Staggering Around

IN MOST CASES, WHEN YOU HEAR THE WORDS "stagger" and "motorcycle" in the same text, it usually has a negative outcome, but when you are using these words to describe how to place riders on a group ride, you're taking a step in a positive direction. This month, we'll wrap up our series on group riding with a more in-depth look at riding properly within a staggered formation. Many riders feel that riding with a group of bikes is safer than being out on the road alone. The truth is, if they don't approach riding in formation correctly, they could actually be increasing their risks, which is not a good start for a ride.

When riding with others, a lane has to be shared, so let's take a look at the safest way to do that. To start, we'll divide our single lane in half, creating two imaginary lanes. We'll call the right half (closer to the shoulder) the outside lane, and the left half (closer to the center) the inside lane. Our lead rider will be at the head of the inside lane so he can monitor the group as necessary and watch for any vehicles, either passing or riding alongside. Our second rider will be in the outside lane, riding a minimum of one second behind the lead rider. The third cyclist will ride the inside lane, again keeping the one-second minimum from the adjacent rider. By maintaining this distance, there will be a two-second cushion behind the rider directly in front (in this case the leader) and in the same half of the lane. Subsequent riders in the group will position themselves in the same way, staying one second away from adjacent riders and two seconds from riders directly in front of them. The zigzag pattern they form is known as a staggered formation.

Many riders understand how the staggered formation works, but they have trouble keeping it working in a safe manner. The biggest issue occurs when the group closes together. The time and space distances were set up to prevent conflicts with other riders in the formation. Even though you can use the whole width of the lane to adjust to road conditions, you should ride in your half of the lane when possible to maintain the recommended space minimums. You will also need to adjust your spacing as your cruising speeds change. Some riders find this part the most problematic.

Keeping that minimum following distance is the same whether you're in a car (yuck) or on a bike. When the vehicle in front passes a fixed object (such as a traffic sign, light pole, or even a shadow line) count two seconds (one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two) before your front wheel passes that same mark. If the count works, the minimum time and space distance has been achieved; if the mark is passed before a full count, the safety zone has been reduced and risk has been increased. Not a good thing — so ease up on the throttle to regain that safety margin. With the constant changes that occur in riding, the time factor will always need to be adjusted to keep things as safe as possible.

You've probably noticed that I've been stating the time distances as a minimum measurement. Most of us who are in fair mental and physical condition need roughly 1.6 to 2 seconds to react to a given situation. Whether it is to brake, swerve, or slow down, this is the minimum time it takes to process the information and start the physical motion required. I hate to bring this up, but we need to consider that the average age of Harley riders is over 38 years old (that includes me), and, with age reaction times change. So, perhaps we should increase that minimum cushion to give ourselves more of a safety margin. Also, when setting a riding zone, consider individual levels of riding experience, weather and road conditions, and the motorcycles braking capabilities.

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So, the next time you head for the highway with a few pals or ride with a larger group, remember to constantly adjust your speed and, if need be, lane position to maintain a good safety margin. Ride your own ride. Don't let your ego or the need to "keep up" become a risk factor. We're responsible for our own safety, and if everyone you travel with approaches the ride the same way, you'll achieve two things: a decrease in risk and an increase in good times. What's better than that? **AIM**

Editor's note: *For further information on group riding, head to www.RidersEdge.com or www.msf-usa.org.*