

PRO RIDER

THE NEED FOR SPEED

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It's 32 years since Maverick uttered those immortal words in the movie Top Gun, "I feel the need, the need for SPEED!" But I bet most of us bikers can recall the phrase even if only from watching the umpteenth re-run on holiday TV! Maybe Maverick's familiarity with tearing around the skies in an F14 Tomcat also contributed to his irresponsibility in riding his Kawasaki GPZ900R to Kelly McGillis' house minus helmet or gloves and wearing jeans.

Anyhow, I digress. Though I reckon whatever bike we ride and the reason we used to convince ourselves of the need for it – commuting, having fun with mates, posing or whatever – the sensation of speed was, or quickly became, a motivating factor. With even an average LAMS bike having performance capabilities akin to a sporty 2.0L hatchback, there is no escaping the fact that we bikers can be a bit nippy out on the road and enjoy being so.

Slogans have reminded us of the potential impact (sorry) of speed. 'A speed limit is not a target. Drive to the conditions' and 'The faster the speed, the bigger the mess' being two memorable examples. Latest Ministry of Transport stats bear out these statements, showing a third of bikers in fatal crashes were simply going too fast for the conditions, with 23% losing it on bends, and amazingly, 11% going straight.

These articles have heaps of advice about how to spot hazards, negotiate corners and generally stay upright, but here I want to focus on how we decide what speed we actually ride when given the national speed limit as our option.

THE SIGNS

While there are exceptions with a 110km/h limit on the Tauranga Toll Road and parts of the Waikato Expressway, we can generally assume the top national speed limit for motorcycles is 100km/h. We are notified of this limit by two signs; a conventional red circle sign on white background with '100' on it, and for some (at least from my experience as a CBTA assessor), a less obvious white circle with a wide diagonal black stripe. These signs are officially designated as an RG-2 and an RG-2.1

respectively, just so you know.

The first country to set a speed limit was the UK, and over there the white circle black stripe still has different meanings given the type of road. Here in NZ though, the sign simply means the maximum limit of a 100km/h applies, no matter how many lanes there are. So, given that a great big 100 sign bounded by a red circle is so obvious, why do we bother with the white circle/black stripe option at all? My sense is the 100 red circle option is exactly that – obvious, while the other is intended to make us think rather more about the speed we need.

In general (there are exceptions), the red circle 100 sign is used on decent, reasonably well-engineered roads where bends and other hazards aren't so dramatic. The white circle/ stripe sign generally comes into play when a road is way more challenging – reflected in its common interpretation as referring to the 'open road speed limit'. Thinking about this, 'open road' should conjure up a different image from a nice smooth highway with sweeping curves – that is what this sign is all about.

When the authority responsible for setting the limit goes for the white circle/stripe option, our thoughts of an open road should turn to something stuffed full of potential hazards including tight bends, hidden dips, blind crests, hidden intersections, etc. Basically, the sign is up there because it would be too difficult and a bit of a pain to have classic red circle numbered speed signs posted every two minutes, with the limit going up and down to match the circumstances. In this case, we are trusted to determine how fast we should be going to remain safe given the potential for rapidly changing conditions. That trust extends to not blatting along at full tilt in any 100km zone if it isn't safe to do so, but the black striped circle is making this point quite specifically.

So, next time you come across a dear old RG 2.1 with its nice white circle and black diagonal, show the road the respect it deserves – 100km/h is your limit, but there will be sections of that road you would be crazy to ride at that speed unless you want to contribute to the next set of ACC fatality stats.

