

Safety Tips #15

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Swerving

We need to be good at avoiding hazards. The best way to avoid a hazard is by using our brakes, that is, by slowing or stopping in a straight line. However, this method might not be appropriate for a particular situation. That's when we need to be able to swerve around the hazard.

What is a swerve? It's two countersteer maneuvers, one right after the other, in opposite directions. Jog one way, then jog the other to get back on track. It happens quickly when done correctly.

Of course we will have to decide which way around the obstacle we want to ride. Make sure that your decision won't take you into another bad situation, such as oncoming traffic or off the road, etc.

The first thing to discuss about how to swerve, as with all other riding maneuvers, is where to have our eyes focused. Applying the rule that the bike tends to go where the rider is looking, we can deduce that we should have our eyes focused on the place we want to go, namely, in this case, the escape route. It is tempting to look at the obstacle itself; don't do it! This is called "target fixation" and can be highly problematic. Look for the escape route.

Then we countersteer to avoid the obstacle. Countersteering was discussed in a previous article; in short, we press on the handlebar grip of the direction we want to go, while easing pressure or even pulling back slightly on the other grip. In the case of a swerve, this has to be done quickly and with authority. This will make the bike start leaning and then turning to avoid the obstacle. How long should we maintain handlebar pressure? Long enough to get around the obstacle. Then the next step is to countersteer in the

other direction in order to get the bike on the original path of travel in which you were traveling prior to the swerve.

Caution: a swerve maneuver uses lots of our traction. There is often not enough traction available to both swerve and brake simultaneously, so if the two things are necessary, separate them. First complete the swerve, then brake; or first complete the braking, then swerve. But don't do both at the same time!

Swerving is a crash-avoidance maneuver. We need to react quickly. Adrenaline is pumping. How can we have a good chance of doing this successfully in the heat of the moment? Be prepared: practice. Rider education classes, and licensing tests, all include this maneuver because it is critical to safe riding. Practice swerving on each machine you are going to ride, because they all handle a little bit differently. Practice it enough to get it ingrained into your muscle memory, so that when the time comes you will execute it flawlessly.

Ride safely, and have fun!