

KEEPING IT UP by Hein Jonker

Road Racing

It's possible that I've mistitled this tip. Perhaps I should have called it: Testing Limits. On the other hand, since you're reading it it's possible that I titled it correctly after all. I want to express a personal concern here in such a strong manner that it gets some attention and at least causes my readers to think about the issues.

I need to highlight the importance to prepare for your rides. It goes so far as to describe three elements that need to be prepared: Your mind, your body and your machine. That works for me.

It then goes on to advise that one should know and ride within limits. And, again, it lists three such limits: Your skills, your machine and your environment. While I agree in principle, I think one needs to go farther and relate this advice to the real world.

It seems to me that the intention of that advice is spot on, from a safety point of view, but it lacks reality from several other points of view. For example, before you learned to ride a motorcycle your motorcycle skills (limits) were trivial. Following the advice to the letter would preclude ever taking a motorcycle rider class. To grow, by definition, one must test (at least stress) limits. That does not mean 'stepping over the line'. Rather, it means putting your toes over that line. To learn great skills at anything involves a process of pushing the limit line farther and farther ahead of you. Push it too fast and you might not survive for the next lesson.

Next, the three limits described are not isolated and well defined absolutes. You may be able to scrape your pegs on a certain curve, using a familiar motorcycle, but change the motorcycle or try it on an unfamiliar curve and your skill limit is probably breached. Said differently, limits are interdependent, not independent. Because these limits are all functions of each other, a rational person who wants to grow (stretch his limits) must control all those that he is not trying to stretch. One does not, for example, decide to see how far over he can lean in a curve by mounting an unfamiliar motorcycle and aiming it at a blind curve that he has never ridden on before.

While I absolutely agree that motorcyclists must know their own skill limits, the limits of their motorcycles, and the limits of their riding environment, I would argue that until a motorcyclist personally feels that he is 'good enough' to satisfy whatever personal needs he has, he should feel perfectly free to put his toes over ONE limit at a time in order to grow.

And, to think that there are only three limits to be concerned about is silly. I would argue that at least one more is profoundly important: the LAW.

The title of this article is Road Racing, not limits. So, what's the message here?

I know a man who has exceptionally fine motorcycle skills, his motorcycle is of the highest quality and is well maintained, and he tends to ride on the best surfaces possible (meaning, among other things, that he avoids rain when he rides.) This is a man who routinely challenges himself, his motorcycle and his environment ALL AT THE SAME TIME! And, almost by definition, he challenges the law while challenging all the rest of those limits. He considers himself to be a Road Racer. And he's not alone. He travels with and COMPETES AGAINST half a dozen other Road Racers. Always on public roads - often roads he has never ridden before. Always in uncontrolled conditions. Always well in excess of posted speed limits. Sometimes he swaps motorcycles with a buddy to see how another bike 'feels'. And, occasionally, after a beer or two.

If you agree with me that limits include at least self, motorcycle, environment and law, and if you agree with me that if you test limits you should restrict that testing to only one limit at a time, then you have to wonder how this guy survives at all. (Indeed, maybe you already know why so many of them do not.)

So there is no mistaking what I think, try this one on for size: If a group (two or more) of road racers take on unfamiliar roads at speeds far in excess of the speed limit, pushing their skill limits and competing with one another, the entire group is obviously testing too many limits.

And, if someone DIES as a result of that activity, then EVERYONE IN THE GROUP SHOULD BE CHARGED WITH MANSLAUGHTER.

The only place motorcyclists should compete is on a race course. Road racing is not 'growth'. It's reckless endangerment. And, yes, it's a self-correcting problem as well.