

## The Value of a Riding Mentor

by Genevieve Schmitt

*If I knew then what I know now, I would have...* (fill in the blank). The blank is usually filled in with phrases like *made a lot less mistakes* or *done things differently*, or other words along those lines.

One way to minimize mistakes when it comes to riding a motorcycle is by having a riding mentor—someone to advise and counsel you during your early stages on two wheels. Those who have had the good fortune of buddying up with a riding mentor can attest to the value of the relationship. Those who have not had a riding mentor don't know what they missed.

I received a letter from a woman who wrote this about her riding mentor: "He's very patient and understanding of my 'stopping needs.' He doesn't try to out ride me and always encourages me. The most important thing is he never makes me nervous. He would never leave me if I had trouble, and if I was riding alone and I broke down on the side of the road, he would be the one to come and help me."

For many women the whole process of learning to ride a motorcycle can be daunting, but daunting in a good way—they are motivated to continue pursuing their dream despite obstacles that may come their way. They know from other women that the rewards of riding one's own motorcycle are worth whatever hurdles they may encounter. Having an experienced rider as a mentor can help tremendously during those post-motorcycle training graduate days when you're experiencing your first ride on a highway, doing your first U-turn, backing your bike into its first parking space, or taking your first overnight ride. Sure, you can do all those firsts by yourself and you may be fine, but I think having a patient and compassionate experienced rider with you to share some tricks of the trade before, during, and after executing those



firsts can help you speed through the learning process much more effectively and with less trial and error.

I never thought of my riding mentor as my riding mentor at the time. I just looked at him as a friend who wanted to spend time with me not minding that I was a beginner rider. I didn't set out looking for a riding mentor—it just kind of happened. Looking back, I'm so grateful it did.

How do you meet a riding mentor? One way is to join a riding group in your area. There are official and unofficial riding groups. Some of the official ones, like the women's riding groups, actually have riders in the organization designated to help beginners. The group will hold special rides for less experienced motorcyclists.

What if you're not a sociable person and/or don't like to join official groups? Don't worry. There are ways to meet riders who can lead you to others who may want to help you.

Here is my story of meeting my mentor. One day I was hanging around my local dealership, browsing and talking to the salespeople, when I was introduced to another customer who invited me to ride with his unofficial riding group. The group met every Sunday morning at a nearby diner, so one Sunday I decided to go.

One of the male riders in the group took a liking to me and took me under his proverbial motorcycle wing. We quickly became friends and without either of us knowing it, he graciously and humbly slipped into the role as my riding mentor. He was an experienced rider who loved to share what he knew about motorcycling with me, an eager, wide-eyed student. He was always kind to me and never made me feel bad when I was going slower than the rest of the group. He'd wait for me when I was the last one walking into a restaurant after taking longer to park my motorcycle. He always looked out for me when we rode and that was a good thing for me as a young woman on her first motorcycle.

More than being there for some of my firsts, he actually taught me some new skills and corrected bad habits that were starting to take hold. I remem-

ber him explaining to me how to downshift properly. The way I was doing it was wrong.

This person and I are no longer friends—we just lost touch with one another. But through him I met other riders, and through those people I met other riders, and so on and so on. Motorcycling has a way of working out that way, kind of like life in general.

My motorcycling mentor happened to be a man, but it very well could have been a woman. When I started riding, there were fewer women riders so it was logical that I hooked up with an experienced male rider. A couple of years later, though, again at my local dealership hanging out one afternoon in the parking lot with an excuse to pick up the latest copy of a freebie motorcycle magazine, I met a woman rider who invited me to ride with her and her female friend. We rode as an awesome threesome for several years. The first friend's bike was stolen and she quit riding. The other woman and I then bonded as riding buddies, and that's when the two-wheeled adventures began. What a great time we had together both on and off our bikes.

Fortunately, for me, she had more years of riding behind her. So again, I was able to glean more tricks of the trade from this veteran motorcyclist. The wheels of learning never stop turning. Thank you to my riding mentors—you know who you are. And I hope that you, dear reader, can benefit from finding and sharing in the riding mentor relationship. **FZ**

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