



THE WAY I SEE IT by Genevieve Schmitt

## Passing Zones And Left Hand Turns

If we were turning left, that car might have hit us.

THIS IS ONE of the most important columns I ever wrote for *American Iron Magazine*. What I share could save a life. This column ran almost two years ago; with the start of this year's riding season, I felt compelled to share it again.

Motorcycle accidents are on the rise. With all the distracted drivers out there, we motorcyclists need to do our part by staying alert and riding within safe and comfortable limits — our own personal limits. Often we feel the urge to “keep up with the group.” This can get us into trouble. We're so focused on staying with the group that we momentarily get distracted from the road and our defensive driving skills disappear. This happens a lot when in a passing zone, when the group decides to pass on a rural two-lane road. If you find yourself riding in a rural area this summer, heed this advice.

Bear with me as I spell out some basics here: A double yellow line means you are riding in a no-passing zone, so no passing of another vehicle is allowed because there is not enough distance on that stretch of road in which to execute a safe pass. A dotted yellow line means you're riding in a passing zone and according to the traffic rulebook at my local sheriff's office in Montana, “Passing must be made without interfering with the safe operation of any vehicle approaching from the opposite direction or any vehicle being overtaken.”

What I discovered in my rural neck of the woods is that there are dotted yellow lines (passing zones) where there are left-hand turnoffs. Often these turnoffs lead to obscure places like campgrounds, scenic pulloffs, and out-of-the-way lodging, and are usually gravel roads, like the road I live on. My road

comes off a two-lane state highway. The yellow lines are dotted where the road turns off. This means when I'm slowing down from 70 to 20 mph to turn left onto my road, I not only make sure there are no vehicles coming in the opposite direction, but I also check over my left shoulder to see if there are any vehicles behind me executing a pass because I am slowing down. I do this because I drive/ride defensively. I always flick on my turn signal well in advance, but not all drivers and riders pay attention to this because either they have already started pulling out to pass before the signal goes on, or are behind the vehicle that's behind me and can't see the turn signal. Impatience and frustration can lead a person to pull out and pass without paying attention to what's going on ahead. This is what happened two summers ago when I was traveling in Colorado.

I was riding a small 200cc dual-sport, and the engine couldn't go faster than 60 mph. I was traveling with another rider who was on a similar dual-sport in a 65-mph speed zone (which means traffic was moving at 70 mph). Cars were passing us because we were traveling slowly relative to traffic flow. We reached the gravel turnoff to the guest ranch where we were staying, and, seeing traffic backing up behind us, I not only flicked on my turn signal as we were slowing, but also stuck out my left arm indicating we were turning left.

There was no opposing traffic when we reached our turnoff, but, thank goodness, I came to a stop in our lane and then turned to look over my left shoulder because a car two vehicles back pulled out from this lane (angrily, I could tell) to pass the two cars in front of it and us. If we were turning left, that car might have hit us. The yellow lines were dotted. The driver had a legal right to pass; however, as indicated by the rulebook, he could only pass “without interfering with the safe operation ... of any vehicle being overtaken.” That'd be my friend and me. A little patience on the driver's part would have been nice. Good thing I was on my game that day.

Same thing goes if you, the rider or car driver, attempt to pass in a passing zone where there are left-hand turns ahead. A vehicle ahead of you may decide to turn left at the last minute, especially travelers unsure of where they're going. If you pull out to pass and the driver ahead decides to turn left and doesn't see you coming up alongside him, an accident could occur. Once I had that incident on my dual-sport bike, I was on high alert to this tricky situation of passing zones and left-hand turns.

The bottom line is, ride defensively and with patience. I always assume drivers are not going to do what they're supposed to do. They're going to do the opposite. Please be aware of the left-hand turn passing zone scenario next time you're in a rural area. **AIM**

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