

RoSPA SMART

Slow Riding Skills Training

By Alec Gore

There are many competent riders, not just those new to riding, and some who already hold advanced riding certificates, who have surprisingly undeveloped slow riding skills.

There are others who obtained their motorcycle licence before the advent of CBTs and may never have had to do any slow riding in a safe, controlled environment.

If this sounds like you, read on, then consider signing up for a RoSPA SMART Slow Riding Skills Day dedicated to giving you the skill blocks you need to build on. You will then confidently ride your bike slowly in traffic and turn in confined spaces.

Meanwhile, in preparation here are a few thoughts, not taken from any book or manual, based on my own experience of learning how easy it is to ride well at slow speed.

Relax – your body, especially your arms at the elbows; the more relaxed you are, the more feedback you get from the bike and the more likely your inputs will be smooth.

Relax – your mind, feel comfortable on your bike; it's your friend and can do whatever you want it to. Remember many people of all sizes and abilities have already done what you are aiming to do. You can do it too!

Less is more – avoid too many inputs all at once. Feel for the response you get from each input and adjust accordingly. If you can ride with only using the throttle for control, do that. Until you have built up experience, resist the temptation to be slipping the clutch, using various combinations of both brakes and the throttle all at the same time.

If you need to raise your idle speed slightly higher than normal for the exercises, do so. Some people do that to give them confidence and to avoid stalling the bike. However, don't be over afraid of stalling. Most bikes on flat ground in a straight line will run in 1st, 2nd or even 3rd gear with the throttle shut and the clutch fully out, without any special idle speed adjustment.

If you do stall, remember that you need to get a foot out to stop so the bike doesn't fall down. One foot firmly planted on one side will do that. Put your heel down first and then the rest of your foot, preferably parallel to the direction the bike is going. If you put a foot out at 45 degrees it may slide in that direction. One foot down firmly is better than tip-toeing about on two feet off balance.

Make sure you instinctively know where the biting point is on your clutch. If you are an experienced rider, this should be easy for you. Knowing where to hold the clutch so the bike is not free-wheeling, but the rear wheel is not fully engaged to the engine

is very important. You can then control your speed by holding the biting point constant (i.e. slipping the clutch) and giving small measured inputs on the throttle.

Aim to keep both feet on the pedals immediately the bike is underway. This lowers your centre of gravity, as your weight is shared at the pegs (lower position) and is not all on the seat (higher position).

A free-wheeling bike is not under proper control, so when coming to a stop only bring the clutch in at the last moment.

Whatever control you are using, remember always to squeeze, not snatch. Gently roll on the throttle and gently ease it off. Gently squeeze on the front brake and let it off and be especially gentle with the rear brake; roll your foot onto it, don't stab at it. Think in three stages when using the controls: Gently apply the acceleration or the braking and note the bike's response, i.e. whether there is any likelihood of losing traction through wheel spin or skidding. Then increase the control firmly, but smoothly to get the job done. Finally, before reaching desired speed or desired stopping point, ease off so there is no sudden change in momentum. All of this makes for a smoother, more comfortable ride and keeps the bike properly under control, with less mechanical wear and tear.

Know how the bike behaves under acceleration and braking: When the power is applied, weight is transferred to the rear; under braking weight is transferred to the front, which is why the front brake is more efficient than the rear. However, at slow speed, the rear brake can be used to even up the bike under braking and avoid loss of balance when too much weight is transferred forward through too heavy application of the front brake.

Even at fairly low speed, counter-steering still works, i.e. the bike will steer to the left when you lift up the right handlebar and vice versa. This is how it is easy to ride around with only your right hand on the bars, even though you are turning left.

Keep your knees firmly against the sides of the bike for best control. In turning tightly at slow speed, you can transfer weight to the outside of the turn – and thus maintain better balance – by weighting the outside footpeg and even transferring some body weight slightly in the seat to the outside as well.

When doing U-turns or Figures-of-eight, look where you want the bike to end up; don't just look at the path you think you want the front wheel to take. This means turning your head on your neck and looking behind you! You go where you look; if your eyes just follow the front wheel, you will draw too large a circle and not make the turn.

Your throttle is your best friend in turning. Through experiencing the exercises, you will be able to tip the bike into a turn quite dramatically and then roll on the throttle to cause the bike to pick itself up again. Once you get the confidence to find this point of balance, it's a wonderful feeling: Look where you want to go; tip the bike into the turn by lifting the opposite bar (or pushing the same side bar under the turn); then at the apex, roll on the power and feel the rear wheel push into the ground, lifting the bike up again. This process is commonly known as "Look-Lean-Roll."

If you are doing something that produces an unwelcome result that you did not expect, stop doing it! Do something else. Anything. This is called, “Learning from Experience.”

Finally, enjoy the challenge. What you get from the Slow Riding Skills Day exercises will have an exponential effect on improving your street riding technique.