

Lane Position

by Mark Caldwell

Here's a quick quiz to check your riding skill. For each of the described scenarios, select which part of the lane is the best to ride in. Your choices are: Left track (i.e. left 1/3 of lane), middle, or Right track.

Now don't cheat and skip ahead! Read each of these and truly answer them. Your life could depend on getting the answer right. In what part of the lane should you be riding for these situations? Here are the scenarios:

- Late on a Friday or Saturday night, major arterial, you're in the left lane with a lot of oncoming traffic.
- I-405 in the HOV lane (far left lane) in very heavy rush-hour traffic, with jersey barriers on your left.
- Rush hour traffic, you are in the far right lane preparing to exit the freeway in a typical clover-leaf on/off-ramp design
- The first rain after 45 days of dry weather
- The 22nd consecutive day of rain
- A long sweeping left turn
- A winding two-lane road with many hills and curves and short sight-line distances

Did you actually read those and come up with an answer for each one? Or did you skim over them saying to yourself, "Yeah, yeah, I know how to ride. I'm a good rider. This is boring."? If you did that, then we already know all that we need to know about your safety-mindedness, and frankly it scares us.

On the other hand, if you actually answered each one, let's see how you did. Believe it or not, every one of those situations has the exact same answer. The correct answer is: "It depends". There isn't enough information to make a blanket statement about where you should be riding in any one of those situations. Yet I often hear people in conversation saying things like, "In the HOV lane during rush hour you should always ride in the far left portion of the lane." The first tip-off that this is wrong is the use of the word "always". There is no lane position that is always correct.

Why not? Because there are many other factors to consider such as: What's the condition of that part of the road? Is there a groove or pavement anomaly? Is there standing water on any portion of the lane? Are there any objects in the lane? Broken glass? Loose gravel? Discarded trash? Bike parts that rattled off the Harley up ahead?

You need to assess road conditions as well as traffic conditions. On that first rain after 45 days of dry weather, there likely will be an oil streak down the middle of the lane as oils from previous traffic come back to the surface. However, if there is standing water in the tire tracks, the center track could be safer. In the HOV lane scenario, are you safer riding closer to the other traffic so that cars see you are there and may not try to invade your lane and if they do, you have maneuvering room away from them? Or are you safer to stay away from the traffic and give yourself more reaction time but less maneuvering space? And again, what about the condition of the pavement itself?

There are no set rules that always apply. That is why constant vigilance is critical to survival. Continuously scan the roadway as well as the surrounding conditions and make adjustments to changing circumstances as you ride. Don't get stuck in a rut. They are too much like graves.