



Checkers & Chess

Chris Phillips

When I was growing up, during the Pong and Asteroids era of video games, board games were a staple of everyone's house. Our modest beach cottage was no exception—boxes of varying degrees of wear and tear were stacked in the corner of the front room. Of them all, however, checkers remained my favorite. After my father taught my brother and I how to play, we spent hours in the engaging, but relatively straightforward pastime. Fast forward a few years, and our relative mastery of the game led to a dramatic drop off in play. My father made a strategic choice: to elevate the game to chess. On my first game my heart dropped as I saw my father pull out the all too familiar checker board. Ugh—I'm done with this! I thought. I was mildly surprised as he opened a different case than usual, and began to remove pieces that contained much more detail and sophistication than the binary disks of checkers. Similarly, the complexity, yet interconnectedness of the moves accorded to each individual piece forced me to the limits of my abilities. After many years, I was able to best my dad at the game. No mean feat, indeed.

Why, you ask, am I detailing my gaming history here in a decidedly motocentric milieu? Good question, indeed. Perhaps, like most motorists, you began your adult motoring in a car. Though challenging in its own right, as you transitioned from dual to single track travel, you undoubtedly noticed not a linear, but exponential growth in the complexity of the endeavor. If motoring were a game, driving would be checkers, motorcycling chess. Here's a few analogies to support my thesis.

Same Board—Different Game

The disorienting effect felt while moving from checkers to chess is in many ways analogous to the move from driving to motorcycling. While the roads look the same (faded asphalt, broken yellow lines) they are far from similar when movement commences. Departments of transportation break road users into categories, and fragile users is a common subcategory. This includes pedestrians, cyclists and scooter users. However, this also includes motorcyclists. Even though we possess the same technology as cars (engines, brakes, tires, etc.) we lack the inherent safety that a modern steel safety cage provides to drivers. When non-riders ask what it feels like to be on the road surrounded by cars, trucks and trailers, I give them the analogy of the Serengeti. While cars lumber along like elephants, we motorcyclists zip about like gazelles. However, our sheer performance advantage comes at the cost of vulnerability. One missed step and a gazelle makes a small squish under an elephant's flattening foot.

Skills

Imagine you have to make a u-turn in your car. Easy—crank the wheel left, accelerate slowly, straighten out—a fairly simplistic endeavor. Now compare that identical maneuver on a motorcycle. First, terrain reading is everything. As the spot you begin the turn has most likely hosted many thousand vehicles, each oozing various engine, transmission and brake fluids, ensuring traction is paramount. You may need to swing wider or closer than is optimal to avoid the dreaded slow speed drop. Next, it's not as simple as just turning your bars and twisting the throttle. Bikes turn by tipping the bars slightly in the opposite direction the rider intends to go (Thank Newton: For every action there is an opposite reaction). By slightly tipping the bars right, the bike begins to fall to the left (opposite) and your left turn begins. But wait—as it falls we must continue to maintain momentum. How do we achieve that homeostasis so critical to avoid a fractured fairing? The rear brake of course. By slowly dragging the rear brake, we can use the bike's crankshaft as a gyroscope. As the lean increases, we increase throttle to match (homeostasis) and as we end the u-turn, we decrease drag from the rear brake, tip the bars left, and use the throttle to upright and accelerate away. Easy right? Phew! Who knew that such a simple two-track endeavor could prove so complicated in the one-track world?

Moves

Moving down the road in a car is also fairly straightforward: hit the gas, stay within the lane and voila—done deal. Yet again, motorcyclists are faced with a plethora of potential. There are actually three lane positions within each car lane. In center position (mid-lane) or default position, the motorcyclist has room to maneuver and adjust position to increase visibility or safety. Imagine as you crest a hill, you see a truck with towing mirrors coming at you in the other lane. You can quickly dive into right-lane position to avoid a possible collision with said mirrors. Similarly, if you are making a slow, left sweeper, by sliding into right-lane again, you increase your angle of vision to see potential threats earlier than a center-lane or left-lane position. In a car, leaving the lane risks running off the road, or head on into oncoming traffic. This freedom of turning the automotive black and white perspective into shades of gray is another feather in the hat of two-wheeled travel.

Games are a part of life—whether you like them or not. Sometimes, the easy appeal of checkers entices us. However, the ease of play is matched by its relatively low return in pleasure. While chess can be stressful (like motorcycling) the return is immense. Each game, like each ride, demands that we optimize our mental calculations, keeping us at peak game. If there is ever a need to win, motorcycling is a game that demands a winning mindset.