

He Came Out of Nowhere



Too often, that's what the drivers of four-wheeled vehicles say after a collision with a motorcyclist. Usually, the motorcyclist is not at fault, but that doesn't stop him or her from suffering the consequences. It's a scary thought, but there are things riders can do to be more visible on the roadways and reduce their chances of being involved in accidents.

Defensive driving is a good idea for everyone, but for bikers, it's essential. Remain in full control of your motorcycle at all times and remain constantly aware of your immediate riding environment.

This isn't always easy. Roadways can be chaotic places full of stressed-out, distracted, and exhausted drivers. That said, there are things you can do to remain aware of your riding environment and anticipate what's going to happen on the road ahead. Start by improving your rid-

ing skills to the point where they become second nature, leaving your mind free to concentrate on monitoring your surroundings. Then take active steps to make yourself more visible to other motorists, to position yourself properly in the traffic flow, and to accurately evaluate and respond to potential hazards.

Making yourself visible, gathering visual information, positioning your motorcycle within the traffic flow, reading and evaluating traffic patterns and making predictions –these are the tools that will help keep you off the back end of some unwitting motorist’s bumper.

Visibility

Unfortunately, most motorists aren’t looking for motorcycles. Being seen means not only making yourself and your motorcycle visible, but also riding in a manner that clearly communicates your presence and intentions. Here are some strategies to help you accomplish this.

Dress in a way that makes you conspicuous. Choose brightly colored clothing and a light-colored helmet so you stand out. Consider reflective material on your clothing, helmet and even on your motorcycle. This is especially helpful in low-light situations.

Many states require that you ride with your motorcycle’s headlight illuminated, even during the day. Even if it’s not a law in your state, you should always ride with the light on. This is one of the easiest and most effective ways to stand out in the eyes of oncoming traffic. Most bikes have headlights that automatically come on when the ignition is switched on.

Communication is an important part of visibility. Use

your turn signals when changing lanes and if it’s safe, consider using hand signals to further clarify your intentions. Don’t forget to cancel your signals after you’ve completed your lane change. We all know that leaving them on is annoying, but it’s also misleading and dangerous.

Signaling is not enough. You also need to double-check with a glance over your shoulder to check your blind spot before changing lanes.

Don’t rely too heavily on your horn. It can be a useful tool but many motorcycle horns cannot be heard over traffic noise or surround-sound car stereos.

Even if you dress in canary-yellow and signal your intentions each and every time, there are still going to be instances when car drivers don’t see you. That’s why you have to drive defensively, anticipate potentially dangerous outcomes, and prepare to avoid them.

SEEing – Search, Evaluate, Execute

In addition to being seen, actively seeing potential hazards is equally important. Proper seeing goes beyond noticing what is immediately in front of you, and includes everything to the side of you and even what is happening behind you. Scan 360 degrees around you. The key to successful scanning is to always keep your eyes moving. Roving eyes notice more. Your goal should be to scan about 12 seconds ahead of you. This means looking ahead to an area that it will take you 12 seconds to reach. This gives you time to prepare for situations before they materialize immediately in front of you.

Cars, trucks and pedestrians should receive the most of your attention, but don’t completely neglect the

Wearing brightly colored protective jackets or vests will increase your visibility on the road.



Photo by Dan Steber.

environment you will be passing through, including objects on the roadside and on the road itself. Look for problem spots: Trees can provide shade for damp or icy spots, shadows can hide debris, potholes can spread gravel on the road.

Remain aware of the movement of traffic around you – including behind you. Maintain extra alertness at intersections, where other vehicles might cross your path. Other hot spots include side streets, driveways and parking lots where other vehicles enter the flow of traffic. Pay special attention to children and animals on the side of the road since both can act unpredictably.

Gathering Visual Information

Almost all of your impressions of the surrounding traffic scene come through visual inputs, so it makes sense that your eyes are your first and best line of defense. To use them as effectively as possible, it helps to know a little bit about how your sight process operates. You have two distinct fields of vision: central and peripheral.

Central vision is what you use to see something clearly. We'll skip the science behind this, but central vision is what you're using to read these words. It's also the type of vision you use to focus on specific elements of traffic, to estimate distance, or to view other specific details on the road.

Peripheral vision encapsulates everything that is visible beyond your central vision. You can't focus directly on things that pop up in your peripheral vision, but it helps you detect items approaching from anywhere other than right in front of you – and in emergency situations, will draw your attention to objects of importance that you aren't presently looking at, like a deer leaping across the interstate or a car swerving from the right. It's important to keep your eyes moving because although your total field of vision is 180 degrees or more, your eyes effectively only use a small portion of this visual field.

As your eyes check out the scene, there's so much to see. The challenge is to filter everything so that your eyes pick up on the important stuff without being distracted by the unimportant things. Distractions and unnecessary fixations are one of the primary dangers faced by riders.

Proper scanning is a systematic movement of your eye over the visual scene. Keep your eyes moving, but with a purpose. Concentrate your vision on your intended path of travel. Don't let your eyes focus for too long or otherwise become distracted by unimportant objects.

Make a concerted effort to keep your eyes up to keep your field of vision open far ahead of you.

Force your eyes to move frequently, so that you receive a wide field of visual information and remain alert to any possible hazards.

Lane Positioning

Being seen can depend on how you position yourself within the lane and in the flow of traffic. The main idea is to create a comfortable space cushion, separating your-

self and your motorcycle from the other vehicles on the roadway. This will help you see emerging traffic situations more quickly and clearly and will also give you more time and space to respond to any hazards that pop up.

Lane Placement

There is no one best lane position – the best position is constantly changing depending on traffic conditions. Here are just a few of the considerations that could affect your choice of lane position:

- Increasing your ability to see
- Increasing your visibility to other motorists
- Avoiding other motorists' blind spots
- Avoiding surface hazards
- Protecting your lane from other drivers
- Communicating your intentions
- Avoiding windblast from other vehicles
- Providing escape routes
- Setting up for and negotiating curves

In general, the best place to be in the flow of traffic is near the center of your lane. This position makes you most visible to drivers in front of you, and also leaves a reasonable cushion on both sides for you to respond to any encroachment by surrounding traffic. There are some situations where you'll want to avoid the center of the lane, such as busy intersections, where oil drippings from cars can make this part of the lane especially slippery. In these cases, it might be best to ride in the left portion of the lane. Another time to use the left position is when getting ready to pass. However, there are also times to avoid the left track, such as when riding in the lane to the right of a large truck. The left track would make you less visible to the truck driver and more susceptible to the truck's windblast. In this case, move to the far right edge of the lane, or slow down until you're no longer beside the truck. Avoid riding in another vehicle's blind spot. As it says on the back of most 18 wheelers—if you can't see a driver's face in his mirror, he can't see you either.

Following Distance

The general rule, on good road surfaces in ideal conditions, is to maintain a minimum two-second space cushion between yourself and any vehicle in front of you. Two seconds of space should allow enough time to respond accordingly if the vehicle ahead makes a sudden stop.

But how do you know how much space equals two seconds? A technique called "fixed-object count-off" can help. Pick a fixed object ahead of you, such as a street sign, a light pole, or a painted roadway line. As soon as the vehicle in front of you passes the object, start counting. One-thousand-one, one-thousand-two ... If you haven't yet reached the fixed object by the time you finish your second count, you've left enough distance to meet the two-second minimum. Remember, two seconds is the minimum. There's no law saying you can't maintain a greater distance. ■