

Sidetracked

The “J” Factor

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Grinding. Skateboarders do it. BMX riders do it. Even snowboarders kick up an edge and slide sideways down whatever rail seems fitting at the moment. So why not an old guy on a 600-pound motorcycle?

A 25-foot pole lies prone, pegged to the dirt to prevent its movement. A smooth, shallow trench runs along one side, carved by spinning rear tires. The display looks benign ... to the untrained eye. I approach at a 45-degree angle and guide my front tire against the far side as my rear tire engages the pole. Briskly applying power, I start the slide, moving my weight to the right footpeg to counter the bike's tendency to flip left. I've done this dozens of times before, so what could possibly go wrong?

I teach adventure riding skills. Every instructor has a distinct philosophy on why certain techniques work and how a big bike should be ridden. Most agree on the basic principles, but each approach has its nuances. I profess that there are four factors—cornerstones, if you will—that an adventure rider must rely upon. They are balance, control, judgment, and attitude. The premise is that if one or more fails you, the rest can get you through. I suppose this philosophy could be adapted to life in general.

Two of those cornerstones deal with hands-on activities. Balance is, of course, the basic principle upon which two-wheeled machines operate. Some of our first thrills occurred when we discovered we could move under our own power, faster than

ever, never touching a foot to the ground, even though there were only two points of contact between our bicycles and terra firma. There are many ways to manipulate that balance and some of us have spent most of our lives experimenting.

“Control” is both a verb and a noun. It is what we do and what we experience when we achieve the preferred outcome. We control the bike with various levers, pedals, and other mechanisms, and when we successfully apply a measure of skill and dexterity, we are under ... control. It's an important part of riding a motorcycle, and mastery is imperative to good technical riding.

Attitude is what carries us through when things go wrong. It is the ability to remain calm, to stay chipper, even when a bike is broken or when we are injured. If someone else is having a bad day, by keeping a good attitude, we can build them up, offer assistance, or just assure them that this too will pass as a plan is established to get them home, fix their bike, or wait for a bone to heal.

Judgment, however, bridges the gap between them all. When we challenge our envelope of balance and control, things can go badly. The “briskly-applied power” portion of my grinding demonstration was an experiment. Significant dexterity is critical to a successful pole grind with a 600-pound motorcycle. Clutch modulation powers and de-powers the rear wheel, adjusting the tendency to roll left or right as the motorcycle slides askew down the pole. Rushing the bike leaves me without the control required to prevent a

fall. I spring over the saddle, still hoping to control the outcome, as the bike snaps left, landing on my left leg. It slams into my knee, hyperextending the joint and smashing me to the ground beneath its weight. The audible crunch and urgent signals from a group of PO'd pain receptors punctuate the immediate thought that I have misjudged the situation.

As my students gather and the birdies fly off, I am lifted to my feet to face the class, who patiently await a post-performance statement. Someone suggests calling an ambulance, but I decline. We abbreviate the graduation exercises and my coaches assure me they will finish the last few elements of training at the appointed time. I climb aboard my Tacoma for the ride of shame and to face the consequences of my lapse of judgment.

It was not necessary for me to demonstrate grinding at that moment. I was showing off. Not only that, I had attacked the pole more aggressively than ever before because I was eager to move on to the next exercise and mistakenly thought I could outsmart physics. Judgment flew out the window, taking balance and control along for the ride.

Now, looking at the stitches in my knee resulting from repairs to my meniscus and multiple grade-three ligament damage, I realize that the “J” factor caught up with me. Attitude is the lone survivor as I recuperate and promise myself I'll never do that again. It isn't enough to preach good judgment. We must put it on like an essential part of our gear every time we fire up the bike. **RR**