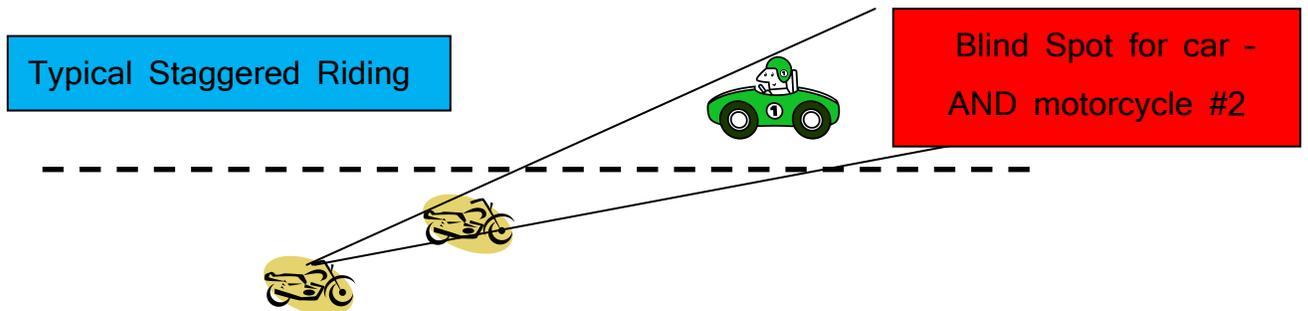


Lane Positions When Riding In Pairs

< Reverse Stagger >

By David Petersen, Mr. BestRest



Gack! Another article on rider safety. Ho-hum. Nothing to see here, nothing new, move along. Hold on for a moment, this article MIGHT contain something new. At least I've not read this or heard this theory before. It challenges paradigms. It makes you think. It may save your life. It's worth a few minutes of your time.

For the past 50 years I've ridden motorcycles on the street and trail. This isn't my first rodeo. Many of those miles I've ridden solo, many with just one other bike, and sometimes with a group of bikes. We always staggered bikes: the lead rider claimed the left side of the lane, with the following bike staggered off to the right at a prudent distance. In a group the stagger repeated itself, so there was never one bike following directly behind the bike ahead.

That's the way we've always done it, so that's the way we always do it. It's what I learned and it's what you learned. Perhaps we were wrong? Perhaps there's a better and safer way to ride with another bike, a way that improves visibility and increases safety. Read on with an open mind.

Every time I see a group of bikes I mentally evaluate how they're riding. Are they gathered together in a close group? Are they following each other too closely? Are they riding side-by-side? All of these styles are just plain unsafe. We all know that you need space between bikes to allow for the unexpected. You need room to maneuver, to brake, to avoid an obstacle like a chunk of truck tire in the roadway. You also need room to take evasive action when an automobile turns in front of you. It only takes a few seconds for something bad to happen. Space is your friend. Space equals safety. So does staggering, because it effectively increases the space between you and the bike immediately in front. Sure, there may be another bike between you and that bike immediately to your front, but that bike is off to one side, which in theory means you won't have to avoid them in an emergency. It's a good theory. It may have flaws.

To get an idea of how quickly things can go bad, just do a YouTube search for "motorcycles in a group crash". On any given day you and your riding buddies are really only a second or two away from sadness, especially if you're riding too closely or in a "pack".

Spacing bikes far enough apart has always been difficult, at least it is for me. In a car I would never follow as closely as I do when I'm on two wheels. In a car I'm very careful to leave plenty of room between my front bumper and his tailgate, but on a bike I crowd the rider ahead. Why is that? For some reason I believe that my bike's braking system is better, or I believe that my maneuverability is better, or I believe that because I can see things better I can avoid a problem. I'm fooling myself. The truth is I just have a bad habit of riding too closely when I'm with the other bike(s). You probably do, too.

Most of us don't ride side-by-side, pretending we're Ponch and Jon patrolling the highways in an episode of CHiPs, or pretending we're one of the Wild Bunch in a Brando film, on our way to a rumble in Hollister. Most of us stagger our bikes. Staggering certainly has benefits, but just exactly how should we stagger? Left-front bike, space, right-following bike, space, left-following bike, space, etc. We've all see it. We all know it. We probably practice it.

I don't know if this is actually written down in a motorcycle safety manual, but I theorize that the traditional placement of the lead bike in the left side of the lane is part of a subconscious effort at "claiming our lane". Because that bike is prominently to the left side of the lane, it projects a looming presence that's theoretically acknowledged by other traffic. Traffic gives way to that lead rider, and traffic yields to the bikes that follow. At least that's the idea. In reality that doesn't always happen.

The lead bike becomes the "eyes and ears" for the rest of the riders, watching for obstacles, looking for cars that will pull out or turn left in front of the group, signaling if there's a problem ahead. Naturally every rider is responsible for their own safety and they should use the same level of awareness as the lead rider, but in truth the following riders tend to become complacent. They rely on Joe to lead the group and watch the road for them. They also rely on Joe to set the pace and the speed, including speeds in corners and straight-aways. You can always trust Joe, he's never let you down. But Joe is human and with that label comes the occasional error or oversight that can reach out and bite you and your fellow (following) riders.

Because Joe is in the lead, he's claiming his rightful place in the Universe at the left front. Good for Joe. But perhaps Joe is doing a

disservice to bike immediately behind him, the one to his right rear that's ridden by his buddy Tom. How can this be? Joe is blocking Tom's field of view of the single most important section of roadway ahead - the section where an oncoming car is preparing to make a left turn. Joe's bike and Joe's body block Tom from seeing that oncoming car, the one with the flashing left turn signal driven by Susie. Tom can't see Susie, and if Tom can't see her car, then Susie can't see Tom.

Susie sees the first bike (Joe) ride past, She begins her left turn when Tom's bike suddenly appears out of nowhere. Susie hits the brakes, Tom slams on his brakes, confident that his ABS system will keep him safe. Maybe it saved Tom today, but it might not do the same job tomorrow.

Do a Google search on the leading cause of motorcycle accidents involving another vehicle. The Hurt Report says this, "**In multiple vehicle accidents, the driver of the other vehicle violated the motorcycle right-of-way and caused the accident in two-thirds of those accidents. The failure of motorists to detect and recognize motorcycles in traffic is the predominating cause of motorcycle accidents.**"

Predominating cause? 2/3 of the accidents? How many were due to the other driver not seeing the motorcycle? Most, if not all of them. Let's face it, most drivers won't intentionally turn in front of another vehicle if they can see it coming. The Hurt report doesn't give data on which accidents involved bikes riding in a group of 2 or more, but we can logically assume that if the car didn't turn left in front of the lead rider, it was because they saw that 1st motorcycle, but didn't see the 2nd or 3rd rider.

Why didn't they see the 2nd or 3rd rider? There's been a lot of studies as to how the brain works and how it recognizes (or doesn't recognize) a motorcycle on the roadway. Headlights, driving lights, and brightly

colored riding gear all tip the scales in our favor, but even then there's reports of automobile drivers turning in front of a bike then saying, "I didn't see him". They really didn't see the bike. Yes the bike may have been physically visible, but they didn't "see" him. The bike was invisible in their brain.

Could another factor play into this equation? Could the typical staggered bike placement play a part? Could bike staggering be working against us? Could there be a flaw in our left-space-right-space-left-space staggering habits? I think there is.

This summer I was riding home from the Idaho BDR with one of my buddies, Scott. We were on the highway that goes over Mount Hood, OR. As we rode in our typical staggered fashion, Scott was leading in the left front position and I was Bike #2. As we rode I watched for wildlife, oncoming traffic, and other obstacles, but I noticed that several degrees of my field of view were blocked by Scott's body and his bike. The closer I got to him the more my view was blocked. Hmmm... OK, I'll stay back a bit for safety and enjoy the scenery.

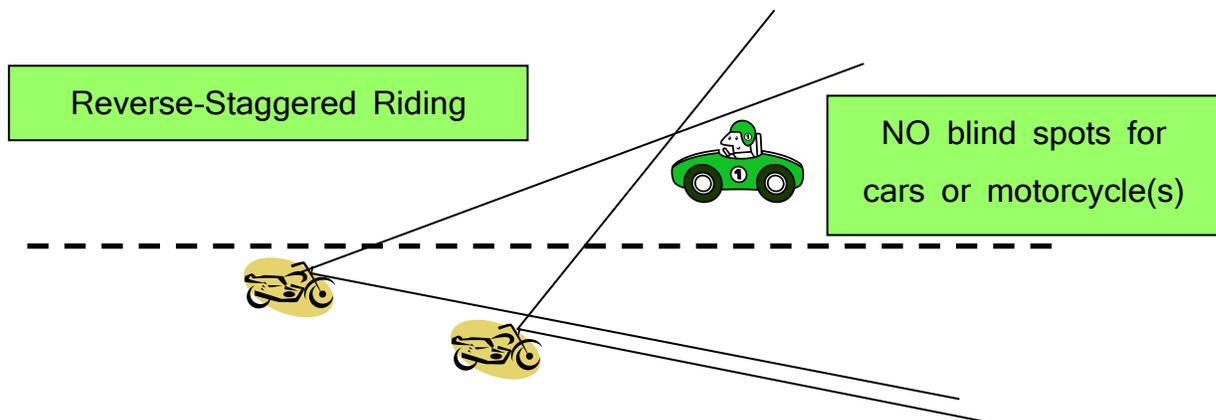
Then something happened that really woke me up!!! Suddenly "out of nowhere" an oncoming car started to left turn in front of me. He saw me and stopped turning; I swerved to the right and kept going. Where in the heck did that car come from? I was diligently watching the road ahead, but I simply didn't see him until the last second. Disaster was averted, but just barely.

How could this have occur? It's a simple matter of field-of-view, math, and angles. That car "crept" up on me and was blocked by Scott's bike and his body. Even though I was following Scott at a safe distance, and I was in the "proper" right side of the lane, my field-of-view joined up

Fate to create the Perfect Storm. His approach was masked and his speed was exactly right so his car coincided with the blind spot cast by Scott. In hindsight there was really very little I could have done differently. I had followed all the rules and was riding with plenty of space between us.

Using our bike-to-bike intercom, I asked Scott to move from his left-front position to a right-front position in the traffic lane; I moved from the right side of the lane to the left side. My view of the road was totally changed. I could see down the roadway because Scott wasn't blocking my field-of-view. Sure he was at the front right and there was still a blind spot to some degree, but that position didn't hold the greater hazards like the one I just avoided.

I asked Scott to trade places, with him following behind me. I rode in the typical left-front position, he rode in the right-rear. Then I moved over to the right and he moved left. He was amazed! A light came on in both our helmets! We agreed that a reverse-stagger riding position provided a better viewpoint for Rider #2, and didn't affect the field-of-view for Rider #1.



We played with this reverse-stagger all the way home to Seattle. At times we fell into old habits and assumed the normal stagger. A word

over the intercom corrected things and we went to the opposite side of the lane. When we did our field-of-view opened up.

Some might argue that placing the lead rider in the right front places him at a safety disadvantage. Well, perhaps, but only slightly. The benefits of a reverse-stagger far outweigh any disadvantages IMHO. The lead rider still has a full and unobstructed field-of-view. He can take action based on that view.

When we got into the Portland area we were riding in city traffic. We found that the reverse-stagger method worked equally well in the city as it did on the highway. Moving that bike over and switching lane positions really made a difference for Rider #2.

How do oncoming cars or cars by the side of the road react to this reverse-stagger riding style? Nobody's done a study so there's no empirical data to support my theory that the reverse-stagger is safer. We did see situations where oncoming cars could've repeated that left-turn-into-the-2nd-rider situation that almost happened to me on Mt. Hood. But because the 2nd bike was running with headlights and driving lights and the rider was wearing high-viz gear, Scott and I believe that BOTH bikes were more visible to other vehicles, more visible by several magnitudes. The 2nd bike moved out of that deadly blind spot located to the right rear of Rider #1.

How does this work in a group of more than 2 bikes? Pretty simple, keep staggering, but change the lead rider to a right-side lane position. The other bikes will fall into their proper place. Of course you must space the bikes far enough behind one another to maintain that all-important space/distance that keeps you safe.

Next time you're out on the bike with a buddy give this reverse-stagger a try. See if you agree, or if you find a flaw in my theory.

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