

SAFETY



Sense and Sensibilities FEATURES

Elsewhere in this journal, I touched on the acquired, instinctive habits of survival that are essential for the motorcyclist. The "Messerschmitt Twitch"—the habit of constantly taking a quick peak over your shoulder before you change course or direction—is one. There are others.

Instinctively pushing hard on the bar in the direction you wish to swerve is another. And that's a tough one, it seems to defy natural laws, and will win you stares of amazement even from experienced riders, if they haven't had the good sense to enroll in an MSF or Canada Safety Council motorcycle course. It doesn't seem to make sense—steering toward whatever you're trying to avoid. And when you read this one, you need it in a hurry.

Less than two seconds. Or as long as it takes to say those four little words. That's all the time you have for instant, instinctive reaction in the average shunt betwixt you and Oscar Grope, according to Harry Hurt. And Dr. Hurt knows whereof he speaks.

When Grope hangs a left across your intended path, you have very little time to decide: Brake? Accelerate? Swerve? Two seconds to make the right decision and then execute it. Before Grope executes you. You'd better be ready for him... and make the right decision, with no delay.

I have given three possible counter-measures for the left-turn whammy. There's another: Stay out of situations where you're the loser. In other words, use your head, and consider riding as a game of chess—think six moves ahead.

Even so, when—not if, but when—it happens, you will have one chance only. Time after time, I have looked at accident reports where the motorcyclist had the time or space to brake, accelerate or swerve. And blew it. Some of them freeze at the slick and blithely sail into the side of Grope's Belchfire Eight. Others, those who have not been properly trained, will brake—using the rear brake only. Or accelerate, without a thought of downshifting. And a disproportionate number swerve by instinctively steering away from Grope. And invariably hit the front passenger door. Hard.

When a chrome grill fills your forward field of vision, there's a shock factor, a near-hypnotic effect. Richard Kryghier of San Francisco wrote about a similar September 1983

syndrome in a recent letter:

"The other day I was following a cyclist who I know to be an experienced rider. A pothole about a foot and a half wide appeared in the road ahead. If the rider had only continued his line of travel he would have had no problem missing the hole. Instead, I watched his bike drift toward and over the hole. When I asked him about the incident a few minutes later, he said he had seen the hole but too late to avoid it. During my 12 years of riding, I have encountered this type of situation many times in myself and other riders. So many times, in fact, that I have come to term this phenomenon 'the pothole effect.'

"The pothole effect is the tendency of a cyclist to hit any pothole, or small obstacle, which suddenly appears within several inches of his line of travel. I eventually developed an explanation and a simple cure for this effect, which has provided me with a much smoother ride and several other dividends over the years.

"It occurred to me the pothole effect exists because (a) the majority of actions while riding are actually subconscious reactions, and (b) the mind tends to focus its attention on the irregularities of a relatively plain background.

"In actual practice, although major decisions concerning line of travel may be made consciously by the rider, the numerous minor adjustments necessary to maintain that line are made by the subconscious, which has learned its task through experience. When the cyclist is faced with a situation in which there is insufficient time to initiate a conscious action, the subconscious also takes over and provides the cyclist with a reaction based on input and experience. The greatest single input the mind receives is visual, and through experience the subconscious has learned to maintain a line of travel in the direction of the focus of visual input. Simply put, the motorcycle tends to move in the direction in which the rider is looking. If the rider is staring at the pothole that just popped into his field of vision, and he doesn't have time to think anything else but pothole, the motorcycle will move toward it. Even if he has time to think something as lengthy as 'Don't hit the pothole,' he will not be capable of overriding his initial, uncon-

scious reaction.

"Attempting to change one's subconscious reaction in order to avoid the pothole effect would not only be extremely difficult, but also undesirable. The cure, instead, is to change the conscious focus of visual attention. The conscious mind must train itself to switch its concentration from the foreground (obstacle) to the background (the clear surface of the road).

"Learning to rapidly shift one's visual attention is actually a very simple process which requires very little practice for dramatic results. When coming upon a small obstacle, the rider responds by giving it cursory attention. The thought at the time should not be pothole, but clearspace. Although the rider is aware of the obstruction, he is only aware peripherally; his main focus of attention is on the path of least resistance. The subconscious can then deliver the preferable reaction of guiding the motorcycle away from, instead of toward, the obstruction.

"Although missing a few potholes may seem inconsequential, I believe that the frame of mind which produces this effect has much broader implications in much more serious situations. The obstruction that suddenly appears may only be an inch-deep, irregularly in the road surface. It could also very well be two tons of steel in the hands of an inattentive driver. If a car makes a left turn into the motorcycle's line of travel and the rider focuses his attention on that vehicle, the subconscious receives the message car and danger. With this input alone, there is only one alternative open for reaction—brake—for which there may or may not be adequate distance. However, if the rider is capable of changing his attention to a possible clear path, the subconscious is given additional input and thereby an additional alternative—swerve."

An old burlesque schtick had two stand-up comedians rapidly approach each other from opposite ends of the stage, one looking down, the other up at the ceiling. Two pratfalls. Then the one who had been looking down says, "Why don't you look where you're going?" The other says, "Why don't you go where you're looking?" So, look where you're going, and you'll go where you're looking. □