



One Mistake Away

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U.S. Air Force photo by Dennis Spotts

I love motorcycles, sport bikes in particular. I'm attracted to the sense of freedom and adventure they provide. When I put on my riding gear to go for a spin, I can actually feel myself becoming more centered, more focused. My pulse picks up, just a little — probably from the adrenaline rush I get when I throw a leg over my R6. While I love to ride, I also have a very healthy respect for the power and speed of today's sport bikes — and I never take for granted that I could be one mistake away from breaking myself or my bike beyond repair.

There is an unfortunate "dark side" to sport bike riding. We've all seen them: the cocky young rider dicing through traffic at breakneck speeds; the daredevil riding a wheelie while going over 90 mph on the interstate; the would-be road racer trying to drag his knee in some twisty canyon. For those of you who think these are pretty cool tricks, I have a message: these people are attention-seeking idiots, and they're dangerous — not just to themselves, but also to those they share the road with. They also give a bad name to sport bikers everywhere.

I haven't been riding long, but I've learned a few things along the way. First, if you want to really open up that throttle and see what that baby can do, there's no better environment than the track to learn your limits. You reduce the risk to yourself and others by

keeping it off the road. I can almost guarantee that your bike's limits will far exceed yours. If you need more convincing, how about avoiding that ticket for speeding or reckless driving and saving yourself some coin on your insurance? Better yet, how about saving your own neck?

A few years ago when getting ready for a race during the first practice of the morning on a cold track and more or less cold tires, I was rear-ended prior to the braking zone. While my bike flipped up and missed me, I landed in the middle of the track with about a dozen bikes bearing down on me. A trip to the emergency room showed a couple of broken ribs. I was lucky. When I went into work to fill out the ground safety paperwork the following Monday, my commander was shocked because I didn't have a mark on me. If I had been riding at 120 mph on the road, you wouldn't be reading this right now.

Even those of you who feel invincible and in complete control on the street, let me assure you that you're not. I've seen more than a few knee-dragging "canyon cruisers" getting their bikes hauled off on a trailer because they hit a patch of sand or a car spooked them going around a sharp bend. Even on a familiar road, there are just too many unknowns. The track provides relative predictability, on-site emergency responders,



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built-in safety features, run off areas and no speed limits.

Good-quality personal protective equipment (PPE) is invaluable, but only if you use it every time you ride. Helmets go without saying, but what about the rest of your riding ensemble? While jeans and a long-sleeved shirt are better than shorts and flip-flops, they'll offer you almost no protection from road rash in the event of a mishap.

Perforated leather racing suits have hundreds of tiny holes in them which allow air to penetrate and cool your skin. Aerostitch suits offer great abrasion protection, and you can wear street clothes underneath. If you opt for a two-piece riding suit, look for something that zips together all the way around. Otherwise, the suit won't offer much protection if you end up sliding across your back and it rides up. I know this stuff is expensive, but can you afford not to wear it? Broken bones eventually heal, but skin grafts are forever. Riding gloves with a forearm gauntlet and Kevlar-reinforced, mid-shin-length riding boots should be in your closet too. Good equipment is worth the investment.

The last point is that there is no substitute for experience and training. No matter how frequently or how long you've been riding, there's always room for improvement. Everyone on active duty who rides has training available. Track days allow you to learn more

about your bike and your limits, but there are also great riding schools that teach bike-handling skills and techniques. Learning what it feels like to have a bike sliding underneath you will increase confidence.

I hope I've provided a little food for thought. Safety statistics don't affect us as much as they're intended to, primarily because we don't think we'll be the next statistic. If the numbers and the statistics don't affect your decisions before and during your ride, listen to the professionals, the racers who do this for a living.

Sport bikes are designed to go fast — on a race track. In the flying world, crew members are taught to “dress for egress,” meaning if it's cold outside, wear your jacket in the cockpit and keep it cool inside; you never know when you might have a problem and have to bail out of that aircraft. The same goes for motorcycles — dress as if you're going to hit the pavement at 60 mph because you never know when it could happen.

Finally, keep learning and keep challenging yourself. Take a skills class every few years or try adding a new skill like dirt riding. You'll be surprised how quickly your confidence and riding skills will improve and you'll be better equipped to handle a situation that demands a quick and correct response. Your family and your Air Force family will be far happier if you don't become one of those statistics in the safety briefings. 🛡️