

The Pace

Racing involves speed, concentration and commitment; the results of a mistake are usually catastrophic because there's little room for error riding at 100 percent. Performance street riding is less intense and further from the absolute limit, but because circumstances are less controlled, mistakes and over-aggressiveness can be equally catastrophic. Plenty of road racers have sworn off street riding. "Too dangerous, too many variables and too easy to get carried away with too much speed," track specialists claim. Adrenaline-addled racers find themselves treating the street like the track, and not surprisingly, they get burned by the police, the laws of physics and the cold, harsh realities of an environment not groomed for ten-tenths riding. But as many of us know, a swift ride down a favorite road may be the finest way to spend a few free hours with a bike we love. And these few hours are best enjoyed riding at The Pace.

THE PACE

The Pace focuses on bike control and de-emphasizes outright speed. Full-throttle acceleration and last minute braking aren't part of the program, effectively eliminating the two most common single-bike accident scenarios in sport riding. Cornering momentum is the name of the game, stressing strong, forceful inputs at the handlebar to place the bike correctly at the entrance of the turn and get it flicked in with little wasted time and distance. Since the throttle wasn't slammed open at the exit of the last corner, the next corner doesn't require much, if any braking. It isn't uncommon to ride with our group and not see a brake light flash all morning.

If brakes are required, the front lever gets squeezed smoothly, quickly and with a good deal of force to set entrance speed with minimum time. Running in on the brakes is tantamount to running off the road, a confession that you're pushing too hard and not getting your entrance speed set early enough because you stayed on the gas too long. Running The Pace decreases your reliance on the throttle and brakes, the two easiest controls to abuse, and hones your ability to judge cornering speed, which is the most thrilling aspect of performance street riding.

YOUR LANE IS YOUR LIMIT

Crossing the centerline at any time except during a passing maneuver is intolerable, another sign that you're pushing too hard to keep up. Even when you have a clean line of sight through a left-hand kink, stay to the right of the centerline. Staying on the right side of the centerline is much more challenging than simply straightening every slight corner, and when the whole group is committed to this intelligent practice, the temptation to cheat is eliminated through peer pressure and logic. Though street riding shouldn't be described in racing terms, you can think of your lane as the racetrack. Leaving your lane is tantamount to a crash.

Exact bike control has you using every inch of your lane if the circumstances permit it. In corners with a clear line of sight and no oncoming traffic, enter at the far outside of the corner, turn the bike relatively late in the corner to get a late apex at the far outside of your lane and accelerate out, just brushing the far outside of your lane as the bike stands up. Steer your bike forcefully but smoothly to minimize the transition time; don't hammer it down because the chassis will bobble slightly as it settles, possibly carrying you off line. Since you haven't charged in on the brakes, you can get the throttle on early, before the apex, which balances and settles your bike for the drive out.

More often than not, circumstances do not permit the full use of your lane from yellow line to white line and back again. Blind corners, oncoming traffic and gravel on the road are a few criteria that dictate a more conservative approach, so leave yourself a three- or four-foot margin for error, especially at the left side of the lane where errant oncoming traffic could prove fatal. Simply narrow your entrance on a blind right-hander and move your apex into your lane three feet on blind left turns in order to stay free of unseen oncoming traffic hogging the centerline. Because you're running at The Pace and not flat out, your controlled entrances offer additional time to deal with unexpected gravel or other debris in your lane; the outside wheel track is usually cleanest through a dirty corner since a car weights its outside tires most, scrubbing more dirt off the pavement in the process, so aim for that line.

A GOOD LEADER, WILLING FOLLOWERS

The street is not a racing environment, and it takes humility, self assurance and self control to keep it that way. The leader sets the pace and monitors his mirrors for signs of raggedness in the ranks that follow, such as tucking in on straights, crossing over the yellow line and hanging off the motorcycle in corners. If the leader pulls away, he simply slows his straightaway speed slightly but continues to enjoy the corners, thus closing the ranks but missing none of the fun. The small group of three or four riders I ride with is so harmonious that the pace is identical no matter who's leading. The lead shifts occasionally with a quick hand sign, but there's never a pass for the lead with an ego on the sleeve. Make no mistake, the riding is spirited and quick -- in the corners. Anyone with a right arm can hammer down the straights; it's the proficiency in the corners that makes The Pace come alive. Following distances are relatively lengthy, with the straight-aways -- taken at more moderate speeds -- the perfect opportunity to adjust the gaps. Keeping a good distance serves several purposes, besides being safer. Rock chips are minimized and the highway patrol won't suspect a race is in progress. The Pace's style of not hanging off in corners also reduces the appearance of pushing too hard and adds a degree of maturity and sensibility in the eyes of the public and the law. There's a definite challenge to cornering quickly while sitting sedately on your bike.

New rider indoctrination takes some time because The Pace develops very high cornering speeds and newcomers want to hammer the throttle on exits to make up for what they lose at the entrances. Our group slows drastically when a new rider joins the ranks because our technique of moderate straightaway speeds and no brakes can suck the unaware into a corner too fast, creating the most common single-bike accident. With a new rider learning the pace behind you, tap your brake lightly well before the turn to alert him, and make sure he understands there's no pressure to stay with the group.

There's plenty of ongoing communication during The Pace. A foot off the peg indicates debris on the road, and all slowing or turning intentions are signaled in advance with the left hand and arm. Turn signals are used for direction changes and passing, with a wave of the left hand to thank cars that move right and make it easy for the motorcyclists to get past. Since you don't have a death grip on the handlebar, your left hand is also free to wave to oncoming riders, a fading courtesy that we'd like to see return. If you're getting the idea that The Pace is a relaxing, noncompetitive way to ride with a group, you are right.

RELAX AND FLICK IT

I'd rather spend a Sunday in the mountains riding at The Pace than a Sunday at the racetrack, it is that enjoyable. Counter steering is the name of the game, a smooth forceful steering input at the handlebar relayed to the tires' contact patches through a rigid sport-bike frame. Riding at The Pace is certainly what the bike manufacturers had in mind when sport bikes evolved to the street.

But the machine isn't the most important aspect of running at The Pace because you can do it on anything capable of getting through a corner. Attitude is The Pace's most important aspect; realizing the friend ahead of you isn't a competitor, respecting his right to lead the group occasionally and giving him credit for his riding skills. You must have the maturity to limit your straightaway speeds to allow the group to stay in touch and the sense to realize that racetrack tactics such as late braking and full throttle runs to redline will alienate the public and police and possibly introduce you to the unforgiving laws of gravity. When the group arrives at the destination after running The Pace, no one feels outgunned or is left with the feeling he must prove himself on the return run. If you've got something to prove, get on a racetrack.

The racetrack measures your speed with a stopwatch and direct competition, welcoming your aggression and gritty resolve to be the best. Performance street riding's only yardstick is the amount of enjoyment gained, not lap times, finishing position or competitors beaten. The differences are huge, but not always remembered by riders who haven't discovered The Pace's cornering pureness and group involvement. Hammer on the racetrack, pace yourself on the street.

PACE YOURSELF

The street is not the track -- It's the place to *Pace*.

Two weeks ago a rider died when he and his bike tumbled off a cliff paralleling our favorite road. No gravel in the lane, no oncoming car pushing him wide, no ice. The guy screwed up, rider error. Too much enthusiasm with too little skill, and this fatality wasn't the first on this road this year. As with most single-bike accidents, the rider entered the corner at a speed his brain told him was too fast, stood the bike up and nailed the rear brake. Goodbye.

On the racetrack the rider would have tumbled into the hay bales, visited the ambulance for a strip of gauze and headed back to the pits to straighten his handlebars and think about his mistake. But let's get one thing perfectly clear; the street is not the racetrack. Using it as such will shorten your riding career and keep you from discovering The Pace. The Pace is far from street racing - and a lot more fun.

The Pace places the motorcycle in its proper role as the controlled vehicle, not the controlling vehicle. Too many riders of sport bikes become baggage when the throttle gets twisted - the ensuing speed is so overwhelming they are carried along in the rush. The Pace ignores outright speed and can be as much fun on a Ninja 250 as on a ZX-11, emphasizing rider skill over right-wrist bravado. A fool can twist the grip, but a fool has no idea how to stop or turn. Learning to stop will save your life; learning how to turn will enrich it. What feels better than banking a motorcycle over into a corner?

The mechanics of turning a motorcycle involve pushing and/or pulling on the handlebars; while this isn't new information for most sport riders, realize that the force at the handlebar affects the motorcycle's rate of turn-in. Shove hard on the bars, and the bike snaps over; gently push the bars, and the bike lazily banks in. Different corners require different techniques, but as you begin to think about lines, late entrances and late apexes, turning your bike at the exact moment and reaching the exact lean angle will require firm, forceful inputs at the handlebars. If you take less time to turn your motorcycle, you can use that time to brake more effectively or run deeper into a corner, affording yourself more time to judge the corner and a better look at any hidden surprises. It's important to look as far into the corner as possible and remember the adage, "You go where you look."

DON'T RUSH

The number-one survival skill, after mastering emergency braking, is setting your corner-entrance speed early, or as Kenny Roberts says, "Slow in, fast out." Street riders may get away with rushing into 99 out of 100 corners, but that last one will have gravel, mud or a trespassing car. Setting entrance speed early will allow you to adjust your speed and cornering line, giving you every opportunity to handle the surprise.

We've all rushed into a corner too fast and experienced not just the terror but the lack of control when trying to herd the bike into the bend. If you're fighting the brakes and trying to turn the bike, any surprise will be impossible to deal with. Setting your entrance speed early and looking into the corner allows you to determine what type of corner you're facing. Does the radius decrease? Is the turn off-camber? Is there an embankment that may have contributed some dirt to the corner?

Racers talk constantly about late braking, yet that technique is used only to pass for position during a race, not to turn a quicker lap time. Hard braking blurs the ability to judge cornering speed accurately, and most racers who rely too heavily on the brakes find themselves passed at the corner exits because they scrubbed off too much cornering speed. Additionally, braking late often forces you to trail the brakes or turn the motorcycle while still braking. While light trail braking is an excellent and useful technique to master, understand that your front tire has only a certain amount of traction to give.

If you use a majority of the front tire's traction for braking and then ask it to provide maximum cornering traction as well, a typical low-side crash will result. Also consider that your motorcycle won't steer as well with the fork fully compressed under heavy braking. If you're constantly fighting the motorcycle while turning, it may be because you're braking too far into the corner. All these problems can be eliminated by setting your entrance speed early, an important component of running The Pace.

Since you aren't hammering the brakes at every corner entrance, your enjoyment of pure cornering will increase tremendously. You'll relish the feeling of snapping your bike into the corner and opening the throttle as early as possible. Racers talk about getting the drive started, and that's just as important on the street. Notice how the motorcycle settles down and simply works better when the throttle is open? Use a smooth, light touch on the

throttle and try to get the bike driving as soon as possible in the corner, even before the apex, the tightest point of the corner. If you find yourself on the throttle ridiculously early, it's an indication you can increase your entrance speed slightly and be releasing the brakes earlier.

As you sweep past the apex, you can begin to stand the bike up out of the corner. This is best done by smoothly accelerating, which will help stand the bike up. As the rear tire comes off full lean, it puts more rubber on the road, and the forces previously used for cornering traction can be converted to acceleration traction. The throttle can be rolled open as the bike stands up.

This magazine won't tell you how fast is safe; we will tell you how to go fast safely. How fast you go is your decision, but it's one that requires reflection and commitment. High speed on an empty four-lane freeway is against the law, but it's fairly safe. Fifty-five miles per hour in a canyon may be legal, but it may also be dangerous. Get together with your friends and talk about speed. Set a reasonable maximum and stick to it. Done right, The Pace is addicting without high straightaway speeds.

The group I ride with couldn't care less about outright speed between corners; any Gomer can twist a throttle. If you routinely go 100 mph, we hope you routinely practice emergency stops from that speed. Keep in mind outright speed will earn a ticket that is tough to fight and painful to pay; cruising the easy straight stuff doesn't attract as much attention from the authorities and sets your speed perfectly for the next sweeper.

GROUP MENTALITY

Straights are the time to reset the ranks. The leader needs to set a pace that won't bunch up the followers, especially while leaving a stop sign or passing a car on a two-lane road. The leader must use the throttle hard to get around the car and give the rest of the group room to make the pass, yet he or she can't speed blindly along and earn a ticket for the whole group. With sane speeds on the straights, the gaps can be adjusted easily; the bikes should be spaced about two seconds apart for maximum visibility of surface hazards.

It's the group aspect of The Pace that I enjoy the most, watching the bikes in front of me click into a corner like a row of dominoes, or looking in my mirror as my friends slip through the same set of corners I just emerged from.

Because there's a leader and a set of rules to follow, the competitive aspect of sport riding is eliminated and that removes a tremendous amount of pressure from a young rider's ego - or even an old rider's ego. We've all felt the tug of racing while riding with friends or strangers, but The Pace takes that away and saves it for where it belongs: the racetrack. The racetrack is where you prove your speed and take chances to best your friends and rivals.

I've spent a considerable amount of time writing about The Pace for several reasons, not the least of which being the fun I've had researching it (continuous and ongoing). But I have motivations that aren't so fun. I got scared a few years ago when Senator Danforth decided to save us from ourselves by trying to ban super bikes, soon followed by insurance companies blacklisting a variety of sport bikes. I've seen Mulholland Highway shut down because riders insisted on racing (and crashing) over a short section of it. I've seen heavy police patrols on roads that riders insist on throwing themselves off of. I've heard the term "murder-cycles" a dozen times too many. When we consider the abilities of a modern sport bike, it becomes clear that rider technique is sorely lacking.

The Pace emphasizes intelligent, rational riding techniques that ignore racetrack heroics without sacrificing fun. The skills needed to excel on the racetrack make up the basic precepts of The Pace, excluding the mind-numbing speeds and leaving the substantially larger margin for error needed to allow for unknown and immovable objects. Our sport faces unwanted legislation from outsiders, but a bit of throttle management from within will guarantee our future.

THE PACE PRINCIPLES

Set cornering speed early. Blow the entrance and you'll never recover.

Look down the road. Maintaining a high visual horizon will reduce perceived speed and help you avoid panic situations.

Steer the bike quickly. There's a reason Wayne Rainey works out - turning a fast-moving motorcycle takes muscle.

Use your brakes smoothly but firmly. Get on and then off the brakes; don't drag 'em.

Get the throttle on early. Starting the drive settles the chassis, especially through a bumpy corner.

Never cross the centerline except to pass. Crossing the centerline in a corner is an instant ticket and admittance that you can't really steer your bike. In racing terms, your lane is your course; staying right of the line adds a significant challenge to most roads and is mandatory for sport riding's future.

Don't crowd the centerline. Always expect an oncoming car with two wheels in your lane.

Don't hang off in corners or tuck in on the straights. Sitting sedately on the bike looks safer and reduces unwanted attention. It also provides a built-in safety margin.

When leading, ride for the group. Good verbal communication is augmented with hand signals and turn signals; change direction and speed smoothly.

When following, ride with the group. If you can't follow a leader, don't expect anyone to follow you when you're setting the pace