

Motorcycles and Marathons

By Susan Dragoo

Now I see the problem.

It might have occurred to me while I was buried in the sand under my motorcycle, the engine still running, my bootlaces tangled with the clutch lever, ribs smarting from a close encounter with the handlebar. But I was too busy trying to catch my breath.

Bill laid down his Kawasaki KLX 250 and ran back to me. He got the shoelace untangled and the bike off me and stood it up, managing to find a spot of sand sufficiently hard-packed to support the kick stand.

"Where does it hurt?" he asked. I couldn't answer, still curled up on the ground, waiting for the pain to subside and trying to draw some air into my lungs.

"Where does it hurt?" he repeated.

"My ribs," I managed.

At first, I was afraid I had really hurt myself. But very quickly I was able to get to my feet. With Bill's help I brushed off the sand, relieved to find that I was still in one piece and mobile.

That mobile part was a big deal, given that we were miles from nowhere, literally in the middle of the South Canadian River, on dual-sport motorcycles. Assuming we did have to call 911, where would we tell them to pick us up? We had thus far ridden about 15 miles southeast from Norman, Oklahoma towards Purcell in the sandy tributary.

The South Canadian, in its meander to the Arkansas River, cuts through remote areas of Oklahoma where access is limited and the population is sparse. We were still fairly close to a population center, but the term "wilderness experience" would not be a misnomer for today's journey. I was glad to know I would be able to get back on my Yamaha XT 225 and ride out, but still not cognizant of the potential conflict I was living in that moment.

It might have occurred to me when I looked down and saw blood soaking my jeans at the right knee. But I was more intent on finding out the nature of that injury, and whether it was worrisome. Bill was most interested in taking a look at the gore, and getting a close-up photo with the macro lens of his new camera! Another battle scar to brag about, but nothing serious. A hard blow to my knee had caused a bloody gash but it would heal just fine. In the grand scheme of things, it was nothing.

We straightened up the bent parts of my bike . . . turn signal, mirror, clutch lever, hand guard . . .

and moved along. My mind was on successfully completing this ride without further injury. The spill I took was the result of a miscalculation while riding over a steep pile of sand. Elevation . . . maybe 24 inches? I had watched Bill go over it and thought, "I can do that." It looked for all practical purposes like the "whoop-de-doo's" on the hard-packed dirt bike trails we had ridden. But hard-packed it wasn't and I was not prepared for the lack of a landing surface on the other side. I went up one side with confidence, then just crumpled. I was wearing a helmet as always, but no protective gear otherwise. Bill said the soft sand on the other side caused the problem. What I noticed when I looked back on the spot was. . . I could have gone around!

This early October day had started out cool, calm and sunny, and although it had warmed up into the 80's, we couldn't have picked a nicer time to be out riding the river. The water was low . . . barely a trickle in most places. The vegetation was lush. Tall grasses on the river bank waved in the slight breeze, their towering tassles evidence that it was late in the growing season. The sand willows were just starting to show a tinge of yellow.

I had run six miles that morning, capping off my first official week of training for the Austin Marathon, the next February. This was a 20-mile week for me. Having run four miles the night before meant I had clocked a total of 10 miles in the past 24 hours. Although I was still energized at the start of our river trek, clearly I didn't start out with maximum vigor.

Actually, I didn't start with the best attitude either. Riding on the river was new to me and I was hesitant. I didn't know what riding in sand would be like, and the first wash of soft sand we encountered conquered me quickly, even before we got to the river itself. I was down in a heartbeat. Of course, I wasn't hurt and neither was the bike, but I couldn't imagine struggling through this stuff for miles. I had the option of going home, but Bill offered to examine the riding surface farther out into the river. It was mostly mud flats and wet sand, and I agreed to give it another try.

As we rode on, Bill coached me on making water crossings. In spite of how low the water is in most places, there are spots where the current has cut deeply into the sandy banks . . . these would quickly swallow a motorcycle and must be avoided. We looked for ripples on the water's surface . . . indicative of shallows . . . and areas where we

could easily see the bottom, avoiding pools of dark water.

I soon got the hang of this and Bill suggested I slow down in my crossings, as I was getting wet from the splashing water, and no doubt scaring the mud turtles. Soon I got into the groove of the ride, but continued to find an unwelcome challenge in stretches of dry soft sand. Bill coached me on the technique for negotiating this so-called "surface" ("go faster") and I was moderately successfully but soon tired and had difficulty handling the bike in this treacherous stuff. No, it's not as bad as quicksand (of which there is quite a lot), and actually I'm sure I can get the hang of riding on it eventually, but so far it's my least favorite thing.

I should point out that my husband, Bill, is an expert rider, having ridden motocross from the age of 14. He grew up riding this very river for fun. I could have no better teacher. I dabbled in motorcycles as a teenager and have been riding as an adult for about two years, but just got this Yamaha a few weeks ago. I wanted a smaller bike, one that I could feel in control of, versus the 600-pound Harley I had been riding. I knew too that riding a dirt bike would help improve my skill and confidence.

After we bought these two motorcycles a few weeks ago, I thought I got a strange reaction when I mentioned to Bill that this would be a good time for me to start training for a marathon. He seemed concerned about doing both. I thought the issue was not having enough time for both activities.

It's clear to me now that I wasn't thinking deeply enough into the subject.

I had to negotiate quite a lot more soft sand before we reached the "get-off" at Purcell but arrived safely. We were ravenous and stopped at a local favorite, "Ruby's," for something to eat. Even the thin, fried rib-eye steak was ambrosia after the work-out we'd had on the river. When we got up from the booth to leave, my leg was stiff and sore. Getting back on the bike was a chore.

It should have struck me then.

Later, exhausted, we were lying in bed watching . . . big surprise . . . a motorcycle movie ("Dust to Glory," an excellent documentary about the Baja 1000) and sipping a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon. Bill had bandaged my knee, which was bleeding quite a bit. I was trying to avoid bending it . . . the gash might have benefited from a stitch, but I was hoping to take care of it with a tight bandage.

That was when it finally hit me.

I couldn't run.

With a swollen, bandaged knee my marathon training was derailed.

Aha! That explains Bill's dubious reaction to my marathon timing. Successful marathon training assumes you aren't out beating yourself up on a dirt bike every weekend. The two activities are, on their face, mutually exclusive! I should have known.

To feel better, I reconciled myself to training for a different marathon, six weeks later. Still, I was missing the point, if you take the position that the two things can't be done concurrently.

Perhaps I needed to make a choice, rather than extending my training on the assumption I would experience no more bumps and bruises. Was I going to seriously train for a marathon, or was I going to be a trail rider? How would I deal with these two conflicting interests?

Fortunately, I got a reprieve. The next morning, I felt rested and, to my surprise, had very little soreness. I was able to walk without a limp and my confidence was renewed. Yes, I could run again in a day or two. I could keep my date with the Austin Marathon and would do just fine. So many adventures, so little time . . . I don't intend to miss them.

But one thing I do intend to do . . . get knee pads!

Author's Note: I did indeed purchase knee pads as well as a riding jacket with shoulder and elbow protection. I rode through the winter as weather allowed and trained successfully for the February 18, 2007 running of the Austin Marathon. I finished my very first marathon in 4:50:14 with energy to spare.