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Getting Over the **FEAR** of Dropping Your GS

TEXT AND PHOTOS: JIM HYDE

One of most frequent things I hear in the world of off-road training is, "I don't want to drop my bike." To which I usually reply, "Why?" It's no big deal. But to a new rider, it can be a daunting consideration. In this article, we'll address the why, what if, the recovery, and the fact that pride has no place in your vocabulary when it comes to riding a motorcycle off the beaten path.

An old mentor of mine made an acronym of the word FEAR: False Expectations Appearing Real. It's defined as "an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat." In this case, the idea of dropping a bike (until you've done it) can be an unpleasant concept perhaps because it's an unknown. And I think the word "unknown" is key here, because there is no question that GSs are built to be ridden off-road and designed to be able to withstand abuse and the occasional "get off." Once you realize you and the bike aren't likely to be hurt in a drop and that it isn't dangerous or painful to actually drop the bike, you realize it's not a big deal and you can grow as an adventure rider.

Let's face it, if you're going to ride off-road, you will at some point drop your bike. In fact, if you are just learning "adventure riding," you'll probably

Unintended acrobatics are to be expected when adventure riding.

drop your bike a lot. Just like if you're going to hike the woods you're probably going to get wet feet.

Another factor is that fear can be related to shame or embarrassment and ultimately, ego. I have found ego to more problematic for men than for women, because women will admit more freely that they don't know something and men will say "yeah, yeah, I know about that... let's move on!"

As an example, years ago, Harley Davidson's Buell division produced a semi-adventure bike they called the Ulysses, a dual-sport motorcycle. RawHyde was asked to host the press launch and invitations went out to predictable street motorcycles magazines featuring chrome, leather and V-twins. We had all these guys in half-helmets with leather chaps and fringe come to learn about riding an adventure bike. The very first exercise was just to get comfortable standing up on the bike and taking a lap around the arena. After explain-

ing why we stand up, one impatient journalist hopped on the bike after only half-listening to the instructions. He stood up, and the minute he went into a turn, lost traction on the front wheel and went down. Without so much as looking back, he picked himself up and just walked off the field and headed for his car. I said, “Where are you going?” He replied, “I have never dropped a bike in my life. This is bull s--- and this is not for me.” He got in his car and left. That’s the essence of ego—quitting instantly because you’re too embarrassed to carry on.

People who are going to engage in this sport need to come to terms with the fact that they are absolutely going to drop their bike. It’s part of our world. That’s what adventure bikes are meant for... not necessarily for dropping, but for rough use.

I want to be clear—there’s a big difference between dropping your bike and a crash. In fact, we have four different terms that tend to be used when it comes to bikes falling over:

- 1 TIP OVER** is typically a zero-speed drop. The bike isn’t moving forward and occurs when gravity just takes over. It happens when your foot slips trying to balance the bike or the slope beneath your foot is misjudged, finding it’s farther to the ground than thought.
- 2 DROP** or “dirt nap” usually occurs at speeds of 5mph or less and tend to be the result of running out of one of the three Ts: trail, traction, or talent. Usually it’s on take-off or coming to a stop that a drop occurs.
- 3 GET OFF** is generally at speeds above 5mph... and more likely at 15 to 20mph. These might sound scarier than the first two, but usually there is little damage to the bike or rider. Scuff marks on the riding gear and a broken turn signal are normally the extent of these mishaps.
- 4 CRASH** is then a legitimate accident. They happen suddenly, at speeds of 30mph or more, are due to a progression or chain of events, and tend to be more catastrophic for both rider and machine.

The good news is that we don’t deal with crashes too much in my world and to me, the “drop” is the most common balance failure in adventure riding. The only real probable bike damage comes from two areas. If you don’t have valve cover protectors on your bike, there’s a chance that a sharp stone could hit just right and crack the valve cover causing an oil leak, which obviously needs to be repaired. Or, you could damage the engine by allowing the bike to run while lying on its side. It is important to turn the engine off if the bike is down. The reason is that you can score the uphill cylinder because there’s no lubrication, as all the oil falls to the downside of the motor.

In a slow speed maneuver when a rider realizes that a drop is imminent there is a temptation to ease the bike down. I don’t recommend that you try to ease a big adventure bike down because you can hurt your back. The bikes are tough and crash protection is available for any adventure riding bike. Then, if the bike’s going to fall, let it fall. You might break a clutch or brake lever, but you can replace that fairly quickly, whereas fixing your back is... well, the older we get, the longer it takes. Even if you just pull a muscle you’ve ruined your day, and perhaps your week, and you’re probably going to be in pain for a while.

So, in a situation where the bike is going to go down—like a slow speed turn or the rock that moves from under a wheel or you lose your balance or stall the bike—what do you do? We teach riders that if they start to lose control of the motorcycle, just step off the bike and let it go down. Obviously people’s fitness and flexibility levels vary, but in my opinion it’s far less risky to tumble or step off of a falling motorcycle than attempting to “save” a bad situation. Trying to save a fall puts you at high risk of pulling a muscle, tearing a ligament, or even possibly rupturing a disc in your back. It’s so much easier to just drop it, collect your wits, pick the bike back up and go. If you let it go down, there’s an excellent chance you’re not going to get hurt and the bike probably won’t either.

The Details of “Going Down”

So what do you do when you realize the bike is going down? First thing is to make sure your foot or leg is not underneath the bike at the point where it’s going to hit and employ some well-planned dismount techniques.

Let’s just assume you’re easing over some rocky terrain. Maybe we have a foot down to steady



Taking a tumble down a hill is less painful than having a 500-pound motorcycle land on your leg. → **You need to get over your embarrassment** at seeing your bike on its side.





One dismount technique: **1.** On the side of the fall, get your foot 10 inches away from the peg. **2.** As the bike falls, that foot lands and can take your weight. **3.** Step away from the falling bike.

ourselves, and we're just trying to roll the front wheel over volleyball-sized rocks in front of us. But rocks are really unpredictable, as you don't know how well embedded they are in the soil beneath. And suddenly you've got a zero-speed drop coming. Your front wheel has just slipped, you know you're going to lose it; the bike is going to fall to the left. What you want to do is spread your legs as wide as you can, get your left leg out of the way, and let the bike kind of fall between your legs. Now, most people can't spread their legs that wide, but as the bike starts to go down, you've made sure your left foot is out of the way, and you can just flop over onto your back. By falling backwards, your left leg will typically stay out of the way and your right leg will come up in the air. A lot of time people will struggle to the very end to try to keep the bike upright. But by that time, weight is bearing down on their leg, and they can't move it. Then the bike comes down on their leg. When 500 pounds of adventure bike comes down on your ankle, it hurts, regardless of what kind of boots you have on.

A good rule of thumb is to get the weight off the leg that the bike is falling toward. You don't want any weight on that leg. So when the bike falls down, it actually pushes your leg out of the way. If you're going to fall to the left, simply spread your left leg, get it out eight to 10 inches away from the foot peg. Let the bike come down. At that point the bike is most likely going to brush your leg, but you need to fall backwards. You just have to get off of it. If you're on flat terrain, maybe you're making a turn of some type, there's 90% chance you can just throw your left leg down on the ground and run away from the bike.

Damage control

There is no doubt that radiator guards and crash bars help mitigate damage. There are a multitude of companies that make them. For the GS and the water-cooled bikes, radiator guards are an important addition. For those who ride in really rocky terrain, a good solid skid plate is important. You can upgrade your handlebars as well, if are concerned about that. Bar ends and handlebars take the brunt of front-end impact drops, which is why hand guards are so important. Most of the hand guards that come from the factory are just plastic but I know of at least

one company that makes a hand guard with a metal band in them. That helps protect the levers. Bags keep the backside of the bike up. If you're on a Moto Guzzi or a BMW, the cylinders will keep the bike up. On the narrower bikes, the handlebars are probably going to hit and then fold over. You can bend the handlebar perhaps a little bit. In the thousands of drops I've seen at RawHyde, I've never seen any major damage from drops I've witnessed.

Luggage as sacrificial armor? Having luggage on the bike can keep the back of the bike off of the ground and make it easier to pick up, plus it can protect the paint near the back of the bike as well as your muffler. However, aluminum luggage tends to get bent up and misshapen if you drop it a lot, and you can get soft luggage that won't dent and will accomplish the same thing. Luggage does make the bike a little heavier, and yes, under some circumstances your pannier can come up and clip you in the back of the leg, which hurts but to me it's worth it to have everything I might need with me, just in case.

So Practice...

Get a couple of friends to help you and begin by laying the bike down carefully; making note of anything that could end up breaking in an impact situation. If you've added auxiliary lights or your turn signals hang out or you notice something obvious that might get damaged in a fall, this might be a good time to buy some spare parts to carry with you—just in case.

To truly get comfortable with dropping your bike, you might also need an attitude adjustment first. Ask yourself, "Why did I buy one of these things?" This is a rough-and-tumble motorcycle. It's not a frail little flower. This is tough piece of gear. You need to say to yourself, "I am willing to face the consequences of dropping my bike." Once you've gotten over that mental hurdle, then you can practice.

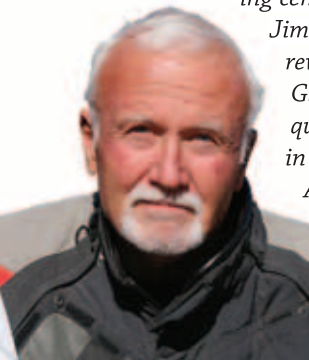
All you need to do is take two or three moving blankets and lay them down along the left side of the bike, maybe on the floor of your garage, preferably on the grass. Sit on your bike. In a single motion, stand up on the bike quickly but lean to the left a little bit. Your right leg should be on the foot peg; you stand up, and then as the bike falls to the left, just move your left leg out of the way. Move your leg 12 inches to the left of the foot peg. As the bike tips over to the left, there comes a point where your foot touches the ground and you're actually standing for just

a second. As your foot hits the ground, your right leg comes off the peg, then fall backwards. If you want to have a soft landing, put another couple of furniture blankets out for yourself as well. Otherwise, wear your armored riding jacket and your helmet, and just go ahead and fall. You can do it to the other side as well. Left, right, doesn't matter. Just put some padding down to protect the bike if you're concerned about scratching it and a little extra to prevent bruises. It's a great way to practice falling. And once you've done it a couple times, you'll realize... wow, that's no big deal!

There are lots of reasons why people drop their bikes. In the early stages of learning to ride, one of the biggest skills is learning how to read the terrain in front of you without fixating on things. Target fixation means if you stare at it, you're going to hit it. So if there's rock in the way that you want to avoid... the more you look at it, the more certain it is that you're going to hit it. The skill of reading the terrain, picking the line you want to ride and actually riding it, is a big step toward avoiding unintentional dismounts. Frankly, taking a class and learning all the principles of riding helps. But that's a bit of a shameless pitch for what I do. Honestly, just practice and get comfortable. A lot of riders make more mistakes than they need to because they are nervous. Getting comfortable with whatever it is you're going to do would alleviate a lot of drops. When people get nervous, they tend to drop the bike more. In the next issue, we'll discuss how to pick it up!

Enjoy the ride... drop the bike... pick it up... carry on... it's no big deal! ▀

Our columnist is Jim Hyde, owner of RawHyde Adventures. RawHyde is one of only a dozen or so official BMW off-road schools in the world and the only privately owned, BMW sponsored "off-road" training center in the US. As such, Jim says, "My entire world revolves around the BMW GS which is, without question, the pioneer bike in what is now called the Adventure segment of the motorcycling world. In this column I hope to discuss what Adventure Riding is really all about."



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