From our Rider Education Department

Basic Straight Line Braking

By J.T. Smith

If your first ride was preceded by some " instruction" that consisted of a brief preview of the controls and a warning either not to use the front brake or to use it only with great caution, then you need to pay close attention to what I'm about to say here. You've been a victim of the most vicious rumors in motorcycling, and your life is in danger!

The person who gave you this all-too-common advice wasn't trying to get you hurt. He or she probably had the best of intentions and an honest belief that the front brake should be avoided, especially by new riders. It is, nonetheless, very bad information.

The front brake(s) can produce up to 75 percent of a street bike's total braking ability. To avoid or minimize its use is, at best, foolish. At worst, it's suicidal.

It's the front brake's ability to lock the front wheel that makes it something to be respected. With a locked front wheel, you can't steer and you'll fall down (low side) unless you quickly get the wheel rolling again. But that's not a reason to avoid or be timid with the front brake. Instead, as with all of the other controls you need to learn how to use it correctly.

Even if you don't need maximum braking power, it's a good idea to always apply both brakes. You need to train your reflexes for the times when you will need to stop quickly. If you get into the habit of using only one brake, that's exactly what you'll use when you encounter an emergency-stop situation.

The shortest possible stopping distance is attained by applying maximum pressure to both brakes just short of locking the wheels. This is very difficult to achieve consistently, but it can be approached by using the following technique: Use light-to-moderate, steady pressure on the rear brake pedal, and smoothly apply steady increasing pressure on the front brake lever until you get the desired deceleration. You can apply the pressures rapidly, but do not "grab" the front brake lever or "stomp" the rear brake pedal. Abrupt application of a brake is more likely to lock it.

In a straight-line stop, if you should lock the front wheel and are unable to steer, immediately release the front brake lever, then squeeze it again using slightly less pressure. If you lock the rear wheel in a straight-line braking situation, keep the front wheel pointing straight ahead (don't look down; keep your eyes straight ahead at eye level). If you are braking simply to reduce speed, make sure that the bike is going perfectly straight before releasing any pressure on the brake pedal. Releasing the rear brake with the bike in a major sideways slide can result in a very violent form of crash, called a high side. In such an extreme braking emergency, it's better just to leave the rear wheel locked until you come to a stop. Doing anything with the rear brake (even thinking of it) only diverts your attention from the maximum application of the front brake and increases stopping distance. On your next stop, use a bit less rear-brake pressure.

Practice! Practice! Practice!