place two markers side-by-side to define a larger obstacle, such as a car, and repeat the drill. Note that you will have to maintain handlebar pressure for a longer period of time to move the motorcycle farther left or right to avoid the wider obstacle. You'll also have to press and hold longer to recover to stay in your "lane." After a few parking lot visits and a few hundred miles of careful street riding, your skills should be back on track.

Some riders prefer to attend formal training courses. Not only will the drills be clearly defined, but the outlay of time and money ensures that you will devote your attention to the goal of learning. If you're one of these riders, I recommend starting with the MSF Experienced RiderCourse ([www.msf-usa.org](http://www.msf-usa.org)), which focuses on building a solid foundation of mental and physical skills. For more advanced concepts and skill development, consider Lee Parks' Advanced Riding Clinic ([www.totalcontroltraining.net](http://www.totalcontroltraining.net)). For the ultimate training experience, you can't beat a racetrack school or a track day that provides instruction. Any one of these venues will put a smile on your face and a ton of confidence in your pocket.

### **Mental Tune-Up**

Riding skills encompass more than the ability to skillfully turn, brake, and shift a motorcycle. Riding skills also include mental skills for surviving traffic situations, reading surface hazards, and judging cornering complexities. These skills become quite rusty from being unused over the winter.

You can begin to improve these mental skills by reading motorcycling skills books (see above). Look for topics that discuss ways to manage your riding environment and then apply what you learned on every ride you take. Learn the specific strategies that help you to identify and predict hazards so you can act to prevent potentially dangerous situations from becoming catastrophes.

Start to develop strategies by first becoming highly conscious of typical hazards found in your riding environment. For instance, knowing that drivers often turn left across traffic at intersections should prompt you to be extra alert, cover your brakes, and have a planned escape route, just in case. If your riding environment is mostly rural you must recognize the risk of animals, higher speeds, and complex cornering situations and know how to handle them. You should also understand where road surface hazards typically appear and how to position your motorcycle's wheels to avoid traction loss.

It's important to remember that road debris, road salt and potholes can taint springtime rides. It's also important to remember that drivers are not used to seeing motorcyclists, which means that they are more likely to not register your presence in traffic, even when looking directly at you.

You can get a head start on polishing your mental skills by noticing traffic behavior from behind the wheel of your car. Ask yourself what action you might take to ensure that other drivers will see you if you were on your motorcycle. Look for situations where an escape plan might be necessary, and spot where you might place your motorcycle to avoid a collision. This mental exercise is very effective at conditioning your brain for your first ride of the season and if you continue using car driving as mental motorcycle training your mind will remain sharp throughout the year.

### **Expand Your Horizons**

The upcoming season offers the opportunity for you to broaden your knowledge of motorcycling and expand your riding abilities. You may want to consider long-distance touring, track day riding, racing, dual-sport riding, or trail riding.



**Practice cornering in an empty lot to increase confidence.**





**Practice swerving for those times when stopping isn't an option.**

Long-distance riding provides the opportunity to experience the unique feeling of being far from home with only your motorcycle to rely on. You'll discover a greater emotional connection between you and your motorcycle. For riders new to touring, a simple overnight trip is a great start. All you need is some time, maps, money and a reliable motorcycle. Planning for a trip requires forethought about weather, routes, overnight lodging, and sites to see.

For very long trips, you may want to consider flying to your starting destination and renting a motorcycle, or trailering your bike for a portion of your trip. Purists might scoff at these options, but for busy people with limited vacation time or endurance, these options can mean the difference between taking the trip or not. For those of you who routinely take long trips within the U.S. borders, perhaps it's time for an overseas adventure. You can choose to let a touring company take care of everything, or you can do it the old fashioned way with a bunch of phone calls, Google searches, and maps spread out on the kitchen table.

Recreational dual-sport and trail riding is a great way to enjoy the wilderness or less-beaten path while heightening your understanding of motorcycle control and traction management that can add considerably to your knowledge and confidence as a street rider. Off-road riding is different enough from street riding that it is smart to get a lesson in dirt riding techniques. A great place to do this is the MSF Dirtbike School ([www.dirtbikeschool.com](http://www.dirtbikeschool.com)). You can also buy any number of DVDs and books that provide knowledge about off-road techniques. Take a look at Shane Watts' *Dirtwise* for dirt techniques ([www.shanewatts.com](http://www.shanewatts.com)), or *Dirt Riding Skills for Dual-Sport & Adventure Riders* by Carl Adams ([www.whitehorsepress.com](http://www.whitehorsepress.com)) for dual-sport techniques.

Another adventure you might consider that can expand your range of experience and develop your skills this season is a track day. Track day events are located all over the country and allow street riders of a wide variety of skill levels and motorcycle types to experience the truly exciting riding experience. The benefit of a track day is to develop your skills in a controlled environment free of typical street riding hazards. Unfortunately, many riders assume that a track day means you must go fast and that the likelihood of crashing is high. But organizers encourage participants to ride at a comfortable pace. This means that novice track day riders will

often ride at speeds similar to quick street riding. Once you become familiar with the track and each corner's character, then your attention becomes free to work on refining your braking and cornering technique. Many track day events have some instruction available. At the end of the day, your skills will have improved immensely and you'll have had the time of your life.

### **New Season, New Bike?**

Many riders upgrade their machine during the off-season. If you are starting this year with a new ride, then you must understand that there is a learning curve involved. Too many riders assume that all bikes are the same and that they can simply swing their leg over, start the motor and safely go on their way.

However, every bike has its own unique feel and power delivery. This may mean that your new motorcycle handles much differently than what you're accustomed to. Make sure your first several rides on the new bike are safe and enjoyable by acclimating yourself to its power delivery, handling properties and braking system. The best way to do this is—you guessed it—to take it to a parking lot.

Sure, you can start your season by simply strapping on your helmet and thumbing the starter without much thought about your mental and physical competence. But, with a little forethought and practice, you can minimize the likelihood of close calls, clumsy braking, and awkward cornering that can get you into trouble and end your season before it starts. Make a point to put some effort into tuning your mental and physical skills before the season really begins. Not only will you be happier about your riding, you'll minimize the chance that you'll suddenly be faced with a situation that your rusty skills can't manage. ■



**This season, find new opportunities to expand your riding horizons, such as motorcycle travel and camping.**

### **THE AUTHOR**

Ken Condon is a current MSF RiderCoach, chief instructor for Tony's Track Days and author of ***Riding In The Zone: Advanced Techniques for Skillful Motorcycling***, available through Whitehorse Press and from: [www.ridinginthezone.com](http://www.ridinginthezone.com)