

The Art of Two-Upmanship

Ensuring First-time Passengers A Great First Ride

by Steve Larsen
photos by Bob Meador

INTRODUCING THE UNINITIATED to the joys of motorcycling can be lots of fun. Sharing the feeling of freedom one gets on a bike and, in particular, exploring a beautiful piece of road without being caged in a car, can be rewarding not only for the new passenger, but for the rider providing the introduction as well.

But it doesn't always work out that way, does it? Messing up when giving someone a first ride can cause hurt feelings, loss of trust and respect and even anger. Doing things wrong, I know from experience, can even lose you a friend. I once assumed an individual was genuinely enthusiastic about riding as my passenger because she had recently purchased a new motorcycle. When she asked if she could accompany me on an 1,800-mile, three-day-plus trip to pick up my bike from a distant city, I figured she would be good company and agreed. We arrived separately at the city where I was picking up the bike. But I mistakenly assumed she knew all about riding and took off with only cursory instructions. At our first gas stop I learned she was not only terrified, but angry with me for what she felt was excessive speed, although I'd rarely gone over 70 miles per hour on an interstate freeway. For the rest of the trip, she nearly freaked out if I went over 60 mph and tensed up completely when the bike leaned even a little. When we confronted a wind storm that moved the bike around a bit, she wanted to take a bus home. It's been three years and I think she is still mad at me.

This article explains how to maximize the opportunity for a positive first ride experience and minimize the possible negatives. The next time a niece or nephew, neighbor or friend asks to go for a ride with you, review the rules in this article for yourself and with your passenger before you go. But first, size up your potential passenger.



First, find out what your potential passenger's attitudes are about riding. Are they really enthusiastic, or do they feel pressured, or worse, are they actually negative about motorcycling and scared to death to ride with you?

THREE TYPES OF PASSENGERS

You are likely to face one of three categories of first-time pillion pal. Understanding them is very important. The three categories are:

1. The Curious: Genuinely enthusiastic passengers; perhaps even riders someday.

2. The Sympathizers: People willing to ride primarily because they know and trust you. But consider that they may be doing it because you (or a spouse, friend or relative) want them to, and the decision is perhaps not entirely of their own volition.

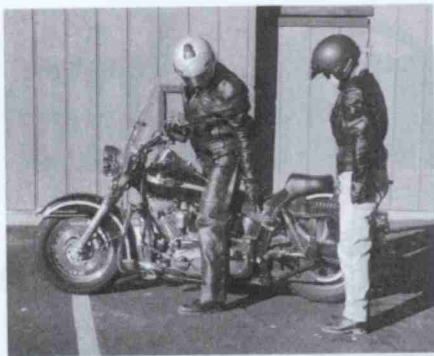
3. The Motorcycle Phobics: For them, motorcycles have no appeal and/or they are terrified at the idea of being on one.

The way you should approach each of these potential passengers is very different, so your best bet is to know with certainty the passenger's category. "Sympathizers" may seem more enthusiastic than they really are. You need to sort this out and factor how you will treat them and how much prep time they will require to become comfortable. Ask your prospective riders how they feel

about motorcycles, how long they've wanted to go for a ride on one or if they've ever ridden on one before. If they've rid-

TIPS FOR PASSENGERS

- 1. Know the rules for riding.** Ask about where to hold on. Ask about when to get on/off.
- 2. Learn a bit of how bikes work.** Clutch, brakes, throttle. They lean to turn. They are noisy. They can accelerate and stop more quickly than cars.
- 3. Relax.** Don't tense up. It may be new to you, but this is supposed to be fun.
- 4. Never ride with someone you don't trust.** Don't ride with anyone who's been drinking. Ride only with full protective gear, meaning a helmet, boots, protective jacket and pants. Good riders dress for the accident that hopefully will never happen. However, if it does, good protection can save your life.



Don't let the bike be a mystery. Show them how it all works, urge them to observe your control actions. Tell them about how the bike is different than a car, how it will feel, and how they will actively participate by leaning with you and the bike.



With the bike securely steady, your feet on the ground, let them climb aboard, keeping their body weight centered over the center of the bike. Let them know that they should only mount and dismount with your permission, so that you are ready to support the bike.



den before, have them tell you what was good or bad about that experience. Prospective riders often tell you they have a brother, son, neighbor, cousin, friend who rides. Have them talk about his/her motorcycle, and ask if they've had an opportunity to ride with this person and if so, why they did or did not. Listening carefully, you will uncover if your prospective passenger is a genuinely enthusiastic participant, a reluctant sympathizer or motorcycle phobic.

The "curious" and potentially enthusiastic prospects are easy to spot and require less time and reassurance, but it is still important to go through the pre-ride checklist with them. Where one may get seriously off track is in failing to recognize and distinguish between the "sympathizers" and the "phobic." Make sure you know which is which and your objective for each of them before going to the next step.

In talking to what appears to be a "sympathizer" you may uncover you really have a "phobic." This is someone who is riding with you only because of very strong external pressure. Your best move here is to not take them for a ride. Instead, find an excuse not to go. You will know you are right if you say something like, "You know, next Sunday might be a much better time for a ride than now," and the person looks as if you've just saved his or her life. Often these



reluctant riders are not just afraid of riding, they also may be opposed to the whole idea of motorcycles as well.

GOALS

In addition to understanding the goals of your passenger, consider your own goals as well. As a responsible rider and friend, your goal should be to provide the passenger with a great experience. You have the opportunity to introduce a new person to the joys of the sport of riding, the sense of freedom and connection to the environment that can only be sensed on a motorcycle. Perhaps you are hoping to show a "special" person a good time. Another goal may be to increase your enjoyment of your ride by having someone to share it with. And of course, the bottom line goal is to have a safe ride and return without incident with a big wide grin on the face of your passenger.

Are there inappropriate goals? You bet. Trying to impress a newbie with your stellar motorcycling skills ("I'm so fast, I can scrape the pegs. Here, let me show you!") is guaranteed to get you in trouble. Any ideas of demonstrating the incredible capabilities of your particular bike, its awesome acceleration, powerful braking and superior ground clearance should be forgotten. Many motorcyclists (often male, like myself), think they can convince a reluctant passen-

ger that riding is fun. I've learned the hard way that when ego controls judgment, good sense evaporates. It's fairly natural to want to show off your bike's speed, cornering, stopping ability, or maneuverability by weaving through slow traffic. But these are exactly the types of actions that scare back-seat beginners. Some ideas to totally banish from this particular ride include:

"With the power and acceleration of this baby, I can easily pass this car before the curve...watch!"

"Scraping the pegs, just this once, will really demonstrate how far we can lean—making the rest of the trip much more fun and relaxed."

ENSURING A GREAT RIDE

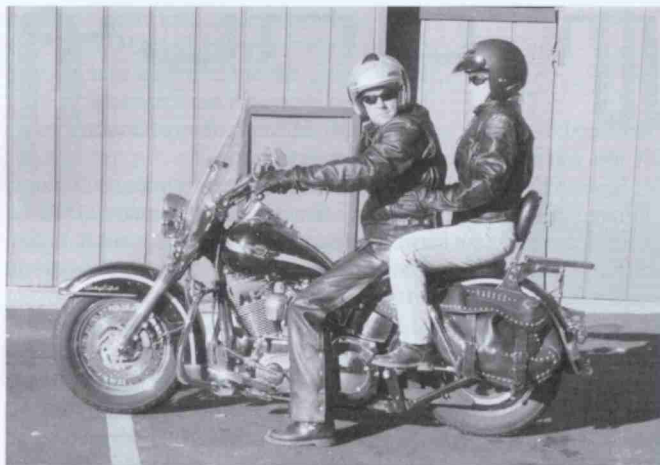
So, how do you meet your goals to ensure a great first ride? Teach your passenger what to expect by explaining each of the following concepts:

1. How motorcycles operate—Familiarize them with the controls: Explain the throttle, clutch, shift lever and both brakes. Point out how the turnsignals and brake lights operate. If you have a radio, CD or intercom, show them these controls as well. It helps to explain what you do to operate the bike. Explain the coordinated actions you make to move the bike, pulling in the clutch, selecting the right gear, slowly letting out the clutch while rolling on the throttle—and that you do it all at the same time. Show them what you do to up-shift. Explain what you do to stop. Encourage them to watch for these things when you are riding. It dispels the mystery, and at the same time teaches them skills. And frankly, having them focus on things like this is often a good diversion early in the ride as it takes their mind off their fears.

2. Talk them through how motorcycles feel when you ride them: Explain that they lean in corners; it's an unnatural sensation but absolutely necessary.

3. Inform them that you will keep lean angles as moderate as possible for them, especially at low speeds. Then do it. Tell them that the motorcycle is capable of leaning far, far further over than you will lean it with them on the bike, so they should not be afraid at the very moderate angles which you will lean the bike. The bike will not tip over, even if it feels as if it will.

4. Let them know that they should lean with the bike. Be very specific on this point; this means: Do not anticipate and actively lean over in a turn, but also, do not resist leaning—go with the bike and the driver. Look over the driver's shoulder in the



Wear correct gear. Have an established destination and figure to stop for a break before too long, to get their feedback and adjust as necessary.



Let the passenger be in charge of your speed and how long the ride will last. Have a slow down signal, and turn around willingly if they ask.

direction the bike is turning. Stay with the bike, not the rider. If you have a backrest, use it. Keep your body stable by pushing your knees into the driver, vs. riding splay-legged, especially when going downhill.

5. Explain how motorcycles and automobiles are different:

Wind noise on a motorcycle is much greater than they might suspect. Tell them, you might consider wearing ear plugs.

Motorcycles often vibrate more than cars, so don't worry about that.

Motorcycles are capable of far faster acceleration and deceleration than cars and while, of course, you will do your best to accelerate and decelerate slowly for them, the bike is capable of much more.

6. Have a defined destination and ride length.

Establish a point to which you are riding with perhaps a break and chance to get off the bike and talk after 20 minutes or so. This way you can assess how the person is doing and feeling about the ride, giving you the chance to make appropriate adjustments.

7. Tell them what you focus on during the ride: Talk to them about watching the surface of the road, how you study and predict what other traffic is likely to do and how active mentally you are during the ride.

8. Wear the right gear:

Helmet, gloves, jacket and jeans, good over-the-ankle boots.

Do consider earplugs, they can really help first-time riders.

Think about an MP3 player and some favorite music if your bike is so equipped.

9. Explain passenger mounting and dismounting:

Mount and dismount only with the dri-

ver's consent. Ensure your passenger knows to ask when to get on/off, and it helps to have them only get on/off on the left. Only give the okay for mounting/dismounting when the bike is in neutral and you have both of your feet on the ground.

10. Put the passenger in absolute control of two things:

A. Speed: If you are going faster than they are comfortable, arrange for a way for them to signal you to slow down. I ask my passengers to gently tap my right shoulder if they want me to slow down. If you get this signal, you must slow down immediately (safely, of course).

B. Ride Length: Whatever the planned length of the ride, if at anytime they wish to return, make sure they understand they can make that call and you will return them home immediately, with no recriminations or criticism.

IT WORKS

Earlier this year I had a chance to follow this process with a friend from California who'd never ridden on a motorcycle. I met her at her hotel and we spent about 20 minutes at the bike, over a cup of coffee, talking through the above. We then began the ride with city streets, followed by an hour or so of interstate highways. From there we moved to a two-lane, curvy road with terrific scenery. After a couple of hours, we reached the location I had determined would be our turn-around point. This scenic overlook is reached after about a mile of gravel. I explained, "For the next 28 miles, this road twists and turns, beginning with a long, steep downhill. I don't think you will like it." However, as I explained what was coming up and my plan to turn around here, she said, "Oh no, let's keep going. I'm totally comfortable and having a great time!" Two weeks later she sent me an e-

mail saying she'd begun shopping for her first motorcycle.

Following these simple steps and maintaining the proper attitude will go a long way to ensuring you and your first-time passenger have a great time. ☺



A positive first riding experience can make a special friendship much closer, and may even create a new motorcyclist. It's up to you.