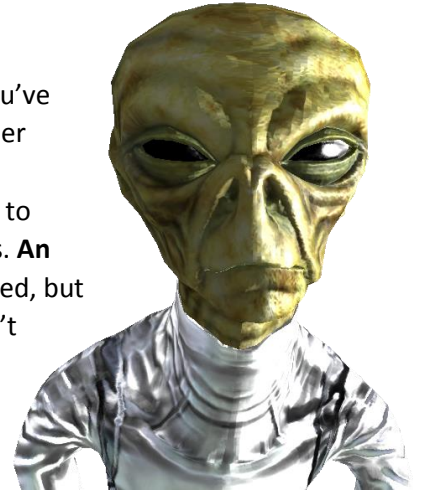




Riding with the Aliens

After they've spent a few weekends at a given racetrack, there is a recurring phenomenon that many students describe to me. It goes something like this: You've become comfortable with the line and can ride around confidently with most other riders. You start to feel like you are riding well, and get the sense that you are approaching your comfort limit in a few areas. There is a consistency that begins to show in your riding. Then, just when you start to feel really confident, it happens. **An alien is sighted.** When you were first learning the track you expected to get passed, but now that you know your way around an alien sighting can be surprising. It doesn't matter what corner you find yourself in, they always seem to fly by effortlessly. The force of the wind as they pass will sometimes move your bike what feels like a couple feet, and by the time you gather yourself back together they are disappearing from view. No one knows when they will strike again.



I have to admit that when I first turned expert I experienced this phenomenon myself. Then, just when I thought I was something special I started racing at the AMA professional level and got another dose of the alien flu. It's that sickness that comes when you have no idea how to accomplish what you just witnessed, and it has kept many a rider awake at night. I think that perhaps with the exception of the very best riders in the world, we all get a dose of alien fever from time to time. What I found over the years is that in order to be cured, you need to have a plan. This month we will look at an area of the track that many riders can successfully begin their quest to join the alien race.

If we want to ride like an alien, the first thing we must do is to identify what they do differently. Most riders are held back by either fear, technique, or a combination of both. Aliens possess both the knowledge of how to extract the most out of their machines and the confidence to walk the line of traction whenever it is needed. Knowledge alone will not produce optimum speed, as speed requires action as well. Bravery without proper technique often results in flying lessons – and not the kind of flying real aliens do. When we start to look for an area where we can approach the limit, it makes sense to start where the techniques are easy to understand and the window for recovery is the largest.

The most common (but not always the most effective) places to gain time for most riders are in segments of heavy braking or acceleration. The downside of trying to first replicate an alien here is that there are multiple actions happening at once, and there is often not much of an opportunity to recover from a mistake. We want our initial foray into the alien realm to be where things are simple and safe.



As an exercise, do a couple laps in your head at your favorite track. Look for one or two areas where you spend a while on the edge of the tire. These are likely either fast corners or long corners, and likely have long spells where you are either lightly trailing the brakes or slowly rolling the throttle. We are looking for an area where roll speed is the primary focus and this is where we will start!

There are two reasons to use segments like this to start your quest to admission to the alien race. First, in corners where there is minimal throttle or braking your focus from a technique standpoint is simple. In these areas our main focus is to allow the tires to allocate as much of their grip as

possible to cornering forces. This involves two basic concepts. The first focus is to release all bar input except for the very light “guidance” needed to keep the bike on line. Since every ounce of pressure in the bars takes away available grip, riders need only to maintain just enough pressure at the grips to maintain their present arc. At Penguin we call this “thumb and forefinger” effort. Riders should next work to shift their weight (both hips and shoulders) well to the inside of the motorcycle. This is to take load off the tires and reduce overall risk. The more you get off the better, but riders must balance helping the bike to turn with the ability to ensure that their arms never reach the end of their “travel” (even during a headshake).

Since in most long corners, riders generally don’t use all the racetrack – especially through the middle of the corner – there is a unique opportunity for experimenting with the limit. When the outer half of the track is unused, it becomes a “punishment free” mistake zone. Of course, riders can always fall down if they really put in the effort (anyone come to mind?), but in areas like this there is no good reason to do so. Riders can experiment with incrementally greater mid corner speeds by steadily reducing brake force over a sequence of laps. As soon as the bars begin to feel heavy, all that is needed to stay upright is the release of bar input. Riders simply let the bike drift wide and allow it to scrub off the speed it needs in order to turn again. It only takes a reduction of couple MPH (which happens very quickly) to allow the bike to carve back towards the inside.

The beauty of this simple method is that the pre-determined “mistake” for stepping over the limit only involves getting a few bike lengths wider mid corner. Since the only prerequisite to carry max speed in these corners is good position, riders can easily focus on creating the feedback they are seeking for. The absence of heavy braking or acceleration makes it easy to carry optimum speed and even makes perfect suspension less important. With smooth inputs, the bike is not moving through the stroke and suspension becomes less of a factor. There is nothing preventing you from riding with the aliens

Everything at this point comes down to the grip of the tires. If you have the same tires as the aliens (there is no special alien store – these things are simply available for purchase) then chances are you have what it takes to carry speed in a long corner. It just takes the confidence to relax on the bars and let the bike lean. If you are going too slow, the bike will lean more and carve right to the inside of the corner (often too tight, too early). Remember, as you approach the limit, the bike begins to resist carving tighter and all you need to do relax your inputs.

Once you master this skill in these long corners, the aliens stay close enough for observation that riders can learn from them for a few turns at a time. The next step is to apply this technique elsewhere around the track. Most corners have at least a short segment where we carve on the edge of the tire. Raising mid corner speed is the basis for all alien life. Higher mid corner roll speed helps both braking zones (since you need to slow down less for every corner) and drive zones (since the faster you go, the harder it is to spin the tire). Before you know it, little green antennas begin to sprout from the top of your head.

Until next time – ride fast, ride safe!

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