

# SOFT HANDS



So I am motorcycling up into Pennsylvania to an orchard I know on a mission of acquisition—a goodly size stash of tree-ripened apples. It's a lengthy, straight-line run, roughly 180 miles port to port, but routine. I make the trek during harvest season taking advantage of this orchard's produce. Peters Orchard has won Best in Show at the Pennsylvania State Fair several times which tells me a lot of how well they grow things out of the ground.

Often when I am riding I plug into an iPod and today is no different. A song comes on that rips me up. The tune is "John's Other" by a group calling themselves Hot Tuna. Folks who came up in the late sixties/early seventies may remember Hot Tuna as a spin off from early Jefferson Airplane. Two of that band's early players, guitarist Jorma Kaukonen and bassist Jack Casady formed Hot Tuna when the Airplane flew off in a different direction. The Tuna is still hot, playing locally this past summer. Anyway the tune bowled me over for its' locked in, rhythmic groove, so precise is their musicianship.

"What's this got to do with soft hands, much less motorcycling?" You ask.

First, I say it takes soft hands to play music well. I say Jorma and Jack have got the touch (their decades of success prove it) as do other artists and craftspeople that have mastered their skill. The irony, of course, is that having soft hands has nothing to do with literally having soft hands. Often, it's quite the opposite, hard, sinewy hands honed by years of practice. Soft hands are the result of study and handling anything requiring manual dexterity. It results in a certain light touch. The touch allows you to communicate through whatever medium you're working with and it's not just with musicians either. Think of a sculptor with clay, or a painter with canvas. Think of Franco Harris' Immaculate Reception or a certain boxer who stung like a bee. Mastery is communicated in the finished result by someone with soft hands.

Riding a motorcycle well is no different. It takes soft hands. Nothing replaces the time and many miles it takes to develop soft motorcycling hands – brother, you've just got to ride! But let me suggest several ways to facilitate those hands.

It begins with a certain attitude. Conjure in your mind a "lightness of being" as you straddle your ride. It doesn't matter how much you literally weigh. Instead, make believe! Conceive it, believe it, and achieve it. I'm here to tell you it works. Pretend you're feather-light as you ride down the road. By believing this, you will guide your motorcycle more into doing your bidding rather than more forceful means of control. Instead of ever dumping the clutch, or cracking, twisting, or getting on the throttle, instead of (God forbid) "hammering" the brake, think in terms of pressuring these controls. Your motorcycle will respond immediately, almost willingly, when coaxed with subtle pressure inputs.

So as you make believe and conjure a feather-light touch, take a deep breath and relax. Sit on your bike. Rest your hands lightly on the handlebar rests. (Hand rests are not hand grips!) Develop good posture. (My grandmother

always said that good posture and good manners would get you through!) I suggest sitting slightly forward off your spine with slight tension in your stomach muscles, your thighs gripping the tank. As momentum and centrifugal force pushes you back and forth, and side to side, use those stomach and thigh muscles to maintain posture and ensure continuously that your arms are loose and your hands are light on the controls. Also, ride with the balls of your feet on the foot pegs. Often I see riders with their boot heels hung off the pegs with their feet pointing down at the pavement. To my eye this doesn't look put together. By riding with the balls of your feet back on the pegs, good things happen. Not only does it look better, you engage your legs resulting in better comfort and control. Your legs become real shock absorbers keeping you light in the saddle while soaking up road bumps as you motor along.

Maintaining this light touch isn't particularly easy, however. Tense riding circumstances often arise which cause you to clench the hand rests and, like clenching your teeth unawares, keep them clenched in the aftermath. This tension radiates from your hands through the rest of your body. Your forearms and elbows lock up. Your shoulder muscles get tight. Your neck hurts, your back hurts, your butt groans, and riding just isn't as much fun anymore.

It is no cinch to continuously stay feather-light and relaxed on the controls - discipline is the key. When there is cause to tense up, determine *right then* stay focused. Discipline yourself to maintain a state of continuously calm, lightness of being.

Over the course of a ride, I often shake out my wrists and elbows. As Reg Pridmore would say. "Stay loose as a goose." Flapping your wrists and elbows helps you stay this way as long as you ride.

I imagine Jorma and Jack use a guitar pick now and then. One tool I use to help me keep light and relaxed in my throttle hand and much less apt to clench is a Throttle Rocker. This less-than-ten dollar devise helps me open my right hand using only my palm pushing down on the throttle to accelerate. To back off, I simply lift up and the throttle spring rolls back the throttle automatically.

Like most kids, I wanted to play like recorded rock 'n rollers. I couldn't then, and I still can't now. I've resigned myself to listening on my iPod. Now, as an accompanist, seriously into make believe, my motorcycle morphs a Stratocaster, and when I'm really humming, feeling light, loose, and smooth on the controls, I too can rock on—locked in a rhythmic groove. With a little practice you'll be rocking along too.

See you in 3rd gear.