

Road Construction (The pavement ends)

By: James R. Davis

Sooner or later you are going to find yourself riding on a road where the pavement has ended and stretched before you is crushed rock. You tighten those pucker muscles and slow down, and you decide to keep going.

Last week a small group of us were confronted with just such a challenge. The group consisted of a Magna in the lead, followed by a Valkyrie, followed finally by my GoldWing. The lead bike, Elaine, had asked if we all wanted to try it and she heard us all agree to do so. She asked again about 1/4 miles into the stretch because it was far more difficult than it had looked like it would be. This, because some of those rocks turned out to be the size of a small clenched fist. Again, we all agreed to keep going - but, honestly, by then it would have been more dangerous to try to stop and turn around.

I was carrying a passenger on my GoldWing. Fortunately he has accumulated about 3,000 miles on the back of my Wing and was game for the effort. Had my passenger been inexperienced I would not have attempted that road. Even a little squirming would have resulted in loss of control of the bike.

There were a pair of tire tracks where the rocks were more densely packed and more uniform than the rest of the roadway. Each driver elected to try to ride along one of those tracks. Since I had been riding in the left track before the pavement ended I chose to stay there. That decision, I now believe, was a mistake. More about that in a minute, however so there is no suspense in the matter, all three of us managed the problem without incident.

God bless gyroscopic force! Though we would constantly find our tires riding up and over large rocks, most of the time they tried glancing blows with the rocks and found that the rocks would squirt out to one side while the tire shifted laterally to the other. We found that so long as our speed remained above about 20 MPH we could keep going but if we went any slower the bikes were so unstable that it would be only a matter of time before dumping them. Clearly gyroscopic forces made the difference.

On the other hand, going too much faster than that was unthinkable. This, because the bikes could not be kept on a straight line no matter how much effort was used, and there was two-way traffic on that road. In the event that one of the bikes found itself in the path of an oncoming car there was nothing for it but to stop - and the odds were high that the bike would fall down if we used ANY front brake to try to slow down. So, we drove at a speed where front brake was NEVER NEEDED.

I have heard, as I'm sure you have, that if you drive a bike with integrated braking (like the GoldWing) you cannot apply the rear brake without applying the front one. Nonsense!

As I already pointed out, trying to slow down by using the front brake on such treacherous footing would probably have resulted in a dumped bike. How do you use the rear brake without using the front one? By using the engine for most of your braking. You drive in a low enough gear so that you can roll off the throttle to slow down and you can use your clutch friction-zone to moderate speed precisely.

As to picking which tire track to ride on if you have a choice, I suggest that you select the right one. Despite trying to stay in those tracks there were times when large loose rocks forced our

front tires out of them. You will recall that when riding into a pool of standing water your motorcycle or other vehicle will feel substantial drag and it slows down. Similarly, when your tire is forced out of a relatively well packed tire track and onto the more loosely packed roadbed nearby you will feel greater drag and your bike will slow down.

That happened more than a couple of times during the ride, but one of those times was a white knuckler. My front tire was forced to the left out of the track and the bike slowed down. Giving it a little gas made the front-end a little lighter and just then it received a series of glancing blows that pushed it farther and farther to the left. Indeed, in a matter of 2 seconds I had moved FOUR FEET to the left - directly into the path of an approaching truck! I managed to SMOOTHLY force the bike over to the right and back into the tire track I had left before that truck got too close to me. In fact, I kept going and got into the right track. [I'm told by my passenger that his eyes could not have opened more widely than during those two seconds as he kept telling himself not to move. He REALLY wanted to shift his weight away from that oncoming truck, but wisely just held on. (See what experience and practice can do for you?)]

After returning to paved road the tension snapped back to normal levels and riding once again was fun. At our first stop thereafter we compared notes. Following is what we agreed to:

- If you have a passenger who is either inexperienced or who has not developed a profound trust in your abilities, do not voluntarily attempt to ride on unpaved roads.
- Drive in either 1st or 2nd gear so that you can use engine braking as necessary and so that you can use your clutch friction-zone to precisely control speed.
- Do not drive slower than about 20 MPH in order to allow your wheel gyroscopics to help you.
- Do not drive much faster than 20 MPH so that you can totally avoid using your front brake to slow down.
- Do not 'white knuckle' your grips - you need to ride with a firm grip on the bars, but you must be loose enough to prevent transmitting all the instability of the front-end to the rest of the bike.
- EVERYTHING you do must be done SMOOTHLY.
- Given a choice, ride in the right-most tire track to keep you away from any oncoming traffic.

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And remember: Drive on the right except to pass...