

Bill Wood

Layin' it Down

Riding tips that don't cause crashes

by Bill Wood

"I came around the corner and saw a truck in my lane. There was nothing else I could do, so I had to lay it down."

When I first started riding motorcycles 30 years ago, there were people who actually said stuff like that. And being new to this whole thing, I worried that someday I might need to perform this critical emergency maneuver, involving throwing the bike to the ground to avoid a crash.

Fortunately, a few years later, the state of Illinois, where I lived at the time, started offering [Motorcycle Safety Foundation](#) classes, and I learned that the purpose of an emergency maneuver is to avoid a crash, while "layin' it down" is just another way of describing how you caused a crash.

A lot has changed since those days. Motorcycle brakes are enormously more capable than the wimpy drums on my Honda CL450, and tires grip much better than my old Dunlop K87s. Plus, MSF training is available in every state.

Yet even now, we still get reports of riders who, when faced with emergency situations on the road, respond by "layin' it down."

Welcome to our April issue, where every year we bring together tips for riders who are looking ahead to the new season after a winter layoff. The idea is to present a quick refresher course we can all use.

Whenever we do these stories, though, I'm reminded that much of the "common sense" I learned decades ago has turned out to be nonsense.

Remember the warning that you should never, ever, touch the front brake because it would flip you over the handlebars? More than likely, you heard it from a guy who knew it was true because it happened to his friend's brother-in-law (or was it his brother-in-law's friend?).

It's doubtful that the brakes that came on bikes back then were capable of levering an entire motorcycle over the front wheel. Today, with massive dual discs and steep steering-head angles on sportbikes, I guess it's not impossible. But in decades of watching racers scrub off speed heading into Daytona's turn one, Road America's turn five or Mid-Ohio's turn six, I've never seen one of them flip a bike this way.

On the other hand, we've all heard of crashes in which a rider hit a car when he or she had plenty of room to stop. The problem? The rider didn't use the brakes hard enough. Maybe they were congratulating themselves on not flipping over the handlebars as they plowed into the car's fender.

One old-time habit that's hard for me to kick is the technique of nudging the bike into neutral while rolling to a stop. It always seemed like the thing to do, especially on bikes that wouldn't easily go into neutral at rest.

When I learned this trick, it was one of the skills that separated experienced motorcyclists from rookie riders. We would come to a stop and confidently take both hands off the bars, knowing that, unlike them, we weren't needlessly heating up our clutches and wearing out the muscles in our left hands.

Unfortunately, there might be a good reason to put up with those little inconveniences. If, for instance, a car is coming up behind you and can't stop, you can react much more quickly on a bike that's already in gear and ready to go. Me? I'd have been sitting there with my arms crossed nonchalantly as the car hit me.



But my favorite bit of advice from the old days was the notion that you could improve your odds of avoiding a crash if you made eye contact with the driver of a stopped car that might pull out in front of you.

The quaint idea was that some unspoken communication would pass between rider and driver, and the car would hold up while you passed.

This theory is proven wrong thousands of times each year. What we see as meaningful eye contact turns out to be nothing more than the vacant stare of a driver just about to push down the accelerator.

It turns out that the better place to focus your attention is on the car's tires, rather than the driver's face. Tire rotation will give you the first clue that the car is moving. And unlike the eyes of the person behind the wheel, those tires won't lie.

The point of all this is obvious. Since the days when many of us learned to ride, people have studied what works and what doesn't on the road. So instead of relying on somebody's brother-in-law's friend, we can learn from people who actually know something.

We've pulled together some of these useful tips in our story, "Ride Smarter, Safer, Longer, Better," on page 32. If you're looking to get rid of the winter rust and get the most out of your '05 riding season, turn there.

On the other hand, if your crash-avoidance strategy involves the words "layin' it down," get to an [MSF course](#). You can find one by calling (800) 446-9227.

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