Play it safe with ATVs and UTVs

They’re fun, efficient and some feel like cars, but they have quirks you need to consider.

The big, powerful, new all-terrain vehicle climbed the steep razor-backed ridge with ease as I leaned forward, trying to keep all my weight over the center of gravity. With no problem, we reached a clearing near the top where I thought there was room enough to turn around and test the machine’s ability to brake on a severe downhill course. The room was there, but the angle was wrong and I found myself tumbling in tandem with a 600-plus-pound four-wheeler cavorting over and over to the bottom of the nearby draw.

I was wearing a helmet and was fortunate enough to duck out from under the path of the overturning machine. It landed upright, still running, no worse for wear. I, on the other hand, was out of breath and very thankful everything was still in one piece — on me!

The problem I had on that ridge came not because the ATV was unsafe, but because I didn’t obey given laws of gravity. The penalty was only a lesson for me, but it could have been a fatal mistake.

The point? There’s more to driving ATVs and utility vehicles than being able to start one and steer it.

ATV/UTV SAFETY TIPS

There’s no argument about how much fun ATV and UTV rides can be. Whether riding out to get the mail or doing some challenging off-road trail riding, being outdoors and in control of a powerful machine is extremely exciting.

Where most people have problems, however, is with speed and overconfidence, or, as in my case, with misjudging centers of gravity and angles of slopes.

Off-road vehicle experts say speed is a big problem. Some ATVs are capable of running highway speeds, and some UTVs will approach 50 miles per hour. Many others are limited to about 25 mph, but if conditions don’t warrant it, that still can be very dangerous. Even at slower speeds, one can wind up in a ditch or being thrown from the machine if the terrain is rough.

Suggestions to stay safe with a UTV or ATV include:

✔ Seek instruction on safe operation from your dealer.
✔ Take time to read the owner’s manual before you ever start the engine.
✔ Most new machines come with a safety DVD. Watch it!
✔ Take time to get accustomed to the vehicle and the terrain on which you are riding.
✔ Be aware of the dangers of tipping when maneuvering across slopes.
✔ Never allow anyone under 16 to drive the vehicle.
✔ Always wear the seatbelt if the machine has an occupant protective structure.
✔ Always wear a department of transportation or Snell-approved helmet.
✔ Don’t overload a UTV. Be aware of combined weights of cargo and passengers, and manufacturer’s load limits.
✔ Consider inclement weather conditions as winter approaches. Slick roads can be dangerous even with an agile machine with four-wheel drive.

For more information on ATV and UTV safety, check with your machine’s dealer or go online to www.atvsafety.org. Or, for more information on ATV rider courses in your area, call (800) 887-2887.