

Tune Up Time

By Cat Grabowski – Safety Coordinator

Haha! No, this is not an article about maintenance for your bike. It's about maintenance for the rider!

Winter months tend to result in reduced saddle time primarily due to weather concerns. Spring rolls around providing increased opportunities to get back out on the road to go places and do things. (Yeah!) It also offers the opportunity to assess skills and work one's way back into prime riding shape!

First, give your gear a good once over. Replace worn out items. Is it time for a new helmet? How's the jacket holding up? Is that hole in the glove getting bigger? Are boot heels / soles worn so far down that you walk funny? Does the rain gear still fit? How's your eyewear? Your riding gear serves a purpose and it needs to be maintained if it is to function properly when needed. I also recommend spending a few extra bucks and getting good gear that will last longer and is made for the purpose for which it is intended. Buy motorcycle gear to wear when you ride a motorcycle. It will do its job when needed. Don't buy a yellow rain suit from Home Depot – unless you like cleaning melted plastic off your pipes/engine. And those fashion boots from DSW? They look great, but they're going to slip the first time you put them down on greasy, wet pavement. Those blue tinted plastic glasses made you look fierce at the mall kiosk, but that bug / stone / cigarette butt is going to land smack in your eye when you're doing 70 on the expressway.

Take into consideration any physical changes that may have occurred over the winter months. What kind of shape are you in? Do you have a lingering injury? Has your vision changed? Are you taking a new medication? How's your strength? Mental acuity? Have you had surgery? Expect to experience “clutch hand” and “bike butt” on longer rides from overuse of muscles that haven't had a recent workout.

Take your bike to an empty parking lot. Go with friends and have fun. Practice slow circles looking into the turn. Look where you want to go. Practice U-turns. Use the parking lot lines as markers if you don't have small cones or halved tennis balls. Start large and work your way smaller building your confidence as you improve with each run. Practice controlled quick stops with all four fingers of each hand on the brake & clutch looking straight ahead and stopping in the shortest distance possible without locking up the rear wheel. Try to reduce the distance needed to stop with each run. If you have ABS, use it in a parking lot so you remember what it sounds like and how it feels. Yes, folks, they have a distinct sound and feel – and even if you've used them in your car or truck, using them on your bike is not the same.

For those who may have acquired a new ride, be especially careful for the first six months as you get used to how your bike performs and handles. It will be different. Take the time to learn it. Understand what it is capable of and how your skills will manage it safely. Take a few private lessons with an instructor if you can - it really helps!

Review group riding procedures with your chapter. Conduct a short “tune up” ride to blow the dust off. Debrief after the ride. What worked? What could be improved? Communication is key. Experienced riders are a great resource. Listen to those who've “been there” and “done that.” Pick up a tip or two to make your ride a better one.