
Handling A Blowout (© *Motorcycle Consumer News, Letters To The Editor, February 2007*)

On Saturday, Sept. 2, we had a rear tire blowout on our Gold Wing while in Salt Lake City and crashed. I had what seemed like three to five seconds before we hit the edge of the road and flipped.

Both of us were rendered unconscious and airlifted to the LDS Trauma Center. I broke my nose, a couple of ribs and my right leg. Suzy had a broken right arm and was bruised from head to toe. We later found out that Suzy also broke her left shoulder blade.

Glad we had helmets-they were crunched, better than our heads! I have been riding for 48 years and never even had a flat!

My questions are as follows:

1. What actions should one take in the event of a rear tire blowout?
2. What actions should one take in the event of a front tire blowout?

I know not to brake suddenly and someone suggested pulling in the clutch. But I would really like to know what the "correct" procedure is.

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Bill,

Sorry to hear of your mishap. As you know, tire blowouts are not a common occurrence these days, but they do still happen. I'd like to first discuss why blowouts occur.

You don't mention whether your tires pressure was to spec before the blowout, but the majority of tire failures are the result of underinflation. This causes the tire to self destruct due to excessive buildup of heat, which can lead to air loss at the bead and delaminating of the carcass plies. Gold Wings and other big tourers with large saddlebags can make regular tire pressure checks inconvenient, but it's imperative that this task be performed religiously. Check your owner's manual for the proper tire pressure for the bike with and without a passenger. You don't mention how many miles or how worn your tire was, but excessive wear and aging rubber can also cause problems. Keep a close eye on your tires,

checking for foreign objects that can cause punctures and use your tire gage to monitor pressures. Be sure to replace aging and worn tires, especially before a big trip.

Even with meticulous maintenance, tire failures can occur. Most tire failures are of the slow-leak variety and give warning as air is lost. The motorcycle will wander or feel vague as though you were riding on soft sand. If this happens, pull over as quickly and smoothly as possible, coasting to a stop by squeezing in the clutch. You may be able to use minimal engine braking to slow. If you know which tire is the problem, you should be able to gently brake with the good wheel, avoiding brake pressure on the problem wheel.

If a catastrophic blowout occurs, such as the one you describe, you will need to rely on your ability to control the motorcycle as best you can. Not an easy task, as you know. It's a common mistake to look down and try to muscle the handlebars when in a panic situation. It's better to keep your eyes at the horizon to aid balance and to help steer the motorcycle straight as it fishtails beneath you. It's also best to let the motorcycle move from side to side without trying to force it to do otherwise. The hope is that you can keep the motorcycle on a desired path as long as possible and not amplify the instability by trying to force the bars straight. Eventually, you 'll come to a stop.

Rear tire blowouts are easier to control than front tire blowouts, because the majority of your control inputs occur with the front tire. Think about controlling a rear tire skid compared to a front tire skid. It's quite possible to keep a motorcycle upright until a complete stop with a rear tire skid, but in the event of a front tire skid you will fall, unless you release the brakes immediately. In the case of a front tire blowout, follow the advice above and hope for the best.

To recap: The way to avert a blowout-related crash is prevention, followed by quick response to early warnings, and finally by catastrophe management. May this be the last blowout you experience. And keep wearing your protective gear, just in case! Good luck.

-Ken Condon