

Crashes Happen

by Ken Condon

AS I WRITE this column, I am suffering from the loss of a friend, coworker and fellow motorcyclist, taken from this world by a careless driver who ran a red light. Dereck was an avid rider of exceptional skill and was well aware of the risks of riding, and yet he was killed.

Many highly skilled riders have been involved in crashes. I am reminded of Larry Grodsky, the safety columnist for Rider magazine and founder of the Stayin' Safe on-road rider training program. Larry died when he collided with a deer at night. Larry knew full well the dangers of animal strikes and took all precautions to avoid being exposed to this hazard. However, circumstances required him to ride later into the evening than he wanted. The chances of encountering a deer may have been elevated, but the risk was probably acceptable. Fate stepped in with a different idea.

Just last week, I answered two letters from readers looking for explanations as to why they crashed or almost crashed. Both were concerned with traction loss in a curve. After reading each letter, it appeared that both riders were doing nothing that would have increased their risk and that each was fully aware of the long list of possible hazards before them. I answered their letters by mentioning the conditions that can exacerbate traction loss and how to spot surface hazards. What I didn't include in these replies was a statement that sometimes crashes just happen and that even the most knowledgeable, conscientious and diligent rider can have one. Fatigue, a slip of concentration, or a slightly mis-timed maneuver may be responsible, but sometimes the cause is a force or forces completely outside our control.

As someone who has dedicated much of his life to rider training, this does not sit well. Even though continual learning and purposeful practice improves my odds significantly, I know that nothing can absolutely guarantee my safety.

Possible Vs. Likely

I do believe that "out of the blue" mishaps that befall alert, skilled riders are rare, and that the vast majority of crashes are preventable. I also know that sometimes crashes happen, even when the rider has taken all precautions. To ride a motorcycle well, we must ride with knowledge of this fact. We all must understand the risks we are taking by riding a two-wheeler, so that we can do what is necessary to increase the likelihood that we live a long and healthy life. This means doing all we can to minimize the risks.

The odds of getting hurt or dying as the result of a motorcycle crash are contained in statistics. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), in 2010 there were 4502 fatalities nationwide with a fatality rate of 24.39 per 100 million miles traveled. In comparison, drivers of all vehicle types died at a rate of 1.11 per 100 million miles traveled. NHTSA summarizes by saying: "Per vehicle mile traveled in 2010, motorcyclists were about 30 times more likely than passenger car occupants to die in a motor vehicle traffic crash and 5 times more likely to be injured."

These statistics are upsetting, but if this is news to you then you haven't been paying attention. Motorcycling has always been



Crashes happen. We must do all we can to keep them from happening to us.

riskier than driving a car. And it's been riskier (statistically speaking) during some years and less risky during others. The reasons include: a surge of new riders during good economic times and/or when fuel prices are high; good weather that leads to more motorcycle miles traveled; increases or decreases in safety initiatives at the government level, etc. The list goes on, but you get the idea.

So, does that mean that the more you ride, the more likely you are to crash? Not necessarily. Statistics suggest trends, not absolute outcomes. The chance that flipping a coin will result in heads or tails is always 50/50. But, you can flip a coin ten times and it's possible to get heads all ten times. That doesn't mean that the odds of getting tails have now gone up; it's still 50/50. Let's say the odds of crashing are 1 in 100,000. If we ride 99,999 times, does that mean we will crash on our next ride? No, because the likelihood of you crashing is not based on past rides.

It can be argued that the more you ride, the less likely you are to crash, because you've learned how to ride well. However, this only holds true if you have actually become more skilled, as opposed to simply having ridden more miles. It may be less likely that you will crash if you are skilled, but crashes still happen. The fact that we ride means that we are exposed to that risk. So, what can we do to reduce the chance of being involved in a crash? Excluding any mention of bad luck, or fate, or acts of God, we are left with our ability to manage the risk.

Why Crashes Happen

The reasons why crashes happen are not very numerous: inattention, alcohol or drug impairment, lack of traffic-management strategies, poor risk perception, lack of mental preparedness and attention, and inadequate cornering, braking and slow-speed skills. Sure, there are other reasons we could add to the list, but you'll find that this list covers a huge percentage of why crashes happen. And you'll also notice that 5 of the 6 reasons I list are mental skills. Not being in the right mental condition to effectively and accurately evaluate the environment puts you at high risk of being involved in a crash.



Intersections should raise your personal danger alert status to high.

The physical skills of cornering, braking and keeping a slow-moving motorcycle upright are also critical. It is necessary to have the highest possible level of ability to control your motorcycle, but often it is the lack of mental proficiency and good judgment that gets us into trouble. Poor mental skills require us to use superior physical skills to survive.

Single-vehicle Crashes

About half of all fatalities are the result of single-vehicle crashes, and the vast majority of those crashes occur in a curve. Riders often fail to negotiate a corner because they enter the turn faster than they can handle (a lack of mental skill). This usually is followed by an inability to corner effectively at this higher rate of speed (a mostly physical skill). Had the rider used better judgment about entry speed, the corner would have passed without incident.

Single-vehicle crashes can also be the result of road surface hazards. Motorcycle stability relies on traction. Add sand, gravel, oil, diesel spills, anti-freeze, or water onto the pavement and you've got the potential for a crash. While the existence of road surface hazards are not in our control, we must learn to spot these hazards before they become a problem.

Car drivers do not need to pay any attention to trivial things like sand or gravel or tar snakes. That's why many new riders crash as the result of surface issues. Veteran riders learned long ago the dangers of surface hazards and have developed a keen eye for spotting potential problems. However, even experienced riders can find themselves on the ground, having failed to identify a patch of sand or fluid spill.

Unfortunately, we can't catch all potential surface hazards, but what we can do is predict the likelihood that sand or some other contaminant may be present. For example, riding near a construction site should prompt you to slow down and scan the surface more carefully. A wet road can make it nearly impossible to see a slick spot caused by oil, so it's smart to reduce speed and minimize lean angle and brake force.

Low-speed tipovers may not seem all that scary, but these seemingly benign mishaps can land you in the hospital with nasty fractures and soft tissue damage. Too many riders ignore their slow speed riding skills, partly because it doesn't seem that important, but also because learning to control a motorcycle at walking speed can be rather intimidating. Stay tuned for an in-depth article on slow speed riding techniques in an upcoming issue.

The Other Guy

The other half of fatal crashes involves a second vehicle. Too many drivers operate their vehicles with ignorance, complacency and carelessness. These drivers have no intention of killing anyone, but they do not consider that their behavior is putting all road users, not just motorcyclists, at risk. And it's not just the victim who suffers. I'm sure the driver who took my friend Dereck's life is living in his own personal hell right now.

One factor that leads to careless behavior is how some people treat other drivers when they get behind the wheel. It's common for otherwise courteous and thoughtful people to tailgate, or bully, or otherwise try to intimidate other drivers when in traffic. There is something about the perceived safety of one's own automobile and the righteousness of many drivers' sense of entitlement that causes them to judge others as incompetent and in the way.

There is also the feeling of safety that many drivers of large vehicles feel as they loom over smaller cars and motorcycles. Their perception of personal risk is reduced, and the motivation to drive aggressively when late for work can be difficult to resist.

When it comes to motorcyclists, there is a "de-personalization" that happens when we cover our head and face with a helmet and dark shield. Instead of being perceived as a fellow human being, we can be seen as an inanimate object. Even fellow motorcycle riders can fall into this unconscious misperception. I often start track day rider's meetings by having the attendees introduce themselves to each other. Then I ask them to remember the people they just met and understand that the person they are sharing the racetrack with is just like them; someone who is here to have fun and has to be at work the next day. It sets a tone for safer passing and more courteous behavior.

Do riders who choose not to wear a helmet fair better, since their head and face is not covered? I don't know of any study that can confirm that theory. However, there have been studies showing that drivers come closer to bicycle riders who wear a helmet compared to riders who don't. I'm not suggesting we all ride helmetless so that drivers perceive us more as humans; that would



Being seen is one of the easiest ways to avoid a collision.

be trading a sure risk reducer (head protection) for the hope that a driver will treat us with more courtesy (wishful thinking). However, it does point out that we are sharing the road with fallible beings whose perception of reality varies. Knowing this, you must take precautions that take all these variables into account.

A World Of Distraction

Another factor that can increase risk is distraction by electronic devices and other sources of stimulation. The use of cell phones, GPS, and texting are at an all-time high. It's common to see drivers wait until they get into their cars before dialing their phones. Even though law enforcement discourages distracted driving, the trend of driving while distracted is increasing. More than once, I've even seen members of law enforcement chatting on cell phones while driving their police cruisers. What message does that send?

It's not only electronic devices that distract. Alcohol is the most obvious cause of poor judgment, but there are other conditions that we may not consider risky, including having the wrong person in the passenger seat. It's easy to let a conversation or distracting exuberance lead to poor decisions. The number of teen fatalities with at least one passenger in the car is much higher than teen drivers who are alone. This is why several states allow teens to drive only with immediate family (no joy rides) for the first several months of learning to drive.

What To Do?

Yikes! With so many uncontrollable factors to contend with, it can seem foolish to ride a motorcycle at all. There is good news, however. We can train ourselves to reduce risk.

For instance, knowing that intersections are one of the most likely places where crashes occur, you must approach intersections with the caution and alertness of a hunted animal. Every sense should be heightened to spot anything amiss. Scan aggressively for movements from the side, front and behind that can signal a vehicle about to invade your space. Keep your brakes covered to minimize braking reaction time and identify possible escape routes, just in case. To help drivers see you, make sure you are aware of lines of sight and use lane positions that ensure that drivers see you. I see too many riders who foolishly ride in drivers' blind spots or "hide" behind other vehicles so that it is nearly impossible for drivers to see them until it is too late. You must develop a sixth sense about line of sight to ensure the highest level of conspicuity possible.

Another simple strategy is to wear bright colors. High-viz jackets and helmets are very popular lately. Unfortunately, high-viz is not the color of choice for most fashion-conscious riders. Okay, fine. If you choose to wear black, then be aware that you are increasing the risk of not being seen and don't be surprised if drivers pull out in front of you more often than if you were to wear more conspicuous gear.

By choosing lane positions that ensure good lines of sight and by wearing bright clothing, we can help defend ourselves from careless drivers who may otherwise "not see" us. But, sometimes crashes happen when neither party is clearly to "blame." Human beings make mistakes and one or two seemingly small

mistakes occurring at just the wrong time can suddenly lead to two vehicles coming together. Even though true "accidents" do happen, you should take solace in the fact that there is usually some control you have in preventing mishaps from happening. However, even the most diligent and skillful rider cannot control all situations at all times. We share the roads with many people

that do not take driving seriously and others who are often in a daze, so that they see what they expect to see and not what is in front of their eyes. This means that we must take more responsibility for our own safety by doing all we can to prevent a crash from happening to us.

Broken Record

Here I go again touting the need for rider training. The reason is that rider training is the gateway to reduced risk. When I say rider training, I don't only mean formal training programs. I also mean continual practice, whether that is in a parking lot or at a track day. It can also mean purposefully refining mental strategies and control skills

while you are on a typical ride or when commuting to work. The opportunity to become a better rider is always present.

The biggest challenge to effective training is motivation. How many riders take advantage of training opportunities to learn new techniques and to brush up on old ones? Not many.

I understand. Spending a weekend rolling around a parking lot instead of touring the beautiful countryside does not appeal to many. However, the time spent focusing on mental survival strategies and physical control skills can mean the difference between making it home and spending several expensive days in a hospital bed, or worse. Even a fractured ankle or foot can change your plans for the rest of the season.

Self-help training is just as valid as formal training, as long as your knowledge and control skills are solid to begin with. Get a copy of "Riding in the Zone" or "Total Control" and find the sections in these books that outline parking lot drills. Then find a clean parking where you can spend a half-hour practicing the skills you think need refinement. Make it a social event by inviting a couple of like-minded riding friends to join you (especially those who really need to work on their control skills). Self-help rider training lacks the feedback of a professional instructor, but the drills outlined in a good book can provide you with the fundamental information to help you raise your skill level.

Even the most proficient riders are involved in crashes. However, there is no doubt that we can tip the scales in our favor if we become as skillful possible, both mentally and physically. ■



Keep your skills sharp through purposeful practice.

THE AUTHOR

Ken Condon is a current MSF RiderCoach, chief instructor for Tony's Track Days and author of ***Riding In The Zone: Advanced Techniques for Skillful Motorcycling***, available through Whitehorse Press and from: www.ridinginthezone.com