

The Duct Tapes

D.O.T., You Did Good

□ Standardized motorcycle controls have been with us so long that some riders have never ridden a bike with anything else. They have heard that in the dim past there were motorcycles with gear shifts where the brake is, but they don't know the half of it.

They have never experienced the feeling of utter stupidity that comes from trying to upshift the brake pedal. And they have never felt whatever it is you feel when you intended to drop down a gear but braked the rear wheel and engine to a standstill on wet asphalt with a sedan full of churchgoers coming the other direction just a paint stripe away.

You know, we joke about Big Brother getting too pushy, but you have to give him credit if he pushes something in the right direction occasionally.

When motorcycles were available with the rear brake every place but off, you learned how to spell ambidextrous real quick or went on your head a lot. Some riders claimed they never had any trouble adapting to variations in controls. Now I could believe this if they limited their riding to Elm Street; in an off-road situation when they were sucking air through their clenched teeth I would tend to doubt it.

The various locations of motorcycle controls—gear shift, brakes, kickstarter—might have seemed to be a result of some weird national preferences. This is not so. At one time the American Indian and Harley-Davidson were so dissimilar that a rider familiar with one had to be very wary riding the other. The Harley had a left-hand shift and a right-hand throttle. The Indian had a right-hand shift, left-hand throttle. There was a belief at the time that the Indian southpaw throttle was to allow a police officer to hold his throttle open and aim his revolver at miscreants at the same time. (It always seemed to me that any policeman shifting an Indian with a loaded and cocked .38 revolver should have invested some of his graft in a bulletproof jock strap.) To get back to the machinery, both bikes had a left-foot-operated clutch; naturally, the Harley "threw" forward to engage, the Indian backward.

A lot of us old bas . . . a lot of us senior riders got hooked on motorcycles with the slick shifting, agile, British lightweights. Believe it or not, the Tri-

umph 500 was once considered a lightweight, and lifting these lightweights caused more back problems than drive-in movies. In the nomenclature of the day they were called "thirty and a halves," which was their engine size in cubic inches. Like all British bikes, they had a left-side rear brake and a right-side front brake, and we were asked to believe that this was anatomically harmonious because when you walked you swung your left leg and your right hand at the same time. It was also suggested that your right foot, somehow, was more "educated" than your left and could find gears easier.

This being the case we wondered why Triumph went to the expense of a gear indicator on top of the transmission. Some Nortons had TWO shift levers on the right side of the motorcycle. The only purpose of one of them was to put the transmission in neutral. The logical conclusion of this would be five separate gear-shift levers.

A few British bikes shifted up one, down three, which would have been anatomically correct for St. Vitus' dance sufferers. I know I used to get internal short circuits trying to slow one of these things, pushing down with one foot and lifting up with the other to catch a lower gear.

It's too late to change now, but one of the best shift patterns I've seen was on a Kawasaki long ago: everything down, neutral on top. You didn't have to go through neutral into another gear because neutral was the last stop.

There were a couple of terrible systems too. The "rotary," which had no stops at all, went 1 N 2 3 4 5 1 N 2 3 . . . in either direction. The horrible scream from the machinery as you went for one more upshift at 60, and got low, was not covered in the warranty manual. Another awful setup belonged to a Spanish bike whose shift lever, with the end of the shifter shaft clenched in its jaw, could often be found 10 feet up the trail from the last time you touched it. The shear strength of the shaft was slightly less than that of an ice cube.

The shift on the right side of the motorcycle was with us so long, from 1945, that we thought it WAS standard. Triumph was the big brand for many years and all hands thought they were somewhere between marvelous and superb until they discovered that not

only could Greeves riders run rings around them, they could also get up for work on Monday morning. Greeves were nice, once all the pre-mildewed electrical connections were safely soldered, and they were on top until everybody noticed that the Bultaco pilots were going by with a glove in their teeth digging a fresh malted milk ball out of their pocket with the bare hand.

The transition between Triumph, Greeves and Bultaco was painless: all shifted right, down for low. There was, however, occasional confusion brought on by the other variations, like fuel valves with weird RESERVE positions, which resulted in hilarious temporary brain seizures like the one Bill Bitter once had.

Bill had recently switched from Triumph to Bultaco and the Sandy Lane Enduro was his first competition with it. This was a Paul Brumfield layout and Brumfield was part salamander and never happy unless he could SWIM a good part of his course. There was a spectator point labeled "water splash" and we all knew that Brumfield considered two feet of water "just a little dew on the grass." I shut off my engine when I saw the place, cried a little, and pushed my Triumph all the way over, knowing that I might be almost totally exhausted but I wouldn't have a connecting rod looking like a dog bone.

I had leaned my bike against a tree and was kneeling beside it replacing a plug when Bill rode up out of the water with his engine firing once every 40 turns, then every 60 turns, and it died as he was right alongside me. Bill reached down with his right hand to unfold his start pedal, and his jaw dropped as he realized there was no pedal.

"Ed," Bill said, "my starter must have slid off the splines. Lend me your pedal to get running again, will you?"

Bitter, obviously, thought he was still on his old Triumph.

"No need to, Bill," I laughed. "You got another start pedal on this side of your motorcycle," and I pointed to it.

The Bultaco, you see, had a kickstarter on the south side.

The only possible advantage I could ever see with a left-side starter would be if you happened to have been gored by a bull in the right leg. It was awkward as hell and standing alongside to

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start the thing on a narrow trail could get you run over four times a minute. Worse than that were the blows to your pride. Standing on the left to start your bike and discovering it was still in gear meant you had to lie over the seat and stir up neutral with your hand. This offered a tempting target to competitors looking for any excuse to exhibit their latent homosexual tendencies.

The next time Big Brother gets funded to make some more rules there are a few things I'd like him to investigate, and correct if possible.

Most important is the owner's manual. The last one I got was printed on pre-glued contact paper and all the type from the right-hand pages was stuck on top of the type on the left-hand pages. I had to read the damn thing by holding it up to a mirror! And then I found out it wasn't even for the same model I had!! And let's have a ruling on wiring diagrams; I have a diagram that looks like a photo reduction exercise; it's about the same size as a 20-cent stamp.

We could use a TRUTH IN MANUAL clause also. They will sometimes show a photo of someone holding a reverse gidjet in his left hand and neatly sliding the frammistan sector spring retainer on it with his right hand. In actual practice, however, one of those hands would have to be attached to an arm eight feet long and a half inch in diameter so it could be shoved up the exhaust pipe. And can we have an American proofread the manuals? I've been getting cramps in my stomach reading Japanese manuals for years that advise me to ALWAYS WEAR GROVES when riding off-road. I've written L.L. Bean, Malcolm Smith and J.C. Whitney and can't locate any groves yet.

Next to manuals, I'd like Big Brother to investigate the tools that come with motorcycles. I had one motorcycle for four years, had it stripped to the frame three times, replaced EVERYTHING and still had a wrench in that tool kit which I never needed. I'm beginning to think there is a Japanese Mafia who forces the manufacturers to include this size wrench in every tool kit.

The extra wrench is balanced out on bikes that are held together exclusively with 10-millimeter bolts—and have no 10-millimeter wrench in the kit.

All in all, the bureaucrats have done a good thing making controls standard, but I hope they keep an open mind.

I mean, if they made motorcycle controls standard in, say, 1934, then you and me and maybe the rest of the world would be driving with a left-hand throttle, tank shift and foot clutch.

You cannot legislate progress—but you *can* legislate against it.

—Ed Hertfelder