



OUT OF THE SADDLE

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Help! I Can't Reach the Ground!

I learned to ride on a 2006 F 650 GS Dakar, a bike that felt much too tall for a beginner with a 28" inseam. Why did I agree to this mismatch? I didn't have a bike of my own yet, the Dakar was my brother's, and since no one else was willing to sacrifice their trusty machine to a beginner, it was the too-tall Dakar or nothing at all.

As I scrambled up for the first time and let my legs swing free of the ground below, I (naturally) complained about my lack of contact with Mother Earth. My brother JJ put his hands on his hips and scowled, "If you learn to ride with both feet on the ground, you'll be a shitty rider."

Who was I to argue? I'd gone through forty-some years as a short person and had gotten used to making accommodations for myself in an outsized world.

Then he got a funny smirk on his face and said, "Now, let's see you get it off the side stand."

Long-legged readers might be surprised to learn that getting the side stand up with a set of short legs required acrobatics that I've never mastered, even to this day. I challenge any seasoned rider to be comfortable shifting their weight and the weight of the bike to the right, while simultaneously swinging their left foot down for the elusive stand. Miss it and start all over again. And again.

Yes, of course I've seen the circus-ride mount, but that is certainly not a beginner skill either.

JJ eventually kicked the stand out of the way so I could start my lessons on his 5-acre grassy yard. He guided me through some basic drills over the next couple of days before he eventually decided I was ready for the open road, where a whole new set of variables confronted me. First, I had to choose which foot to put down at stops. That's pretty straightforward in your brother's backyard with no traffic and a soft place to land, but on city streets? Whoa!

Choosing the proper foot to land with required me to read the camber and surface stability of the road at a time when I had not yet mastered which gear I was in or if I'd turned the blinker off. One time, while waiting for a long sequence of lights at a complicated intersection, I inched my landing foot all the way flat on the ground by leaning the bike into my thigh and letting the other leg swing free of the peg. What a mistake. To get started again, I had to throttle up before getting my fanny back in the center of the seat, giving me deep respect for those trick horseback riders in the cowboy and Indian TV shows of my childhood.

What I didn't know in 2010 was that my brother could have adjusted the suspension to accommodate me by (maybe?) half an inch, but he was determined to make me a one-footed rider. Months later, when I called him out on it, he only grinned and laughed. "Be angry if you want, but you know I was right!"

I admitted it, begrudgingly. My tough-guy brother could have shown some decency(!) by adjusting the Dakar's suspension — even a smidgeon would have de-escalated my apprehension. But truth be told, there was nothing he could have done to get both of my feet flat on that bike.

Beyond the Honda Rebel

Why do I tell you this sibling story? Because I've seen dozens of posts in Facebook groups asking for advice on low bikes/starter bikes. Most will get hundreds of

responses, and some will get thousands. If you're struggling to get engagement on your page, this topic is low-lying fruit, especially if your target audience is women riders.

Most of the advice offered centers on getting comfortable with the complexities of shifting, throttling, weight distribution, and defensive driving on a short bike that allows maximum contact between feet and the tarmac. Think of this as the Honda Rebel approach to riding. It's valid.

My personal experience tells me that learning to ride with minimal ground contact makes you a better rider — you don't have to unlearn bad habits if you learn to stop with one foot on the peg or back brake. It's also easier to learn how to throttle up without stalling out when you're stopped at a steep incline if you accustom your feet to this arrangement.

Something no one mentions about being a short rider has nothing to do with riding at all: parking. Shorties, get it out of your head that you'll glide into and out of parking spots like those riders with Barbie Doll legs! Hold your head high as you get off and get the job done. Once you learn how to use your hip to steady the bike, or your buttocks against the pannier to back it up, you'll be just as efficient as those who use their feet while still in the saddle.

"It's not about how tall you are, but how well you ride."

- Joanne Donn of GearChic.com (28.5" inseam)

No, BMWs are NOT too Tall for Short-Inseam Beginners

Another reason I shared my Dakar story is to rebut claims by the inseam-challenged that the size of an adventure bike is intimidating. To them I say, take a test ride before you dismiss a GS! I spent two weeks on an R 1200 GS with a lowered suspension while touring the Pacific Northwest and could only get my left and right tiptoes to touch simultaneously. More often than not, I just opted to get the ball of one foot down and

let the other rest on the peg. I don't know what kind of magic the engineers in Germany have employed, but the GS never felt top heavy. I never feared toppling over, and I never dropped it.

When I ride rental BMWs in Europe (where lowered frames are not to be found), I have to ride a standard size bike. Only once have I required someone to steady the bike for me while I got it off the side stand after parking-off-camber.

The key to riding a tall bike is knowing how to ride well: mastering the friction zone, distributing your weight in various settings, and braking. These skills (and many more) can be learned on a school bike at the BMW U.S. Riders Academy in Greer, South Carolina, where I trained after my brother's sessions, and where I continue taking courses.

I've schooled on the Academy's fleet of 650, 750, and 1250 GS bikes over the years and dropped my share of them. After all, if you don't push the envelope, you will not improve your skills. It's empowering to ride a little more aggressively on a school bike than you would with your own, knowing that another bike awaits you in the fleet if you've damaged the one you're assigned to. You'll never get a bill for the repairs.

So how about it, readers? What tips and tricks do you have for riding taller bikes? Let's have a robust discussion in the Letters column in 2022.



Left: Beside the R 1200 GS lowered frame that I rode in the Pacific Northwest. I got both toes down and was overjoyed at being able to ride the big bike because it's so comfortable and capable.



Above: F 900 R with a lowered frame. My "Goldilocks" solution when choosing a touring bike—both toes down. Higher and I wouldn't be able to get both toes down. Lower and I might worry about ground clearance.



Left: This F 900 XR is of similar height to the Dakar I learned on. While acceptable for a light dirt bike, I considers it outside my comfort range for road touring.