



THE WAY I SEE IT by Genevieve Schmitt

Do Your Skills Match Your Motorcycle?

Don't overestimate your abilities.

AS I STARTED getting better at riding, I thought I could handle a bigger bike, one with more power, higher off the ground, heavier, and wider. After two years on an '80s Honda Shadow 500, and then a '93 Harley-Davidson

Sportster 1200, and with 2,000 miles under me, I thought I was a pretty good rider. I felt I could handle anything. My attitude was quickly adjusted the day I brought my Harley in for service, and the nice guys at the dealership gave me a loaner bike for the day. "Here you go," one smiled as he rolled out an Electra Glide Classic for me. "You can handle a dresser, right?"

"Sure I can," I confidently shot back. As I mounted the large touring motorcycle, my senses quickly zoned in on the difference in the center of gravity than what I was used to. This motorcycle is high, I thought. Way high. And there's a lot of weight in the handlebar area. "Heck, I can handle this. Just apply what I've learned and it should be easy," I mused to myself.

Well, you know where I'm going with this. As I rolled out of the driveway to make the right turn onto the street, I turned the handlebars and dumped the 800-something-pound beast. Gosh! I felt like an idiot. How embarrassing! I was shaking and nervous because I made such a dumb mistake. The mistake wasn't dropping the motorcycle. The mistake was in overestimating my abilities. I was not yet confident enough to be able to hop on any motorcycle and take it for a spin. I didn't have enough saddle time to easily transfer the skills I learned to a whole different set of ergonomics. I was still thinking of turning the handlebars instead of leaning the bike into a turn.

What's the moral here? The first is:

don't overestimate your abilities. You might be thinking, "Well, she dropped that bike because she was an inexperienced rider, and she's a woman." Plenty of men have dropped a motorcycle that was too much for them to handle. I always tell women riders to listen to that little voice inside their head. Women know what I'm talking about — that inner voice, some people call it a gut feeling or women's intuition. I think men have that little voice, too, but — with all due respect — it's often muffled by the male ego. Men often feel that because they are men, they should be able to handle any motorcycle. Well, those of you who've dropped a bike because it was too much for you to handle raise your hands. Aha! See. You know what I mean then. I'm sure after the embarrassing mishap occurred, upon reflection, you realized you'd gotten in a little over your head. Listen to that voice, at all times. Don't let ego or peer pressure convince you you're a better rider than you are.

The second moral of my dropped bike incident is that just because you may be able to handle a bigger motorcycle, doesn't mean you are a better rider. Can you take that big bike through its paces? Can you zigzag through a straight line of cones? Can you ride a tight figure eight formation? Can you ride over obstacles safely? Can you slam on the brakes and stop short in a controlled fashion?

New riders, especially, need to be aware that just because a motorcycle is

low to the ground and feels comfortable, doesn't mean they can perform the above maneuvers. That's why so many new riders drop their motorcycle. They are not completely comfortable with the weight of the bike in all situations.

So, here I am 20 years later, a proficient rider able to handle any motorcycle I'm presented with. The reason? Seat time. I have lots of miles on my tires, and through my job as a moto journalist, have had to learn how to hop on any motorcycle and adapt. While bigger doesn't always mean you're a better rider, sometimes you outgrow a motorcycle and bigger is what you need. That's why I traded up from my 1994 Dyna Low Rider to a 2008 Street Glide two years ago. I'm enjoying the bigger bike for many reasons including more storage capacity, more power, and more stability in the form of a larger footprint on the road. I like that I can go 500-600 miles in a day and not feel beat up.

Before I bought that Street Glide, I made sure I was proficient enough to handle the bigger bike in every situation. I'd test ridden the Street Glide at Harley press launches and knew it was the bike for me. I also knew I possessed the skills to handle the bigger bike in any situation: gravel, off-camber turns, up-hill turns, etc. And my inner voice even agreed with me. All I had to do was lower the bike and get a seat that pushed me closer to the bars so it would fit me better, thereby giving me the added confidence I needed to handle it. Sometimes that's what we have to do. It's rare that a stock motorcycle fits a rider perfectly. Looking back, I timed the bike upgrade just perfectly, matching my skills and riding needs at the same time.

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