

INTO THE RIDE #42

Body English and Recumbent Bikes

by Randy Schlitter

To a degree, riding a recumbent has been accepted as passive, in terms of using body English. However, in my experience, depending on the bikes configuration, there is substantial “Englishing” to be done. For example, one of my favorite moves is to shift my weight over the top of the bike in a hard corner. This means you are leaning the opposite way of the turn, but by not leaning into the turn you apply more weight directly over the wheels. This increases traction, and thus the speed, or the rate, the turn can be accomplished. This high-side move works on any type of two-wheeled recumbent, short, long, high or low. I stress two wheels because this is not a move beneficial or natural on a trike.

Body English is something many miss when transitioning to recumbents from uprights, and respectfully so. Being able to shift body weight while riding can be a great safety feature. In trail riding, shifting body weight fore and aft can mean the difference of staying up or taking a nasty tumble after missing a hairpin turn. Even though recumbents are amazing in terms of how well they handle without body English, learning some basic moves can add to the fun and safety of bent riding.

I already touched on the high-side move, but let us take a closer look at how this simple shifting of the upper torso will enhance handling. Cornering is the big reason for shifting weight. If the bike is to stay in the turn it needs traction. Things like rain, sand, mud, leaves, and millions of marbles spilled on the road affect traction. A shift to the high-side and leaning forward will increase the traction on the wheels for the simple reason you are keeping the weight over the bike. Leaning forward will increase front wheel traction and reduce the momentum of directional stability. This is where the CG point is between the wheels. The more aft, the more tendencies for a bike to track in a straight line when cornering.

What I am suggesting here is to practice this enough to get fluid at these two basic moves (you may not be able to lean forward, handlebars or laid back seats may inhibit such moves). If you can, practice in an open parking lot. You will discover you can lay a bike over to an amazing angle, even at really slow speeds. I practiced this one day until I could lay a Stratus over to 45 degrees and turn inside of one lane width. Don't expect to barrel into a turn at top speed and stay stuck. The laws of physics still apply!

In some cases, bents will out corner a DF quite nicely. This is when you have somewhat of a banked road; dry hard surface and you pedal like hell because you can! Ground to pedal clearance on some bents is 30”; no amount of banking will cause any pedal tap. The Stratus, one of our lowest BB bikes has more crank clearance over a DF, and is great fun to keep the power on while cornering. Learning how to sling shot a corner with a pack of DF riders is great fun. But again that is in ideal conditions. When the road gets wet or loose the DF's, with ample body English being applied, are hard to beat.

Perhaps the place the lack of body English affects most bent riders is the ability to recover and avoid a crash. Once any biker has lost control, recovery is up to the rider's skill. The DF is more likely to recover with the greater use of body English. One interesting note: Over the years I have crashed more often on a DF, and very rarely on a bent. There are so many factors adding up to crashes, but for me the number one reason is too much speed at the wrong time and place. Judging road conditions and reacting in time will save your skin on any bike, but the combination of being able to brake without doing a header, different view point, and lower CG could add to why my crashes on bents have been rare.

Ride comfort functions of body English are diminished on bents, again due to the seated position, like bunny hops for example. A bunny hop is useful on a DF when suddenly confronted with a road problem, like a pothole, or speed bump. On a recumbent, our only defense is to slide forward on the seat edge, using it as a sort of shock absorbing leaf spring, or simply try to hop your butt out of the seat.

Being able to unload the bike instantly of the rider's weight, or even lift it off the pavement does help save wheels from such sharp loading. The lack of English on bents has lead many to build bikes with tougher wheels, such as the 650 and 26" variety. Larger tire sections, less PSI, thick seat cushions, and finally suspension, are all ways to sort out the lack of being able to English the ride.

Ride performance is also enhanced with upper body exertion and movement, like sprinting on a DF when an all out effort is made to force the bike forward. A DF rider uses the bar to leverage his body against the pedals. Most bents do not have bars made for this sort of handling, including our models. The handlebar system was never intended for much more than steering. Still there are times when pulling on the bars has helped. The reason this works is it brings the body core muscles into play, firming up power transfer. The stress on the riser and bars is substantial, and officially not recommended, but I know many get away with it. The stiff bar set up on an F-5 tempts the rider to pull and dig in, and it does work, but again, it was not intended and could cause the riser to snap someday. Climbing or sprinting just begs for some sort of extra English, but a good technique is to actually relax the upper torso allowing more oxygen for the leg muscles.

Recumbents will always have their special ways to be ridden, and each configuration will have a unique mix. Learning what works best on your bike by experimenting with whatever English you can apply will enhance the ride. Until next time ride safe and stay into the ride!

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