

So, the Car Turns Left in Front of You...NOW What?

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In the world of motorcycle safety, as well as in the world of motorcyclists' rights, we often talk about the dreaded 'left turning car violating our right-of-way.' And justifiably so; it is a common multi-vehicle crash scenario, and in those crashes, we always take the lion's share of the damage. Thinking about this rider-driver dynamic, I am reminded of the fable of the Frog and the Scorpion:

A scorpion and a frog meet on the bank of a stream and the scorpion asks the frog to carry him across on its back. The frog asks, "How do I know you won't sting me?" The scorpion says, "Because if I do, I will die too." The frog is satisfied, and they set out, but in midstream, the scorpion stings the frog. The frog feels the onset of paralysis and starts to sink, knowing they both will drown, but has just enough time to gasp "Why?" Replies the scorpion: "It's my nature..." (<http://www.aesopfables.com>).

We know that human nature leads drivers to be distracted; we know that drivers have a tendency to look for other cars (and not motorcycles); we know that motorcycles are harder to see in the traffic mix. So, in addition to our efforts in the area of motorist awareness, we need to face the reality that a right-of-way violation is likely to happen to us. We should not be surprised by this, we should not expect otherwise, and we should be prepared for it. I'm not saying its "right," but neither is grand theft auto (and yet I bet you still lock your car). If and when it does happen, what do you do?

Get on the brakes! Your first and best line of defense is to use your brakes hard (without skidding) while keeping the bike on its wheels. This is where the time you spent practicing your maximum braking skills pays off. If you don't practice this skill, there is a good chance that when you need it, it'll be rusty (or not there at all). Regular practice also gives you the confidence to tell yourself 'Yes, I can get stopped before reaching that car.' Remember - 'laying the bike down' is another way to say 'crashing.' Laying the bike down gives up all ability to brake, swerve, or accelerate. It also affects the speed at impact if you hit the car (sliding metal and plastic don't slow you down nearly as well as gripping rubber).

"What about swerving?" you may ask. Yes, swerving to miss the car can be a great way to go. However, there are some things to keep in mind:

- Do not swerve while you are still doing your hard braking. Braking and swerving are best done one at a time.

- Where are you going to swerve to? Is the car going to keep going, or stop in your path when they see you? Is there more traffic coming behind the car? Before deciding to swerve, you want to be confident that the place you are swerving to is better than doing your maximum braking in a straight line.
- How are your swerving skills? Unfortunately, very few riders practice swerving; and many riders ride with their arms straight (rather than bent) – this makes a successful swerve very difficult. Practice swerving regularly and keep your arms slightly bent when you ride so you are ready.
- Follow your nose. If you have elected to swerve, point your nose and **LOOK EXACTLY WHERE YOU WANT TO GO.**

“An ounce of prevention...” We all know that we can’t control the behavior of car drivers. But, we can stack the deck in our favor. Regardless of whose fault a crash is, none of us want to be in a crash, and if there is a crash, none of us wants to get hurt (or worse). There are no guarantees, but here are some tips:

- Be visible. Dressing in all black makes you harder to see. Bright colors and retro-reflective materials make a huge difference. Consider a HEADLIGHT MODULATOR.
- Manage your speed. Evaluate where you are riding. Side streets – driveways – parking areas – any place a motor vehicle can access the roadway = opportunities for right-of-way violations. The faster you are going when it happens, the longer it takes to get slowed or stopped (and the higher your speed at impact).
- Gear up. If there is a crash and you hit the car, the asphalt, or both – what you are wearing can make the difference between walking away and being hauled away. This is not news to anyone. Protect what’s important to you (Hands? Feet? Arms? Legs? Chest? Back? Head? Face? – you make the call).

We will absolutely continue our work in motorist awareness and pursue ways to change driver behavior. However, we also want all of you to be ready to successfully avoid crashing when your right-of-way is violated.

Ride safe, ride well, ride lots.