SPECIAL REPORT

SAME ROAD, SAME RIDER. SO WHICH ONE’S SAFEST?
Psychological studies say it’s the rider on the right. We find out why.

49mph
Bored
Distracted
Inattentive
Legal

71mph
Focused
Stimulated
Alert
Illegal
Why faster is safer
Mr slow and steady doesn’t always win the race. In fact, he’s more likely to pay so little attention to the race that he makes a foolish mistake and crashes. By applying proven psychological rules to riding, Bike has been able to show that going at a pace that keeps you stimulated makes the ride safer – as well as making it more enjoyable.

Air force pilots, astronauts and motorcycle racers often talk about ‘the zone’. It’s a kind of hyper-awareness, a state of mind in which even the most demanding of tasks – ground-hugging flight, landing the shuttle or putting in a qualifying lap at Suzuka – seem almost easy.

But the zone is not some hippy twaddle. It is a facet of the well-documented link between arousal – the level of stimuli a person is faced with (and nothing to do with Hollyoaks) – and task performance – that person’s ability to do something effectively.

As arousal increases with the demands of the task, so does performance. You’re in the zone, working at your very best. Of course, if arousal is increased beyond this point then negatives like stress, fear and excessive risk are introduced and performance begins to tail off. As stress and stimuli continue to build, performance continues to suffer – you can’t deal with the overload and errors of judgement become more likely.

This relationship between stimulation and performance is well-established psychological law, but its relation to the road and speed limits is only just being understood. On the road, sources of stimulation include poor weather, demanding roads and the crap driving of dozy Audi-jockeys. They also include speed, which we have control over.

Ride slowly and boredom, disinterest and inattention can all inhibit performance. Ride too quickly and the stress and over-excitement adversely affect the ability to think clearly and make sound decisions.

In theory, there is an ideal speed for every circumstance. You can feel it every time you ride; a speed you reach without thinking that just feels right. Push it, perhaps to keep up with a deathwish mate, and you’ll begin to feel uncomfortable. Because every rider is different, with their own unique level of ability and experience, this theoretical safe speed is different for everyone.

The problem
This natural speed-setting ability is how experienced riders and drivers remain safe. The problem is that this is incompatible with the government’s focus on camera-based speed enforcement rather than on driving standards.

The speed limits take the speed-setting responsibility away from the driver or rider and many road safety experts are now saying drivers are conditioned to believe that they are safe and invulnerable within the limit. As a consequence concentration levels drop through the floor.

Speed limits are, of course, necessary. They provide excellent information to drivers about likely hazards and help less-experienced road users establish a safe speed. But since they’re fixed, regardless of the road user and variable conditions like weather, speed limits can’t hope to be the best speed to drive at.

As conditions vary, so too will the optimum speed for maintaining the arousal needed for peak performance. While the speed limits imply that 61mph on a national speed limit road is dangerous and foolhardy, reasonable and experienced riders know this is nonsense. In many instances higher speeds may be appropriate, while 30mph in many residential areas can be dangerously fast.

Bored people crashing
While it could be argued that bored people crashing slowly is preferable to fewer but faster accidents, the figures don’t back this up. In 1995 Suffolk County Council reduced 450 of its speed limits. Many that had been 60mph were dropped to 30mph. The result was confusion among road users and carnage. Fatalities in the area had been declining by an average of more than six a year. When the new limits were introduced they leapt from 35 to 59 in 1996, an increase of 69 per cent.

The correlation was clear to many, not least the coroner Bill Walrond. In 1996 he gave his verdict on a fatal accident in Suffolk. “I’ve had reported to me three fatal accidents on this road and these three fatal accidents follow very shortly after certain speed limits have been imposed,” he said. “I think there is a very high probability indeed that this tragic fatality has the speed limits as a contributory cause.”

Walrond went on to point out the dangers of needlessly low limits. “Unnecessary speed limits lead drivers to think that they are imposed arbitrarily and therefore make drivers less likely to observe speed limits,” he said. “If 80 per cent of drivers ignore a speed limit, there might be something wrong with that speed limit itself.”