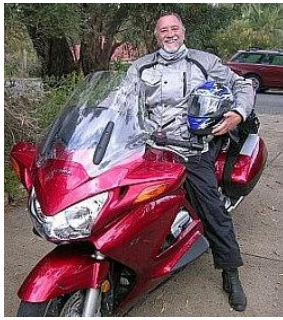


Downsizing – Sometimes It Works, Sometimes It Doesn't



“The bike is getting too heavy for me now.” That’s what we say. We don’t say, *“I’m getting too weak for the bike now.”* But, of course, that’s what it is. Our ageing arms and legs aren’t as strong as they used to be. Add in other conditions of deterioration (such as bad back, crook knees, wonky hips or whatever) and our ability to man-handle a few hundred kilos of motorcycle can be increasingly left wanting. We’re okay when everything is upright and going straight, but when it comes to low-speed manouvres, that’s when it can give trouble. So there is, for many of us, good reason to downsize to something smaller and lighter.

We may have good reason to downsize, but doing it can be a mixed-bag: sometimes it works out just as we imagined and needed; but at other times it doesn’t work out so well.

It’s worth remembering that most of us have gone the other way – started out on something small, and upsized to a bigger bike. Obviously those bigger bikes had advantages we wanted to have by upsizing. When we downsize it can be, to some extent, almost a retrograde step – giving up some of those big-bike advantages that drew us to the larger machines in the first place. The one point in our favour, perhaps, is that bikes have changed over the years; and those smaller bikes will be more sophisticated, (and have more power) than the small bikes we started out on all those years ago. So, as I said, it can work out well; but it can also be a compromise that disappoints.

At this point I should mention that I have written on this subject before; and offered some suggestions on how to successfully make the switch to a smaller bike. Click [here](#) to go to the article. (Bear in mind that I wrote that in 2013, so some aspects will be out-of-date; but the principles will still apply). (I should also mention that the photo at the top / left here is one from that article; but ironically, it is not of someone who downsized, but upsized! Peter was on a trip around Australia on his Yamaha XJR1300, loaded up with gear, when a section of rear frame cracked. He subsequently traded up to a bigger bike. I just used the photo as an illustration of a big bike).

To illustrate, I’ll relate some stories of how it worked out in real life. It’s interesting to see the different experiences.



Okay, we’ll start with a story most of you will know: my experience with downsizing from my **Yamaha XJR1300** to a **Yamaha Tracer MT-07**. Brand-loyalty was a big factor in my choice. A wiser man would suggest you buy the bike that best suits you, regardless of the badge it wears. Anyway, as you will recall, I’d taken one for a test-ride and been quite pleased with it. The seat was awful, but that could be fixed. Power was a serious consideration, being a big step down

from the torquey muscle-bike I'd owned for the previous 11 years. Made especially so as what I was getting was a nobbled LAMS bike. But it was okay: I figured I could live with the performance it had. I also thought it was pretty comfortable – hard seat aside. But having bought the bike, I was disappointed. Not with power, but with comfort. The optional “Comfort seat” was a waste of money, and the ride was just too harsh, too uncomfortable. It mystified me as to why it was, when it had seemed okay on test. Attempts to overcome the problem by fitting an AirHawk, and varying thicknesses of foam under a sheepskin pad, didn't work either. I seriously considered selling it. And I was wishing I'd kept the XJR and just managed the weight.

Long story short, as you will recall, the answer came in replacing the too-firm rear suspension unit with an after-market unit that was sprung to suit my weight, and had damping adjustment as well as the usual preload; and having a custom seat made. The bike was transformed! So the message here is that **sometimes the bike as it comes off the showroom floor might need some work to get it to what you want your downsized bike to be.**



Sometimes, especially if you research extensively and / or have a pre-knowledge of the bike you choose, it can work out well. Terry had owned a variety of different makes, including a Triumph Sprint ST, and a **Yamaha XJR1300**. His son bought a **BMW F800 R**, which Terry had the chance to ride. He was impressed! So much so that he traded the big Yamaha on a BMW the same as his son's. Yes, a very different bike to the XJR, with some quirks that I know have taken other owners a bit of getting used to. For example, the flywheel is very light on these bikes, so the engine has little momentum at low revs; making it easy to stall until you get used to it. But Terry has enjoyed this bike immensely and been on some long trips on it. So a real success story; and proof that **downsizing can work out well!**

Rod, like me, had a certain amount of brand-loyalty when it came to downsize from his **Yamaha FJR1300**. Hardly surprising, as he'd owned the bike for about 15 years and it had been a great bike, and also been superbly reliable. It was a beautiful bike to ride – supremely comfortable, big-bore effortless power, and an ease of handling that belied its considerable weight. But weight, at low speed and maneuvering around the shed, was getting to be an issue. He traded it on a new **Yamaha MT-09**.



Yes, again, a very different bike! But he is a very adaptable rider. He had ridden a wide variety of bikes – including touring India on an old Royal Enfield! – so he reckoned he could adapt. But some of the differences were quite profound. I remember going for a ride with him soon after he got it. When we pulled in at our lunch stop, I asked him how he was liking it; after his FJR. “Like chalk and cheese!” came his reply. There was no doubt which one he was referring to as the chalk! Comfort was a big issue, and, typical of later-model Yamaha, the seat was one of the main causes of discomfort. It had to go. After some consideration, he bought the Yamaha “Comfort” seat. It was certainly better, but not that much. He has persevered with it, recognising the advantages the bike has in being easier to push around the garage, or park on uneven ground etc. But he still misses the comfort and smooth power of the big FJR tourer.

Phil is someone I have mentioned a few times; especially on the Facebook page, with links to a regular motorcycling blog he writes. He has been a long-time fan of the **Honda VFR800**: he's owned about 3 of them, and I think one VFR750. As is often the

case, the realisation of weight versus age came when he dropped it. He stopped at some traffic lights, put the left foot down only to find the road further away than he thought (it sloped away). As he said, once it starts to go, it is hard to stop – especially with the angled-down sports-style handlebars. So it went down. (*I did exactly the same thing on my XJR once, fairly early in my ownership!*). Coincidentally, his brother had decided to



downsize from the same bike, and had bought a Honda CB600 Hornet. So Phil looked around and did the same – bought a **Honda CB600 Hornet**.

This happened just as our period of COVID-lockdown began. Phil decided that being in lockdown wasn't a good time to try to sell a bike, so he kept the VFR until it was a better time to sell. This provided him with a unique opportunity to compare the before and after of the downsizing exercise – something that most of us aren't able to do. It resulted in him developing a bit of a love-hate relationship with the new bike. Not long after he bought it, he responded to my question of how he liked it by saying it totally lacked character, and "It's like riding a sewing-machine." He actually put it up for sale; but then reconsidered and decided not to sell. Not yet anyway. Then he took it on a big run – a 500+ km ride. That should have sorted out the dilemma! I'll let him tell the story of how that went, with this quote from his blog. (Click [here](#) to go to his Blog).

"I took the Hornet yesterday. I've never done a long distance run on it at all so I was anxious to see what it would be like. The ride has actually asked more questions than it answered, however. The bike is fast enough, very nimble in the corners and slightly more comfortable than the VFR (more upright ergonomics). However, it is "buzzy" (5500RPM at 100km/h; hardly relaxing) and the gearbox is not as smooth as the VFR. In an ideal world, I'd keep them both, but the cost of maintenance, servicing of two bikes etc is still a factor so a bit more thought is still required." Then a bit after that a decision was made. Again, I'll let Phil take up the story.

"For the last few weeks I have only been riding the Hornet. I wanted to give it the best chance to convince me that it is a better bike for me than the VFR. Today I took the VFR to the shop to get the Pink Slip so that I could get it registered again and the short ride to Albion Park and back was all that was needed to convince me that the VFR has to stay. I know that it is heavier than the Hornet, I know that it's got 3 times the mileage than the Hornet has and I know that the Hornet is newer and has more farkles. The problem is that the Hornet just doesn't have any character. Yes, it's smooth, it's easier to muscle around and it will probably last a lot longer. But the VFR is smooth, it's refined, it feels like a luxury bike, where the Hornet feels like what it is; a budget bike. The VFR is doing 4000 RPM at 100 km/h, the Hornet is doing nearly 6000 RPM. Both have a six speed gearbox but the Hornet takes you into 6th gear while you are still tootling around town. At 110km/h, the expressway speed limit, it is doing nearly 6500 rpm and it **feels** like it. Yes, I know, the motor is designed to do that, but it just doesn't feel like it is doing it *easily*, and a bike that is going to be used for quite a bit of touring should do that."

His story raises a constant criticism I've made of mid-size 4-cylinder bikes I've tested – the gearing is too low! To me, 6,000 rpm at 100 km/h is ridiculous! It doesn't matter if the redline is twice that, it is still, as Phil found, mechanically uncomfortable (to mechanically-sympathetic ears and eyes anyway). And it doesn't have to be that low! My old Yamaha XJ600 (that I had before the XJR) was a 4-cylinder 600cc bike and was

geared at about 22 km/h / 1,000rpm: at 100 it was doing about 4,500. So that is something to keep in mind too – check the gearing of your intended down-sized bike.

I like 4-cylinder bikes, but with mid-range bikes I have found twins to be better in this regard: they are usually higher geared, and they don't sound or feel as busy at higher revs as do the 4-pot bikes. My Tracer is doing just over 4,000 at 100: it honestly feels as easy at highway speed as the XJR did.

Anyway, as I said, just something to be aware of: and of course it is always a matter of horses-for-courses. For some the lower-geared 4-pot bikes might be just what they want.

So, to summarise the experiences I've related above, several points become clear. Firstly, **downsizing is usually a compromise**. Sometimes the more significant ones can be fixed; sometimes you just learn to live with them; but sometimes the compromise is just too great. And sometimes it hardly seems a compromise at all.

As I said in that previous article on Downsizing, **choosing the right bike is the big thing**: buy the wrong bike and it can be an exercise in frustration and pain – literally! Get it right and you'll wonder why you didn't make the switch years ago.