

Did You Know...? Common Benefits of Yoga Have Every Day Applications to Motorcycling

Fixing our Backs, Riding our Bikes

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Greg writes on motorcycling, yoga, the Midwest, & music

There's a truth in our biking communities that we don't like: aging, illness, and injury hammer us. We're losing strength, our balance is faltering, our eyesight isn't as good as it once was – neither are our reactions – and we're becoming inflexible. After a long day on the road our necks ache, our backs are tight, and arms are heavy. And whether you agree or not, I'm sure we can agree that no matter what, aging doesn't mean we stop riding.

I'm a certified Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) Basic Rider Coach. I've noticed the second part of the MSF mission states, "lifelong quality education and training for current and prospective riders." But we should ask, what does the MSF do to address the rider and his/her long term health, safety and comfort.

I think the curriculum focuses where it must for beginning riders. We familiarize them with the bike and start with classroom lessons on cornering strategies and the apex of curves. We note that braking involves perception, reaction and learning how to use all the technological advantages of new motorcycles.

New riders are taught to experiment with the friction zone and learn the importance of keeping their eyes up and toward the horizon; they're encouraged to buy good gear and pay attention to gravity when packing the bike, yet the most important part of the motorcyclists' long-term experience is his/her physical and mental comfort level and safety.

A brief statement about flexibility, aging, and physical fitness as appendices to the curriculum would go a long way to raising a rider's awareness about their future in riding, a future in which their strength, range of motion, and balance can make the difference between comfort or discomfort.

For a while, I had to stop riding because of an old back injury. But five years ago I started yoga and that has

fixed my back. This may not work for everyone, but I heard the same story many times when talking with other people in yoga classes. As a result of my experience, I have now trained to teach yoga, and am a registered 200-hour teacher. Now I want to blend my two interests and pass it on to others.

Yoga for riders is one way to help deal with the damage of time. Yoga for riders will at the very least increase flexibility and range of motion in the neck and shoulders. It's not an exaggeration to say that an improvement in a rider's flexibility, with a better ability to look left and right, might actually save their life. "People don't stop driving because of bad eyesight, they stop because they can't turn their head to the side," a DMV employee recently said.

Motorcyclists typically are not doing yoga. They may hold stereotypes that yoga is easy, or for skinny men only. Some might think it's only a women's activity. But recently, professional football and basketball players are putting that stereotype to rest. Two MVPs in their respective leagues, Aaron Rodgers (NFL) and LeBron James (NBA) have talked specifically about yoga and its benefits. Yoga and its mental component is also making great inroads treating agitated jail or prison populations and in high schools and colleges.

Motorcyclists should be able to see through stereotypes, having been subjects of stereotypes about motorcyclists in the past. In many ways, yoga and motorcycling have been subject to a similar fate, and are often labeled which is an easy way to dismiss non-typical activities.

Many believe yoga is only for women, but from its origin, and up to 1937, yoga was practiced only by men and today in the U.S. about 20 percent of yoga participants are men. Motorcycling falls to similar sexist stereotypes and many people still believe motorcycling is only for men. The reality today is that nearly 25 percent of all riders are women. The culture is changing; stereotypes of motorcycling and yoga no longer apply.

Actually, yoga and motorcycling have similar requirements: both activities require a good level of mental and physical stamina; both are voluntary – that is – we do the

activities because we choose to; both can lead to a sense of relaxation, wellness, and freedom. Both can open doors to new experiences and new people.

Both require learning. It's not safe for any beginner to simply throw a leg up over a bike and drive away. A prepared rider, after taking a good rider safety course, is a better and safer rider. No beginner should do yoga without a teacher giving careful instructions to help avoid injury. Neither activity requires a religious affiliation, yet some stereotypes brand motorcyclists as part of political perspective or a gang, and yoga is wrongly branded as an outreach of Hinduism.

As we age and begin to consider our motorcycling days might be limited or even coming to an end, maybe it's time for all of us to jump on that bike and aim our independent spirit on a long ride to a yoga studio. Two good things can happen: First, if you go out of town you'll have a great excuse to take a ride and second, nobody will even know you tried yoga.

Start out easy with beginner classes. In time observe how you improve at doing what is asked. You may find increased range of motion in your neck or improved twisting from side to side. Perhaps the forward and backward bending in your class will begin strengthening your spine, and your back will begin to feel better. You might notice your balance improves and that you suddenly find you have a better ability to concentrate.

Notice how yoga's lessons on breathing and relaxation in the midst of stress become methods for dealing with problems. Breathing deeply is so important that it may be enough to shift perspective and bring calmness.

These simple lessons will lead to more comfort and safety on your bike. I must warn you though, yoga is not easy. But those of us who have spent their lives on the road know full well the toll that injury, illness and age can take and we've never been enamored of easy.

When I think of bikers, I don't think of a group of people looking for the easy way out but the way to make it work. Here's a tip, take a deep breath and ask yourself, when was the last time you were really happy with easy?

Common Benefits of Yoga & their Application to Motorcycling

Increased strength and muscle tone through weight bearing and balancing postures.

For large bikes and long tours, building strength for long days on the road.

Improved balance by practicing one-leg standing postures.

Better control in tight U turns and backing.

Increased mental focus and coordination, clarity of thought developed by balance and silence in yoga practice.

The difference between life and death on the bike is directly related to mental focus and clarity.

Improved sleep after a hard yoga practice.

*No dozing during the day.
Better sleep will lead to increased energy on the road.*

Improved posture. *Back pain can be a thing of the past.*

Boost immune system by massage of internal organs through poses of constriction and release.

Internal organs take a pounding on the bike, and yoga's corrective is the massage of internal organs by postures.

Improved flexibility by bending and stretching.

Pick up what you drop with no problem or pain.

Improved adaptability to stress by postures that place stress on the body and the teacher's admonitions to relax and breathe in the midst of stress.

Keep calm on the road – the first lesson we learn in Drivers Ed.

Gregory Ormson has moved to Arizona from Wisconsin. This fall, he will be offering yoga sessions for riders on the outdoor second-floor patio at Superstition Harley Davidson (date & times follow). Ormson is not promoting religion or philosophy, but a way of improving flexibility and balance so riders can keep doing what they do: RIDE ON!

Sept. 24 (Sun). 10:00a – 10:55am | Sept. 27 (Wed). 5:00p – 5:55pm
Sept. 30 (Sat). 10:00a – 10:55am

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