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(Left) Two-time MotoGP World Champion Casey Stoner (27), seen in 2011. Photo by DPPI. (Above) Colin Edwards demonstrates throttle control of a different type on a pit bike. Photo by David Swarts.

# “Traction Control Is In Your Right Hand”

By Michael Gougis

There is a growing perception, a creeping mindset, that the art of throttle control is a disappearing skill, driven to extinction by the relentless intrusion of zeros and ones, algorithms and code monkeys. As more and more motorcycles come from the showroom with traction and wheelie control, there’s no reason to develop said skills, it is whispered; just whack the throttle to the stop and let the little black box do all the thinking for you.

Hogwash.

Throttle control remains a necessary skill for anyone who wants to ride a motorcycle on the pavement at speed. Electronic devices pay their biggest dividends only at one part of the corner; the rider’s ability to twist the grip properly elsewhere in the corner makes a huge difference in speed, comfort and control.

And, not to be too blunt, but electronic systems occasionally fail. There’s a reason programmers created the ctrl/alt/delete pattern of key strokes. It’s not going to end well if you have a computer glitch when you are relying solely on the electronic brain of the bike to modulate the delivery of 200 horse-

power to the rear wheel while your knee is on the ground.

“I was conducting the live interviews at Indy for MotoGP,” says Aaron Stevenson, owner and

founder of the Cornerspeed and Cornerspin riding schools, “and I was talking to Colin Edwards. We started talking about this, and he says, ‘We’ve got the most sophis-

ticated stuff on the planet—and we can still highside ourselves to the moon.”

Lastly, to maximize the benefits of electronic rider aids, a programmer has to take into account a vast number of variables, crunch the numbers, and translate the riders’ desire into a string of binary digits. It’s not easy. A new Pectel MQ12 ride-by-wire electronics package transformed the Castrol Honda CBR1000RR ridden by Jonathan Rea in World Superbike at the end



Two-time Superbike World Champion Colin Edwards (5) is seen here leading former Superbike World Champion Ben Spies (11) during a wet MotoGP race at Silverstone, England, last season. The combination of racing with high horsepower on wet pavement requires excellent throttle control skills even with the help of advanced electronics. Photo by DPPI.

of the 2011 season. But to get that package to work, it took not one, not two, but three trackside technicians from Cosworth.

You, gentle reader, do not have three trackside technicians from Cosworth in your pit at a track day.

You will have to learn throttle control. Learning to use the throttle correctly will give you the benefits of sophisticated electronic systems, if not to the extent of those systems.

“The fastest way around a racetrack is with the wheels of the motorcycle in line. That’s what (two-time MotoGP Champion) Casey Stoner says—so that’s straight from the horse’s mouth,” says Keith Code, founder of the California Superbike School and a guy who knows a thing or two about how to get a motorcycle around a racetrack quickly.

Code says that electronic traction control provides most of its benefits at corner exit, where bikes with monster horsepower are trying to spin the rear wheel—and, almost as an unintentional consequence, kicking the tires out of line.

“Traction control shaves those fractions of a second on the corner exit. But that’s not the only place where you need to be on the gas,” Code says. “You have to be on the gas after initiating the corner, and you’re nowhere near the stop with the throttle at that point.”

Opening the throttle immediately after turning the motorcycle—which takes place at the beginning of the corner, not at the apex—sets the front/rear weight balance of the motorcycle for the duration of the corner. If the rider does not do this, then bumps and other inputs are competing with front-rear weight transfer for the attention of the suspension. It can get spooky-feeling, very quickly.

Obviously, the rider cannot simply pin the throttle immediately after initiating the turn. The rider is looking to maintain the motorcycle’s velocity, or increase it only slightly and progressively. This function usually does not require enough throttle to wake up the traction control function.

So throttle control prior to corner exit is critical. And most streetbikes won’t have electronic controls that absolutely maximize the drive out. How do you learn to develop these areas of throttle control?

Stevenson, King Kenny Roberts, Colin Edwards, Rich Oliver and others figured out long ago that to learn how to ride at the limit of traction in a relatively safe manner requires lower speeds and less traction.

In other words, leave the streetbike at home and go get dirty. “Traction control is in your right hand,” Stevenson says. “We are pilots. If you’re just letting the boxes do all the work, we’re just riders. If I were king of the world, you would not be allowed to buy a streetbike until you’ve spent a year or two in the dirt. The limit is always the limit. When you’re at 100% traction, you’re starting to slide. It’s far easier to learn that with seven horsepower and at 10 mph. You’re not going to learn a lot if you’re out there on a \$10,000 toy—you can push, but if you overdo it, it’s going to be ugly.”

To recap: Learning to use the throttle properly is a skill that never will become obsolete. Learn to get on the gas, at least slightly, immediately after turning the motorcycle. Smoothly apply more power through the turn. And practice, practice, practice, especially if you get to do it off-road. A little dirt don’t hurt.