

Walt's tip of March 5, 2004

I'm very happy to bring you this week's tip. Putting it into action might have saved my life recently.

This week's tip is Situational Awareness. A term fighter pilots use to describe the state of knowing everything that is around you that could affect you in any way. Applied to us, it's a simple enough concept--you form an overall understanding of the environment using all information available, in order to have as early a warning of hazards as possible.

In my case, I was southbound of I-5 and heading for the interchange to 50 East. I was going with the flow of traffic, around 75 mph. As I passed the J street exit, I became much more attentive, as the stretch I was riding has a lot of ingress and egress going on, and plenty of cagers who waited too long to position themselves who would just love to run me over. I noticed a couple of chunks of rubber, and more ahead. OK. Time to get real serious real quick--there is a tire disintegrating ahead of me. First check behind to make sure I won't get an F150 for a suppository, then slow down to increase the gap on the car ahead--that way I'll have more time to see any major new hazards and more time to safely execute whatever avoidance maneuver is most appropriate.

See, what comes AFTER the warning of the rubber chunks is that one or more very large pieces of tread will leave the tire--yes, the one that is spinning at 75 mph. Sometimes they fly, sometimes they just sit on the roadway, waiting to do grievous damage. It could cause an instant loss of traction, if it got under a wheel that you had begun to brake. It could jam one of your wheels causing an instant lockup. It could hit your body or leg causing an unintended dismount (with traffic approaching at 75 mph from behind). I have never actually seen one of us laid low by tire tread, but it seems a distinct possibility. On this day, it turned out that the tread was in the lane next to me, and I didn't see it until it was too late, when a car flipped it into my lane. It hit somewhere around the front fender or bottom of the fairing, and hit my foot and lower leg. I think that one reason I came out of this with nothing worse than "Oh, MAN!" is that I was anticipating it and prepared. I was WATCHING for it, and still encountered it. I wonder if I'd have gotten off so cheap if I'd been daydreaming just then.

Constant vigilance is the price we pay for our freedom. We must take information in whatever form it comes--a sudden blaze of brake lights ahead? Could be hostile law enforcement, could be a brand new hazard. Smell burning brakes? Keep your eyes out for the aftermath of an out of control car, or maybe some vehicle dumping its vital fluids. Back seat bathed in the pale glow of an LCD screen? Those folks don't even know THEY're on the road, much less a biker. The bottom line is to take every available clue to create a clearer picture of your world.

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