

Drive Like You Ride



By Chris Phillips

Several years ago (and by 'several' I could mean 20...) My wife and I were exiting the parking lot of a large local mall, about to cross a major boulevard. My wife was behind the wheel, and as the light turned green, my motorcycle Spidey Sense kicked in. Was something still moving through the traffic stopped in the lanes passing in front of us? “Stop!” I yelled. She jabbed the brakes immediately, and a small car shot through the stopped traffic in the only lane without cars stopped at the crosswalk. Luckily we sat partially in the parking lane as the offending car obviously sped through the long red intersection. She looked at me as if I had yelled unicorn, and one had magically leaped from a bush.

Did I indeed summon some sort of motorcycle magic? The simple answer is no—yet to the uninitiated it would appear so. The influential science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke once remarked that “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”. I would replace technology with training—but you get my analogy. You would think that this level of training would be necessary to keep motorcyclists alive. But, much as new technology is backwards compatible (i.e. Blu-Ray players still can play older technology DVDs) can motorcycling skill sets be backwards compatible with driving? The answer is yes.

The British insurance company Carole Nash dove into its trove of statistical data concerning both its motorcycling and driving policy holders. What it found was impressive: policy holders who held both motorcycle and car policies were significantly less likely to be involved in accidents than car only policy holders. Here are some of these findings:

They adapt to risk and danger. Motorcycling has a much smaller variable on mistake making—in other words—you just can't afford to make the mistakes that car drivers with modern steel safety cages and airbags can regrettably make. Motorcyclists are conditioned to adapt instantly and often to riding situations. They have no choice.

They have quicker reaction times. With increased risk comes increased need for skills. In general motorcyclists are trained to react quicker to potentially hazardous situations, once again, out of necessity.

They check their blind spots frequently. Many years ago (by 'many years ago' I could mean centuries...) I learned the maxim: remember, half the world is behind you. Motorcyclists adhere to this and frequently scan their mirrors. Many, including yours truly, keep a mental map of surrounding traffic as they ride.

They learn to spot bad habits. There are an unending litany of bad habits that many drivers adhere to that are anathema to motorcyclists. Tail gating (fender-blender as I call it) may be a handy way to project your aggression onto another motorist—but to a motorcyclist it means certain danger in the form of decreased stopping distance. Similarly, stopping and slowing based only on the car in front of you can be dangerous. Motorcyclists look through cars to see where they want to go—not just where they are going.

Yes—statistically speaking—motorcycling is a more risk prone activity than driving a car. Yet—with practiced skill sets and a mind set that differs from drivers—you can use the well honed skills behind your bars to up your game behind the wheel. As a famous man once said: It's good to be a chess player in a checkers world.