

Ready to Wear

Racers arguably are our most highly skilled motorcyclists. With all their talents they devote hours to correcting flaws you may not even notice. Unless your dealer made major mistakes in uncrating and assembling your motorcycle, you ride it as-is, and adjust your riding to suit whatever setup you got with the keys.

Professionals hold that motorcycles should be made to suit them, not the other way around. It's a reasonable expectation for guys who live out on the thinnest of edges. George Roeder's drawl and "aw shucks" manner made him seem like the kind of yokel who fell off his turnip truck ready to ride anything with a Harley-Davidson sticker on it. But George liked to have his racing bikes set up right, just like any of today's serious pro riders.

George's traveling kit often included a scabby heat-blistered handlebar that looked like it had been run over by a truck and then scorched in a trash fire. In fact, that misshapen handlebar had been adjusted with an acetylene torch to position its grips for most effective use in George's spectacular sideways slides around a dirt oval. Some said George's custom handlebar was bent so he could stick the right-side grip in his navel and have both hands free to wrestle with the bike.

The late Jarno Saarinen was George Roeder's counterpart in GP road racing, using custom clip-ons that angled sharply downward to suit his crouched riding style. Erv Kanemoto will fit a motorcycle to his rider with as much care as a tailor fitting an expensive suit.

I believe I've changed handlebars on all of my motorcycles, often just to accommodate my size. I'm six-foot-one, with disproportionately long arms and legs, a bad fit on motorcycles made for anthropometry nearer the average.

Being tall, I always pushed my racing bikes' clip-ons out and forward, which spared me the painful embarrassment of having a thumb mashed between bar and fuel tank. You can do this to yourself, if you pull your sportbike's bars back too far and neglect checking for

adequate clearance between the grips and the fuel tank.

I wish footpegs could be repositioned as easily as handlebar grips. The newer sportbikes' pegs are, of course, much nearer to being right than those on the old "UJM" (Universal Japanese Motorcycle) models. They always had shift pedals stuck directly on transmission shifter shafts, and footpegs placed a toe's reach from the shift nubbin. The arrangement was mechanically convenient, but awful in human terms.

How do you know if your own bike's pegs are correctly positioned? Easy: Get seated comfortably, place your open

hands palms down on the handlebar grips, then "post" (i.e., raise your backside about an inch above the seat). If you can do it without having to grab the grips, the footpegs are just where they should be. Sliding back when you try to post means your bike's pegs are too far forward; falling forward means the pegs are too far back, for you, on your bike.

Sometimes it's easier to change the handlebars than the footpegs to get yourself balanced. A set of aftermarket clip-ons with a little extra, or less, forward offset can move your body and shift your balance without changing the footpegs and related hardware, such as shifter links and brake cylinders.

Flat track racers are fanatics about having their bikes' right-side footpegs placed just so. They don't much care about the left one, as long as it doesn't snag their skid shoe, but the right peg is where they can apply their weight, and it positions them on the bike.

I don't know what to say to you people riding cruisers, except that you must be better riders than I am. Having your feet stuck way out in front of you may be hot stuff cruising past Gus's Burger Buffet, but I don't think I'd have full control of a motorcycle if I were slumped on it like a wart on a toad's butt. I figure I'd be OK as long as nothing went wrong, but controlling a skid that developed on an unanticipated slippery patch would be a challenge. I wouldn't want to discover that being cool closed the distance between a fright and an ambulance ride.

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My physician, who cautions me not to crash again, says I am overly impressed with my own riding skills. He suggests that I make a set of prints from my old X-ray negatives and hang them in my office next to my framed photos of glorious moments on the racetrack.

Adjusting the angle of your bike's clutch and brake levers is worth the small investment in time the job requires. Loosen the clamp bolts until you can move the levers around the handlebar by banging them with the heel of your hand. Then, normally seated on the bike, put your hands on the grips with your arms and fingers extended to form a straight line from shoulder to finger tips.

Your fingers should then rest lightly on the levers. If they don't, bump the levers up or down until they do, then re-tighten the clamp bolts. Give the brake and shift pedals the same kind of treatment, but by adjusting the linkages until the toes of your boots touch the pedals when you're normally seated.

Of course, this won't do a thing to correct the common problems of motorcycle foot controls, but you can adjust yourself away from compounding the problems with awkward positioning.

Be very careful when you adjust hydraulic brakes, as some will let you adjust your way straight into a bad case of brake drag. This is bad for the brake's pad life—and your own if the overheated brake either fades or locks at a touch.

I always clear all bubbles from hydraulic brake lines and other cavities, because I hate spongy brake action. If I can't get solid brake action by banishing bubbles, I'll go to a set of fancy braided aircraft-type brake hoses, and if the lever action is still squishy I look for brake caliper flexing.

Many motorcycles have stiff, seemingly grit-filled shift mechanisms, which is especially aggravating if you happen to have an ankle like mine. I once pulled my shin bone away from my foot bone, and ended up with an ankle bone held together with scar tissue.

I always adjust away slack in throttles and other control cables, having found that freeplay in the throttle grip, especially, makes fine control nearly impossible for me. You may not be bothered by a little sloppiness here, a bit of awkwardness there. I'd rather not have to deal with it, as I have aced a number of very near misses in the course of building a perfect 30-plus-year no-crashes safety record on public roads. Careful setup, if not careful riding, has been good to me.

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