



Downtime

Text by Jon DeVecchio

Ask any hardcore rider what they think of wintertime and you'll likely get some sort of gripe. For those living in northern climates, winters can be quite long.

As I write this article, there's a thick layer of frost covering my car's windows and it's mid-April. Late snow storms have dragged out what was an otherwise mild winter.

To make the wait even more frustrating, I've had a new motorcycle in the garage for six weeks now. The first time this happened was on my eighth birthday in 1978. My parents bought me a Huffy bicycle the first week of February. At least then I was able to ride laps around the first floor of my house and terrorize my sisters.

My riding buds and I are going crazy as winter slowly tapers off. By now we're sick and tired of the bantering and talking about road trips we're going to take in 2016. It's time to get moving!

Riders in warm climates also endure periods of downtime. Whether for health reasons or family responsibilities, it might be months, years or decades between rides for some. The good news: we never really forget how to ride.

Operating a two wheeler of any kind requires vision, balance and coordination of various muscles. All of these things are controlled by the brain. To drive a vehicle well first requires experience driving it. And don't expect to be a motorcycling expert your first few years of riding. It takes time and effort to program our brains, but when we do it's forever.

Effects of Downtime

At the same time our motorcycle batteries are draining down and the ethanol fuel is gunking up the works, we too degrade in our ability to hit the open road. While we don't lose everything, we do lose that edge present after being back in the saddle for a few months.

While I never had the opportunity to ride motorcycles in my youth, I was planting the seeds necessary to ride a motorcycle later in life. Riding my birthday bike reinforced the basic skills I would need to operate a motorcycle years into the future.

Many people use the phrase "it's just like riding a bike" to express comfort in doing something now with little effort because of past ability.

Here's how it works. Learning to ride relies on *implicit* memory. The movements required to ride a motorcycle are performed best when you're not consciously aware of it. Recalling a cornering technique read about in a book can be productive, but you're using *explicit* memory at that moment. Explicit memory is conscious and intentional recollection of previous experiences. Riders simply don't have the time to mentally process the steps required to swerve around a pothole. They must be automatic. This is why simply reading a skills article alone can't make one a better rider. We have to repeat those movements over and over again until we don't have to think about it. When something

feels right we tend to do it that way again. It's difficult to communicate advanced riding skills because the techniques are not rooted in language, but rather physical stimuli.

When a physical skill jumps over from explicit thought to implicit action real progress can be made. That said you'll still need to take time and effort to get back to the skill level you were at when you hung up the keys. That's why we need to ease back into riding again. The brain needs time to reconnect with its muscles for optimal motorcycle control.

Even though the brain can automate proper riding skills once learned, it's highly adaptable to subtle changes if we are driven to modify them. I have two motorcycles. The horn and turn signal switches are in the reversed positions. At first, I would hit the horn when I wanted to turn left. But after time spent riding each motorcycle and learning what button gave the correct response, I can swap between bikes and perform each action appropriately.

Back to Uptime

After firing up that motor again, restraint is key to safe and enjoyable riding. Taking it easy can be hard to do after a long break once the adrenaline rush returns. Here are some quick tips for those just pulling off the motorcycle cover:

- **Think.** Make a conscious effort to recognize it takes a little while to get your head (and body) back into the game.
- **Take it easy.** It's better to ride more conservatively after a long break than overly aggressive. There is no penalty for showing up last to bike night.
- **Take a class.** You'll likely get back to where you were before your hiatus relatively quickly. In order to improve be sure to study and practice more advanced techniques.

Back in 1978, springtime did eventually roll around and I was able to ride that new bicycle into the great expanse of Stillmeadow Drive. Each riding season comes with the same level of youthful excitement. Try not to let your enthusiasm get ahead of your brain's ability to get reacquainted with your motorcycling movements.

At some point you'll have to store the bike again. So make the places you go and people you meet in 2016 really count.

Jon DeVecchio is the owner of Street Skills LLC motorcycle riding school. He writes the Street Skills column in Motorcycle Times. In addition to his writings and courses, he speaks to groups about riding skills and shares tips on social media. Visit his website at StreetSkills.net.