



My Motorcycle

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by Jeff Aldrich

One of the wonders of the mechanized world is that—given favorable circumstances—a motorcycle in motion can continue unperturbed for as long as the fuel holds out, gently weaving along in response to slight variations in the terrain. But perturbations in front wheel loading, road imperfections, and ill-considered rider input at the handlebars can overcome the inherent stability of the system and cause the front fork to oscillate—to the detriment of control. Head shake, speed wobble, whatever you want to call it: It's not good.

Adding a steering damper can help. A modern damper is a small shock absorber, a fork-mounted piston with metering orifices moving in a frame-mounted oil-filled tube. Properly designed, it offers little resistance to small, low-velocity movement but effectively damps rapid oscillations that can lead to excursions beyond the normal control envelope.

In the good old days, things were different. We had plain old friction dampers. These knobs of Bakelite, mounted on top of the fork stem, contrived to increase the preload on the front fork's upper steering head bearing. More drag could be useful, but low-speed maneuvering could be awkward at tighter settings. Worse, increased preload on the bearing had a real impact on its useful life.

My first 'real' bike was a 1965 Yamaha YDS-3. Having a two-stroke, 305cc engine was high technology for the day, but it was still burdened with a classic friction damper. Young and clueless, I had a great time with that damper, adjusting it frequently and with scant knowledge of possible unintended consequences. One fine afternoon on a country road, rounding a finely traced bend at a fine turn of speed, the handlebars suddenly began to shake violently from side to side, and down I went. My very first crash, and I had no idea of the cause.

With good gear I survived the incident nearly intact, but the bike was demolished. The mechanic's post mortem revealed the root cause of the steering wobble that was my downfall: The upper bearing races were worn like old shoes and simply broke apart, spilling the balls onto the road.

But it was a lesson learned in vain. With advances in technology, not a single bike I've owned in the 40 years since then has had need of a steering damper of any sort. Stability is better achieved through good basic design than by means of band-aids in the hands of clueless kids. 🖐️