



No More Headless Horseman

by Moshe ben Asher

Moshe ben Asher has made a sport out of survival. It has become an integral part of his motorcycling style. He puts a lot of thought into survival. If you're worried that that's too much to be thinking about while you're riding, what are you thinking about when you're approaching that intersection or heading for that on-ramp?

I rode helmetless—I'm tempted to say headless, even mindless—in the 1960s and 70s. It isn't middle age maturity that accounts for the full-face head gear I now wear with religious fanaticism. I sold my CB 450 in the early 70s and bought its replacement, a KZ 550, in the early 80s. In that short span of years, legal and biking mindsets shifted radically. Helmetless riders came to be seen as unfashionable to say the least. Self-image, if nothing else, dictated avoiding those associations.

I began fixating on safety. I remember when first asked by a woman-friend at a party if I'd give her a ride. I amazed myself by answering, "Sure, but let me tell you first that it's a very dangerous thing to do, and you'll have to get yourself a helmet." It has happened several times since, and the answer invariably surprises me and discourages them. Before that first temptation, I had already considered how it would feel if I casually touted someone to ride without a helmet and we went down, with my passenger injured or killed.

If there was any doubt during this time of my expanding safety consciousness, it was dispelled dramatically when two of my friends were run down in San Francisco's Golden Gate park one Sunday afternoon. One may have been killed but for a helmet I had picked up for him a few days earlier. In the weeks before, we had been riding every night after work, from Richmond in the East Bay, to the city. Dave was regularly taking a third friend on his bike, loaning his helmet to her and riding helmetless himself. It bothered me to ride with them, occasionally imagining, as we crossed

the Bay Bridge near midnight, the horror of seeing one of them on the pavement in little pieces. So I asked around the organization and located a second-hand helmet to keep as a spare in the office. The following Sunday, Dave and his partner Cathy were riding in the park (both of them were wearing helmets for the first time) when a Cadillac came out of a side road without stopping and ran them down. They were on the critical list for several days but survived and recovered fully after many weeks of hospitalization and outpatient therapy.

I had changed by the early 80s. That was the turning point after 20 years of riding. I began to believe that motorcycling can be very dangerous, that I could easily become a victim, but that it's also possible to reduce to almost nothing the chances for my own demise. I heard or read the expression, "There are three kinds of riders: those who have *gone* down, those who are *going* down, and those who are *going to* go down." The point was not "if" but "when" and "how." Would I have a helmet on the day I went down?

I was working out a philosophy in my day-to-day riding, that to survive one has to "take every edge." I recall riding one day when another biker passed me, his right foot resting on a cruising peg, some inches from the rear brake. I thought to myself, damn if I'm going to put even a microsecond between my perception of danger and getting my foot on that brake. The day came when I began to ride habitually with three fingers of my right hand on the brake lever and my left thumb on the horn button.

It was becoming clear to me that survival requires assuming the worst about every other driver, bikers included. My assumption now is that the other car won't stop for the light, that the driver in front won't look before changing lanes, that the car coming up from the side road won't stop before entering the parkway, that the oncoming driver will make a left-hand turn in front of me even if I make

eye contact, and that on the freeway the biker behind me will pass by crowding through in my lane.

These thought patterns and habits have already kept me from at least one injury accident. While riding a back road near Philadelphia, I came down a hill, rounded a corner, and was surprised to find a car stopped before a one-lane bridge that stood 30 or 40 feet beyond the blind corner. There was only enough time and distance for me to brake hard and stop within a half-foot of the waiting car. Had those three fingers not been on the brake lever, I certainly would have been eating trunk lid for lunch.

My conviction about protective clothing began one Sunday morning as I watched, incredulous, at a sight 15 feet in front of me. My riding partner hit an eight-inch “lip” that ran across Highway 1. Earth movement had caused the roadway to drop and the repair left a large bump the full width of the road. He became airborne, the bike dropping to the pavement, his body flying over the cliff, out of sight. For about 10 seconds I had every reason to think he had gone the distance, 100 feet or more, to the rocks and beach below. When I was able to stop, park my bike on the shoulder of the narrow road, and run back to where he went off the edge, I looked over to see him tangled in a large bush about ten feet down the cliff face. Apart from scratches and cuts on his arms, back, and face, he didn’t have any serious injuries.

But the next day I began to think seriously about always wearing a leather jacket on the bike, even in hot weather. A day or two later I was discussing with another biker the pros and cons of wearing leather in the summer. I was whining about the discomfort when he replied, “It’s a whole lot less uncomfortable than an eight-inch patch of skin off your back.” The first leather jacket came that week and I’ve never forgotten that piece of wisdom.

Likewise, my first pair of ankle-reinforced boots came on the heels of learning from a more experienced rider. I was browsing in an accessory store in Southern California when I noticed the salesman was wearing handsome but very heavy-looking boots. When I asked why he wore them, interested in the particular style and brand, he answered thinking that I wanted to know why he wore boots at all. He launched into a story about how the year before he had gone down and been dragged across the pavement wearing tennis shoes, losing a good deal of ankle bone—and living with bad pain for nine months after the accident. I was convinced and became a satisfied wearer of Roadman boots.

Even with this growing safety consciousness, I somehow learned to avoid “fear-focusing” while riding, particularly in conditions that are especially dangerous and thus frightening for me—such as ice patches, railroad tracks and metal bridges when wet, and dense truck traffic. Instead, I direct my thoughts to the field around me and on managing the bike.

It wasn’t long before I made a commitment to lifelong safety learning, which means reading, thinking, and talking safety whenever there’s an opportunity. It means integrating into daily riding, safety knowledge and skill from magazine articles, newspaper stories, and, of course, other riders. Several years ago, for instance, I belatedly learned from a riding buddy to keep my bright lights on during daylight hours. Safety has become a challenging and security-producing quest, not internalized fear-mongering. It has developed into a rewarding part of my favorite pastime.

Lately I’ve begun to think more carefully about my priorities on the road. In boring moments of freeway riding I have fantasy conversations in which I talk my way out of tickets for various moving violations: “Officer, let me explain that my first priority is to stay alive and healthy, my second not to cause harm to anyone else, my third to obey the law, and my fourth to have a good time. You see, in the present situation. . . .”

Once the philosophy was formed, I began anticipating and planning for emergencies. Buying and carrying headlight and taillight spares has reduced significantly my exposure to injury, at least once. Have you ever had both beams of a headlight go out on an unlit rural highway? As a matter of course, I now carry and use helmet shield anti-fogging spray, even on commutes and short tours. Other safety gear includes tire sealant, bungee cords, air pressure gauge, clip-on flashlight, and spare fuses.

The best byproduct of using my head to stay alive has been the satisfaction of responding to the “isn’t-it-infantile-madness-to-ride-a-motorcycle-at-your-age” questioners? After describing my father’s lifelong cycling career, which ended in his late 70s, I launch into my safety rap. It usually begins with the statement that “motorcycling is an extremely dangerous thing to do” and concludes with the caution that “not everyone should do it—it requires maturity, knowledge, skill, and a great deal of self-discipline.” That’s usually enough to get them off my case permanently, and to discourage them from asking to borrow my K75S for rides around the block.