

Road Captain's Report 23 Jan 04

Longtime members will appreciate how difficult it is for me, of all people, to write this. I write not as a rider but as Road Captain...the rider in me is screaming "Nooooooo!" with each word.

I went on a ride this last week that was absolutely thrilling. The scenery was beautiful once the fog cleared, the destination was pleasant and the camaraderie warm and plentiful. I had an excellent time. Had I left my Road Captain hat at home, it would have been perfect.

When we arrived at our destination, one of the newer faces asked me directly "is this pace typical of the club's rides?" I answered, truthfully, that it depends a lot on who is leading. Some rides are more exhilarating than others. This ride had a higher than usual adrenaline flow. The seasoned rider in me loved it.

Still, the Road Captain had to think about it, and hard. What must I say from this new perspective about highway speeds up to 20% higher than posted, and speeds on surface roads as much as 40% higher than posted? The rider says "Cowabunga!" but he is only concerned for a smaller slice of the club, those who already have skills that permit such a pace with CONFIDENCE.

Later in the day I made my way back home as part of a smaller group, which included the person who had asked earlier about our outbound pace. He kept up quite well, maintaining proper spacing front and side. He demonstrated skill and judgment. Still, I worried whether he was doing it with confidence and enjoying it as I was or if his teeth were gritted, knuckles blanched under his gloves and due for a tension headache before the day was out.

I'm sorry if you get tired of me saying it, but it bears repeating: there are only two things that matter in this club--friendship, and motorcycling. Anything we address must be considered in relation to those two goals. From the point of view of the Road Captain, the second is easy. It's the first where things get sticky. There are some who say "The slowest rider should set the pace." No, No way, no how. I personally would be the first of a long line to flat out ignore that notion and then walk out completely, muttering something like "This isn't Romper Room, it's a motorcycle club." Riding slowly enough to accommodate a rank beginner who may or may not have actually taken MSF training would create twice as much stress as the ride was supposed to blow off in the first place.

Still, demanding that people make 60ish mph in a 45 zone demands a leap of faith. That leap gets noticeably longer for those unaccustomed to group riding (in general). That leap is downright intimidating when one has never ridden with the specific people they have drawn as "wingmen" on any given ride. I say this in hopes of cutting off the kinds of harsh comments I myself would have made as recently as this time last year-- "If you can't run with the big dogs, stay under the porch" and other such swaggering, Darwinian slogans.

Such practices and comments are not in keeping with the "friendship" aspect of this club--it's really hard to be friends with someone when you feel as if they are deliberately designing an activity to exclude you. It's equally hard when you feel your "friend" is an anchor dragging you

down and hampering your fun--like a kid brother only worse because you can't slug him when mom's not looking. What I am suggesting, in a likely vain attempt to please the most people, is that on Official Club Rides, we back off to a marginally more relaxed pace, about one click down from where we were on Sunday. It should be entirely reasonable to expect that the group will exceed the posted limit only to the degree necessary to avoid being swallowed up by 4 wheeled traffic. I have read in several motorcycle safety articles that one should ride slightly faster than traffic, the better to avoid blending into the background clutter in the blind spot of a murderously inattentive SUV driver. That makes a lot of sense to me.

I must admit that I am extremely uncomfortable with declaring a policy, and almost as uncomfortable with the very notion of having a set policy at all. In all the discussions I have had on this issue through the years with club members and seen on the websites of other vehicular clubs, it seems that the most considerate thing to do is to indicate the expected skill level of a ride as part of the invitation to the club at large when possible. This way there will be fewer uncomfortable surprises. I like to think that the less experienced would take the opportunity to go on some of the more invigorating rides in order to improve their skills by watching the riders ahead and seeing how they do it. I would hope that the more aggressive will take the opportunity to smell the roses, at least if they are near the apex of a turn. What I definitely want to see is all riders welcome on all rides, just with a better expectation of how the day will unfold.

These suggestions towards courtesy must not be taken as a justification for being a road hazard--please remember that the general public only know CCMC and the motorcycling community as a whole by our behavior on the road. You may be sure that our colors will be just as reviled for a 55mph rolling roadblock as they would be for splitting lanes at 80 mph.

After all that, I am still all too clearly aware that preferences for riding style and actual riding skills are not going to always mesh. Though part of a group, every rider must always be aware that he or she is the master of his own machine. That means that if you find that you find your skills are overwhelmed and overmatched, it is your duty to yourself and to those around you to take appropriate steps to not endanger anyone. You can always catch up at the next stop.

So, today marks the beginning of The Tip of the Week. Nothing fancy, just a weekly suggestion for things to make for a more enjoyable ride.

This week's tip: When riding on a one way street, avoid the far left lane. An inattentive driver might miss the "One Way" sign and enter YOUR street and set you up for an uncomfortable and inconvenient head on collision.

I will accept suggestions for "Tip of The Week" at BanditPilot@yahoo.com with no promise that I will use them.