

Target Fixation (Motorcycle Goes Where You're Looking) *By James R. Davis*

Sometimes we riders tend to minimize the risks we hear about. Take, for example, what every student of the Motorcycle Safety Foundation has heard about - 'target fixation'. 'Fixating' on something means not being able to take your attention (your eyes, for example) away from it. In the case of riding motorcycles, for example, this leads to the phenomena wherein our motorcycles tend to go in the direction we are looking and is usually described with an example familiar to all -- that if you see a pothole in the street ahead of you and don't take your eyes off it you are likely to hit it.

While that is true, it is too trivial an example to get our attention appropriately. We are left with the opinion that 'target fixation' is of trivial concern because we all know that we can, if we try, avoid that pothole.

It is insufficient to simply post the advise that you should avoid target fixation. Saying "don't fixate" is all very well, but once it starts, you need a positive technique to get yourself out in one piece. So once you are in trouble, use target fixation to save your skin.

Don't look at the oncoming truck/tree/pothole; figure out where you would rather be and fixate on that instead. In fact, those of you that have taken the MSF classes know that "target fixation" is an excellent way to control skids - fixate on a point dead ahead on the horizon, and you'll be well on the way towards automatically correcting most skids.

Target Fixation demonstrates pretty convincingly that your motorcycle goes where you're looking. But why? Your eyes, after all, are not holding your handlebars and you frequently scan directions other than the one you're traveling in without your bike wandering all over the road. Is it magic? Or perhaps an undiscovered law of physics?

The idea that your motorcycle will go where you're looking is merely a shorthand way of thinking about a phenomenon that virtually all drivers (of any kind of vehicle) have experienced before: that if you turn your head you tend to STEER in the direction you're looking. In fact, it might be clearer to simply acknowledge that it is HARD to steer in any

direction other than the one you are looking at. ALL of your prior experience has taught you how to steer your vehicle where you want it to go. So, if you look where you want to go, you kick in all that prior experience and AUTOMATICALLY steer in that direction.

There is no magic here nor is there a hidden law of physics involved. Your bike (or automobile) TENDS to go in the direction you are looking because, via experience, you have taught yourself to steer, more or less subconsciously.

To take advantage of that phenomenon you merely need to actively look in the direction you want to go - away from danger. The rest is virtually subconscious reaction. Of course it takes more than a turn of your eyes or even your head. You still need to steer away from danger. Since it is HARD to steer away from what you're looking at, and easy (almost automatic) to steer in the direction you are looking, surely it makes sense to look where you want to go.

But, you say, there are many times when you look in directions other than the one you want to go. After all, one of the most important safety practices you engage in is to actively scan all around you looking out for hazards. Why is it that your motorcycle does not wander all over the road while you are scanning if it's true that it tends to go where you're looking? (More often than not, it does!)

The answer to that question is that when you are scanning or looking in a direction other than the one you want to go in you tell yourself to keep going in the direction you want - you turn OFF your 'autopilot'. If you don't believe me, next time you're out on the road and it is safe to do so, point your bike in the direction you want to go and look in any other direction. Notice how a part of your mind is CONSTANTLY VERIFYING that you are still on course. You do not normally have to do that - that's what your autopilot does for you.

But we have also been well advised to keep our head and eyes 'up' and pointed at the horizon. Surely looking down will not cause a motorcycle to go down, or will it?

Well, not directly. If you are in a skid, however, and look down the odds are overwhelming that you will go down. That, because you will have failed to actively steer the bike in such a way as to try to keep it upright. But that's only one reason why you should keep your head up and eyes

looking at the horizon. The other is that only by doing so can you actively scan for hazards or know, for sure, if your bike is vertical. But that's another story.