

## Defensive Riding

What makes a safe rider? For discussion purposes, it's convenient to think of the many things that contribute to rider safety as being in three categories. These are (1) Preparation of the rider and bike, i.e., good mental attitude, a non-impaired mind and body, a well maintained motorcycle, and appropriate safety equipment and attire on the bike and person; (2) good physical riding skills, i.e., ability to handle the bike well and execute emergency maneuvers when needed; and (3) good defensive riding skills.

Preparation of the rider and bike is fodder for future articles. Last month's Safety article encouraged increasing our safety by improving our physical riding skills. This presentation encourages increasing our safety by improving our defensive riding skills.

Riding a motorcycle has many inherent risks. The term "defensive riding" refers to *riding in a manner to avoid or reduce these risks*. Defensive riding requires an understanding of the situations that represent threats to motorcyclists, a process and ability to anticipate threats before they happen, and riding maneuvers to avoid them. Reducing risk is the essence of riding safely and motorcycle safety experts generally consider defensive riding, and the riding strategies associated with it, as being the foundation of safe riding.

The Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) recommends a defensive riding strategy based on the acronym "SEE." This stands for "Search," "Evaluate," and "Execute." "Search" involves constantly scanning for potential hazards. "Evaluate" is the process of determining to what degree these potential hazards might become real threats. "Execute" involves taking appropriate response actions to avoid the hazards identified in the previous phase. This normally involves signaling intentions and adjusting position or speed. The SEE process allows the rider to anticipate problems and react to them in a controlled manner before they become immediate threats requiring emergency maneuvers. The concept is easy to understand, but requires effort, knowledge, and decisive action to implement effectively

These three elements of SEE are not just tasks, but skills themselves. These skills can be improved through knowledge, practice, and experience. For example, there are recommended ways to use your eyes productively and efficiently during the search phase (viewing proactively; maintaining 360 degree awareness; looking 12 seconds ahead; scanning; using peripheral vision, mirrors, head checks, etc.). Riders can practice these things and get better at them. Knowledge of traffic behavior patterns as they relate to motorcycle interactions helps the rider know where to position himself for the best view, where to look, and what to look for.

The general threats to motorcycles from other vehicles have become well established over time. Intersections are known to be the most dangerous areas for vehicles violating a motorcycle's right-of-way. This also includes side roads, alleys, driveways, on-ramps, off-ramps, i.e., essentially any place where a vehicle can intersect with a motorcycle. The most common scenario is a vehicle turning left in front of an on-

coming bike, leading to a collision. Vehicles also enter roads from the side without acknowledging approaching motorcycles. Vehicles abruptly switch lanes into lanes already occupied by motorcycles. Vehicles hit motorcycles from behind.

Being aware of these patterns can help us evaluate what we see and assess its potential to become a threat. Asking the question “What if?” is useful in projecting an action and its consequences. Several potential hazards may appear at the same time and have to be prioritized. A rider must understand the risks and how to mitigate them. We can improve our evaluation skills through practice when we ride. This requires active observation and thinking through each scenario, whether or not there is a potential hazard, with the goal of improving our ability to “read” the traffic and how it relates to motorcycles.

The safe rider’s general defense is to employ a SEE type strategy and integrate other tenets of safe riding into it. There are many “rules” that apply to defensive riding. Some of these rules are: Ride within your skill level. Ride in positions where you can see and be seen. Ride at a speed that will allow you to stop within your sight distance. Maintain appropriate space cushions around you. Identify emergency escape routes. Cover your brakes on entering intersections and other areas of caution. Etc. The motorcycle safety literature is replete with such guidance. It pays for us to be aware of it and incorporate it into our personal riding strategies.

Although we tend to think of other vehicles as the main threats to our safety, a motorcyclist can also crash on his own. The most serious crashes occur in curves when riders lose control of their bikes. While good physical riding skills are a primary solution, the SEE strategy also applies. The rider must visually search through the curve; evaluate what he sees regarding the curve’s radius, surface, camber, obstructions, etc.; and choose his entry position and speed accordingly. Surface hazards also contribute to motorcycle only crashes. The defensive rider looks ahead for objects in the road and for road surface conditions that can reduce traction, such as gravel, leaves, steel plates, plastic directional arrows, etc. and adjusts his speed and path to deal with them.

Defensive riding does not require that we take an adversarial approach and assume that all vehicles are “out to get us.” This is not necessary and would add some negativity to the sport of riding. Nor does the concept of defensive riding require us to be timid or overly deferential to other vehicles. While challenging other vehicles is not recommended, we must still ride assertively to keep up with traffic, establish our lane positions, and execute our maneuvers. It is in our best interest to be fully aware of the threats that vehicles pose for us and ride in a manner to defuse the threats.

How does a rider develop the knowledge and skills to become good at defensive riding? Books are a good source of information. The MSF’s *Guide to Motorcycling Excellence*, Pat Hahn’s *Ride Hard, Ride Smart*, and other books present much useful information in this regard. It would be beneficial to read the books and conscientiously practice on the street the techniques that the experts have presented.

It is also useful to analyze and learn from our experiences and those of other riders. We can ask what circumstances allowed a situation to escalate to a close call? What could the rider have done differently that might have prevented the situation? What did the rider do to prevent the close call from turning into a crash? And finally, what can we learn from this experience to improve our safety down the road?

Defensive riding ability and physical riding skills have something in common. An enthusiastic rider can progressively improve both of them as he continues his riding experience. Riding a motorcycle presents an ongoing learning opportunity and the better we get at it, the more we enjoy it. Riding safety and riding enjoyment go hand in hand.

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