

The Start of the Riding Season is Almost Here – Are You Ready?

By S.E. Hartley, Safety Officer

Winter is a time of reflection, a chance to catch up on the latest motorcycle news and gear, and planning for taking a riding vacation or putting the bike through its paces on some back roads. For most of us, the bike has been put up till spring returns with warmer weather and clear roads. With spring almost here, are you ready to ride? There are three things that need to be considered: 1) is your bike ready, 2) is your gear ready, and 3) are you ready?

Is Your Bike Ready?

Most of us take good care in getting our bikes ready for the riding season – we have either had the bike to the shop for a spring tune-up or checked the bike over ourselves, using TCLOCS, a pre-ride inspection:

- T: tires, wheels, and brakes;
- C: controls (levers and pedal, cables, hoses, and throttle)
- L: lights (battery, lights, turn signals, mirrors, lenses & reflectors, and wiring)
- O: oil (filter, levels, and leaks)
- C: chassis (frame, suspension, chain or belt, fasteners)
- S: stands (center stand and/or side stand)

Is Your Gear Ready?

What about your gear: helmet, eye protection, footwear, gloves, jacket, pants, riding suit, rain suit, hearing protection, and retro-reflective gear? What shape is your helmet in? How old is it? A general rule of thumb is to replace a helmet every five years because of advances in technology and deterioration of the helmet's materials. Your head is worth it.

Eye protection includes face shields and goggles. Both are designed to keep excessive wind and debris from the eyes; they should be free of scratches and clean. Sunglasses help to protect eyes from too much sun. Footwear should have good tread on the soles, be heat and oil resistant, and be high enough to cover the ankles and provide sturdy support.

Gloves come in several different styles and are made of a variety of different materials. Full-fingered gloves offer the best protection. Gloves with padded palms help to cushion against vibration and fatigue on long trips. Gauntlet style gloves keep wind and foreign objects from flying up the sleeves. Find what works best for you.

Jackets act as a second skin and provide protection against sun, wind, cold, and heat. Mesh jackets can be used during hot weather, and leather or nylon jackets can be used during cool or cold weather. Long pants serve the same purpose as a jacket in providing protection, as well as protecting the legs from hot exhaust pipes.

Riding suits come in one-piece or two-piece configurations and are meant to offer versatility across a number of different riding situations, in addition to protection against the elements and the consequences of a crash.

Rain suits are designed to keep you dry, while riding in wet weather and when worn as a windbreak, relatively warm riding in cool weather. Consider the type of riding that you plan to do and how much you might need to wear the rain suit. Non-breathing rain suits can get hot during warm weather. Breathable rain suits let moisture vapor out and keep rain from getting in.

Hearing protection helps to prevent hearing loss from prolonged exposure to wind noise. A quiet motorcycle and full-face helmet may not protect your hearing enough to prevent irreversible hearing damage. Once you notice hearing loss, it is too late. Properly worn, hearing protection also reduces fatigue from wind noise, allows you to hear car horns and sirens, and comes as disposable foam plugs to reusable custom-molded plugs. As always, check state laws for compliance.

Retro-reflective gear helps to offset one of the disadvantages motorcycles have compared to cars – visibility. While it is prudent to drive as if you were invisible, wearing bright colors such as high visibility orange or yellow and retro-reflective gear helps to draw attention to yourself, especially at dusk or nighttime.

Assess the type of riding that you plan to do and decide if your gear is properly matched to that type of riding. Treat good motorcycle riding gear as an investment versus expense and plan for any replacement gear by saving for future purchases. You'll be better off in the long run.

Are You Ready?

Motorcycle riding requires sharp mental and physical skills and special skill sets that car drivers don't need. You can practice mental skills, the SEE (search, evaluate, execute) strategy or situational awareness, on or off the bike. Play the "what if..." scenario.

Your riding skills start to deteriorate the moment you stop riding. The most critical skills, keeping your head and eyes up and well ahead, cornering, braking, and swerving, are improved only by practice, not just by putting in the miles. To sharpen your physical skills, find an empty parking lot to practice maximum braking and obstacle avoidance (swerving), cornering (slow, look, press, roll), turning from a stop, and other basic skills. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) has the booklet, "You and Your Motorcycle: Riding Tips", on its website, www.msf-usa.org, under the Library/Safety Tips link, that shows you how to set up exercises in a parking lot and walks you through the exercises.

Lastly, learning to ride and keeping your skills up takes lifelong learning. Check for local classes in your area for basic or skilled rider classes: the Basic Rider Course (BRC) or Experienced Rider Course (ERC) through the MSF (www.msf-usa.org), and New Rider Course (NRC) or Skilled Rider Course (SRC) through Harley-Davidson's Rider's Edge (www.ridersedge.com). The benefit from taking one of these courses periodically comes from professional coaching, or what you don't get on your own.

Remember to ride safe, to keep the rubber side down and the shiny side up, and to practice. Then when the start of the riding season arrives and it's time to start riding, someone might ask, "Are you ready?" You will feel confident answering, "Yes, let's ride!"