

GEARING UP: Surfaces and Traction

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We all know to retain ones balance a couple of things need to be in your favour. Many of these we take for granted!

Let's look at the human being – it makes the most of an intricate system using all its senses. Eyes and the horizon give an idea of the 'way up' one should be, the underside of the feet give feeling as to the surface being walked on and the hearing sense gives an idea of other conditions which may relate to the surface. All these factors provide information for the brain. The mind can then make appropriate decisions as to the size of the step, the rate or speed of moving across the surface or to avoid it altogether.

When we're riding our motorcycles we are confronted with exactly the same set of problems but now instead of using our feet we now have two round pieces of rubber upon which we now need to make the same types of decisions – faster, slower or avoid! Our contact points help with the input transmitted through the tyres. These contact points are your hands, feet and seat. The tyres will tend to absorb some of the surface variations one is riding across. Bumpy is still relatively bumpy when compared to a smooth surface and slippery is still slippery when

the feeling of sliding is felt and similarly mud and sand offer different types of texture which create different results on the handle bars. Thick fine sand offers significantly more resistance than a well packed dirt road and hence requires a different approach to riding this surface safely.

Through all of this we are still using our eyes / horizon and ears (inner ear drum) to balance. If you are a rider who listens to music while riding you are taking a significant risk – you have chosen to eliminate a key item in helping you retain your balance. Similarly being caught at dusk with a dark visor reduces the understanding of road surfaces dramatically – to see that diesel patch is extremely fortuitous!

Added to all of this we then have different types of tyres designed specifically to perform on prescribed surfaces – slicks for racing, block type designs for sand and the many hundreds of permutations related to compounds and designs!

So for peat's sake why do we ride motorcycles if all of this is as sensitive as I make it out to be in terms of keeping the tyres rolling on the surface? Very simply because we can and because we want to! However increasingly I see people arriving on our courses (Countrytrax Off Road Academy) with the attitude that things just happen and technology will look after us! Traction control, ABS, fancy helmets, great kit and the list could go on as to why we are in this dream world – cocooned in this technologically safe environment. And when something does happen and we get hurt we are quick to blame the equipment – perhaps a tad too hasty! Or alternatively believing that the 'system' is invincible and we will be fine if something happens – nothing could be further from the truth!

My point being that yes while we have all of these wonderful inventions and the quality keeps on challenging the old boundaries, we must still understand those basics which lay the foundation upon which we can then challenge the roads we wish to travel! Understand the basic dynamics of surfaces and traction and this will enhance your riding experience!

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