

## **November 2017 Safety Article: When Everything Goes Right - Part 1**

It dawned on me recently that I have been riding a motorcycle, of some sort, for about 35 years. I have to say about 35 years because I really don't know the exact age at which I started riding, but it seems to be a reasonable guess because I just can't imagine Mother allowing my brother and I to ride our own bike before our legs could touch the ground when sitting on that bike. The day finally came where she relented and my brother and I spent evenings, weekends, and summers tearing around our own hundred-acre-wood home on our Sears & Roebuck motorcycle frame with a pull-start Tecumseh engine. Maybe you had something similar in your youth. The braking system left a lot to be desired, but was fantastic for locking up the back tire and sliding through the gravel in our driveway or the dirt on our trails through the woods. You see, to stop the bike, you would push down on the brake pedal and it would position a big wedge-shaped piece of steel against the tread of the back tire causing so much friction that every stop of the bike was a sliding stop. It was especially fun doing that on the smooth surface of the sidewalk leading up to the front porch on the house, but our red-headed mother would scold us, without mercy, for the black marks we left on it.

Needless to say, we went through a few rear tires before we finally outgrew that bike. But then, as I look at the bikes in my garage and the list of others that are on my "To Have One Day" and "Gosh, That Would Be Fun To Jump Over A Dozen Cars" lists, I wonder to myself about whether I really ever outgrew it.

It was near Nirvana having all that land on which to learn to ride. There was no traffic, no stoplights, and since we were on our own property, it was easy to push the bike back home if something went wrong with it. More times than not, though, we would find ourselves leaving the bike sitting in the woods to go find Dad and he would come help us recover the bike back to the house to fix whatever was wrong. Sometimes we could identify and fix the problem in the woods, other times we couldn't. There were a lot of things that went into deciding whether to fix it where it was or whether to go get help.

I started thinking about that old bike on a recent Friday evening while sitting on the shoulder of west-bound Interstate 70, just outside Valley Grove, West Virginia. My bike was loaded down with luggage, tools, and other items that 35 years of experience and training have taught me to have when riding. I was on the final leg of an 11-day ride up to Wisconsin and the "mitten" of Michigan, through Ontario, and over into New England. The plan for that evening of the return trip was to find a warm, dry bed and a hot meal in Indianapolis, and then make an easy ride in to home a day early. I was really looking forward to that evening of relative luxury. Much of this trip had been rain-drenched from a pesky cold-front that Canada sent to chase me out of their country, followed by the remains of Hurricane Harvey as it moved up from the Gulf of Mexico, up the Blue Ridge Parkway, and out to sea. Instead, in a matter of seconds, I was 574 miles from home with an impressively-sized hole in the rear tire of my 900-pound touring bike. It was a cloudy evening, so there wasn't a lot of light to see or be seen. It was getting even darker out as dusk was approaching, and so was another wave of rain. (Insert your favorite colorful metaphor here. I sure did.)

It was starting to appear as if the State of West Virginia had intentions on me being grounded for the night. As I crossed the state line from Pennsylvania, I noticed West Virginia had a rather less-than standard surface to their highway. While appearing to be a relatively recent overlay of asphalt on the road surface, I was surprised at how wavy the surface was. I wouldn't call it rough, but it wasn't easy to keep a straight line going on my motorcycle. I found that particularly annoying. While rolling off my throttle and slowing my speed to accommodate for the change in road surface I sensed a different feel to the ride and handling of my bike. Paying attention to your bike's sounds and being in tune with the way your bike feels on the road will save your bacon and backside. It certainly did in this case. While the waviness of the road did create for a little wobbling and bobbing, it wasn't enough to suddenly create the instability I was feeling in the seat of my bike. It was as if my back tire suddenly turned to JELL-O at 70 miles-an-hour.

"Is this the road? This isn't the road. What is happening here?"

In the couple seconds that I was processing all that, I found I had cautiously squeezed the clutch handle, checked mirrors and was checking for traffic around me. It was a reflex. I didn't even have to think about it, but I've had plenty of time to think about it since. My immediate thought was, that this had to be tire failure, and of good friends who were killed several years earlier when a tire blew on their motorcycle, at highway speeds, while returning home from their dream trip to the Sturgis rally in South Dakota. Motorcycle riding has inherent risks. That is one of them.

"People die from this. Don't brake! Don't die, Matt. Just don't die. Umm...hazard lights. Don't brake!"

Having no idea what was happening with my tire, if that is what it was, I pictured my wheel slowing down with brake application, but the tire continue spinning at highway speed. While the brake system of my late-model Road Glide is vastly superior to the steel wedge of my Sears & Roebuck bike of yesteryear, anti-lock brakes do no good in that situation. Braking would surely mean catastrophe.

God pulled his puppet strings on me a little extra tight on me in that moment and kept me upright until I was out of harm's way and parked on the gravel shoulder. The road had a downhill slope and the roadside ditch was deep. For all the detail I recall of when it first happened and the mental processing I went through roadside, I can remember none of getting off the road. I don't recall dodging traffic. I don't recall the feel of the bike as I leaned it to the right. I don't recall how long it took to get there. That just tells me that it wasn't me doing it. Draw your own conclusions, but start by looking at the first word of this paragraph.

As I dismounted my bike, I noticed a giant green roadside sign just up the hill from where I parked. From the backside, I had no idea what it said, but for me, it was a sign of hope. At this point, I still had no idea what had happened with my bike. My experience and training told me it

was tire failure. Lying down in the ditch to assess the situation, with darkness falling along with a light rain, and a convoy of tractor trailers roaring by, I was about to find out.

In the next article, we'll continue the story and discuss the processing of the options I had and how preparedness allowed me to get home, and live to ride another day.

"...and HEY! Let's be CAREFUL out there!"

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