

A Tale From the

By Carl Bennett,
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I was heading home to my wife after spending a week in San Marcos, Texas. I had five hours behind me on this second day of riding and was in the panhandle of Florida on a great piece of road known as I-10, about 200 miles from Jacksonville. My bike just had turned 50,000, and the thought had hit me that I was halfway to getting a new bike. As it turned out, I was closer than I thought.

About 25 miles from my next gas stop (I ride about 75 miles to a rest stop, then 75 more miles to a fuel stop), I approached yet another tractor-trailer. Nothing was new here: head check, change lanes, accelerate, car will be clear when I get there.

The Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) teaches a simple strategy to manage risk. Instructors

use the acronym “SEE” during training: Search, Evaluate and Execute. I have come to think of it simply as “my plan” (thanks, Dan).

Anyway, I assumed the car would be clear by the time I got there, but I was wrong. And because I always quickly accelerate past these huge giants, I successfully placed myself in the trucker’s “no zone”—otherwise known as a blind spot.

My plan A didn’t account for the overpass we all just had gone over. These are the main elevation changes on I-10. Whether the semi sped up or the car slowed down made little difference. I quickly overtook the car and obviously failed to effectively scan ahead; I now was in this trucker’s blind spot on the left side. It was time for plan “B.”

The crash site.



“No Zone”



The survivor and his bike.

I immediately began to slow down; I knew I was hidden in the trucker's blind spot. Plan A's failure to account for the overpass continued to compound because an onramp usually follows these overpasses. Rarely does a crash involve one factor; more likely, it's a combination of factors. A vehicle entering I-10 East from that onramp probably caused this giant to change lanes quickly.

I saw the truck's front tire moving toward the broken white line. A glance at recently completed construction on the edge of the road to the left told me I had maybe 12 to 18 inches of asphalt left—no help there. I looked back at the truck moving quickly into my lane. Even if I did maximum braking at this point, it was unlikely I would clear the trailer. It was obvious to me that plan B had failed before it began. It was time for plan C: the grass median separating the lanes. The second it took to execute this plan seemed like hours, as I reflect back on the events.

At 70 mph, I steered my bike into the center grassy median without a second thought. My brain spit out the orders: Stay off the brakes, keep your head and eyes up, gradually roll off the throttle, let the bike move underneath you, and don't fight it. I knew my best chance of survival was to ride it as long as possible. A witness said she was amazed how

long I controlled the bike. Except for the brief Aflac moment, when I pondered how much it would hurt and how big the bruises would be, my brain never stopped making adjustments to plan C. Besides, there was no plan D.

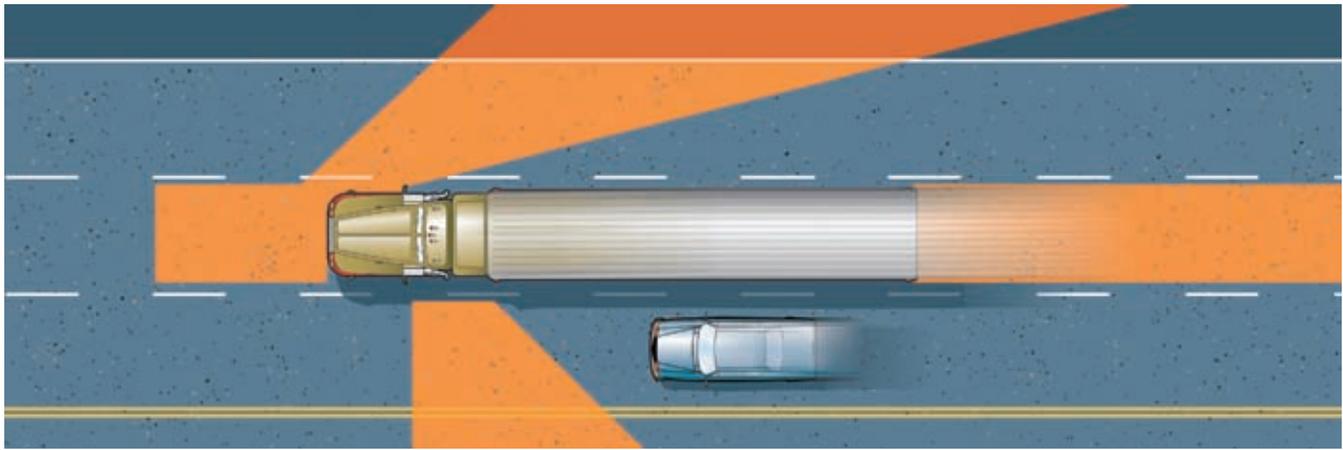
Finally, the lack of traction and my own inertia won out; my assistance on the bike no longer was needed, and I felt myself high-side (get thrown over the top of the bike). Again, my brain adjusted plan C, appendix 2. Advice from my brother about his motorcycle track experience came into my head: “Tuck and roll!” he had said.

I know I tucked in my arms because I had mud only on one forearm pad of my jacket, and my gloves showed no damage from impact. I know I also tried to pull in my legs. From the obvious spectacle I created, though, according to the witness in the vehicle following me (she almost was hysterical), I'd say my legs were not as controlled. I didn't check the speedometer, but I suspect my free flight started somewhere in the 50-to-60-mph range.

While lying on my back in the grass, plan C, appendix 3, went into place. I mentally checked for pain (none noted—good sign); opened my eyes (no blurred vision—another good sign); and started moving one set of fingers, a wrist, elbow, and finally the whole arm from the shoulder down. “Woo, I still can play the guitar,” I thought. I checked each limb in the same fashion and found, to my great relief, I appeared to be injury-free!

By now, I was surrounded by people, and while no one tried to hold me down, they all echoed, “Don't move.” Again, I must have put on a really good show. I finally raised the visor on what had been my favorite helmet (a Shoei X-11) and calmly explained that I wasn't in any pain and didn't think anything was broken.

The crowd allowed me to check my body parts while lying down, and I found they all indeed still were intact and pointed in the direction they've been pointing for the last 45 years—a really good sign. It then was time to stand up and complete appendix 3's required operational check. To everyone's amazement, I not only stood up but walked around, too. However, I finally felt a small bump on my left knee.



Orange-shaded areas represent “blind spots” or areas where a car disappears from a truck driver’s view.

A couple hours later, when I walked into the Jackson County Hospital emergency room, it nearly took a copy of the highway patrol’s crash report to convince the ER check-in nurse I had been run off the road. I guess the lack of an ambulance crew confused her. The doctor equally was amazed. The bump on my left knee (from ground impact) now was accompanied by a sore left ankle. However, the ankle wasn’t swollen, which meant my riding boots had worked, too! Further examination revealed no broken bones, scratches or bruises. It took six days for the only bruise to appear (on my left knee). Had it not been for a few sore muscles, I could have gone back to work the next day.

Riding gear and training truly works for those who wear it and regularly practice their skills. I constantly adjusted my plan C as I recognized each change.

The trucker never stopped—it was my screw up, though, not his. And, besides, he couldn’t see me. Lee Park’s “Total Control” book talks about the importance of controlling one’s fear when riding. Having a plan focused my thoughts and prevented fear from guiding my actions; never once did I think of jumping off my bike or laying it down. It wasn’t until I saw the bike loaded on the tow truck at my home three days later that I fully realized the seriousness of my crash. Frame damage caused the bike to be a total loss. I now have a new helmet (another Shoei X-11) and red jacket (doesn’t match my new bike). Meanwhile, my Joe Rocket mesh pants and Alter Ego jacket, while dirty, are completely intact and will be used again.

I will continue to dispute those who say I just was lucky. Luck only would have been involved if I had closed my eyes and hoped for the best. Without a doubt, I screwed up by putting myself in the trucker’s “no zone.” What saved me were my plan, which I

adjusted continually to each change, and my dedication to always wearing full riding gear. As an educator, I’m sharing this story so others can learn from my experience.

A couple years ago, NHTSA (National Highway Transportation Safety Administration) and AMA (American Motorcyclist Association) came out with a poster campaign, in which motorcyclists were warned, “Never ride faster than your guardian angel can fly.” In my case, though, luck had nothing to do with it.

Within 10 days of my crash, I had a new 2007 Yamaha FJR 1300, helmet and jacket. I highly recommend you use a different process for getting a new bike, however. Other than that one incident, it was just another great day of riding! ■

The author has been a motorcyclist for more than 30 years. As an MSF RiderCoach Trainer, he has been involved in traffic education with both the Navy and the State of Florida for close to 10 years now. He always tells student riders that exposure to risks will provide more opportunities to be involved in a crash, so you have to be prepared. The acronym “ATG, ATT” (all the gear, all the time) is heard a lot in his training classes, and when students see him riding, they see he dresses as he talks and practices what he preaches. That exposure to risks caught up with him on Sunday, March 11, 2007, while riding his 2003 BMW R1150R and prompted him to write this story.

Resources:

- Motorcycle Safety Foundation, <http://www.msf-usa.org/>
- Motorcycle Safety, <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/pedbimot/motorcycle/motosafety.html>
- Motorcycle Tips and Techniques, <http://www.msgroup.org/TIPS.asp>