

Lane Splitting: Tear Along Dotted Line

Think passing cars between is reckless and inconsiderate? We beg to disagree. But there are some things to know before you start.

By [Art Friedman](#).

I had called USC's Accident Research Department to talk to Dave Thom about helmets, but Harry Hurt answered the phone. Hurt, the lead author of the famous "Hurt Report" about the causes of motorcycle accidents, is arguably the most knowledgeable expert in the area of motorcycle safety and always fascinating to talk to.



Today, however, the news wasn't pleasant. Hurt had been rear-ended and had required surgery on his neck. His brand new truck suffered major damage too. "The stupid part," said Hurt, "was that if I'd been on a motorcycle, I wouldn't have had the accident. I would have split lanes and never gotten hit."

Everyone recognizes that lane-splitting is a way for motorcyclists to save time, which may be why car-bound motorists sometimes resent it. In its defense, lane-splitting also reduces congestion and actually helps everyone get there sooner. In effect, it creates an extra lane. That "motorcycle-only lane" can, as Hurt points out, get you away from the antics of cars, which tend to be most violent at the back of the line. I was originally a reluctant lane-splitter myself, but after diving between lanes to escape screeching cars coming up behind me three times in a single ride, I decided that perhaps there was a cosmic message in there somewhere. That was 25 years ago, and I have been lane-splitting, mostly on a non-emergency basis, almost every day since.

The knee-jerk reaction to lane-splitting for most people is that it's dangerous. In fact, Hurt and his fellow researchers discovered that, if anything, it's actually slightly safer than staying in the lane in heavy, crawling traffic. Hurt theorizes that this is because motorcyclists have an easier time steering around threats than stopping frequently. [Evans Brafield](#), *Motorcycle Cruiser's* Associate Editor and an instructor for the [California Motorcycle Safety Program](#) California Motorcycle Safety Program, reckons that the ability to see ahead and get early warning of what traffic is doing is part of the advantage. Certainly, you put virtually all the threats ahead of you and needn't watch your mirrors much.

At *Motorcycle Cruiser* and our sister magazines, [Motorcyclist magazine](#) and [Sport Rider magazine](#), lane-splitting is a way of life. Here in Southern California, rational lane-splitting is tolerated by law enforcement, and the CHP actually testified against a bill that would have banned it several years ago. In a quarter-century of SoCal commuting, I reckon I have reduced the time I have spent in traffic by months, and I can't recall a single close call while doing it. In fact, I haven't ticked more than half a dozen mirrors in that time. In the last few years, the growing availability of carpool lanes has reduced the need to lane-split on freeways, but increased congestion on surface streets has made it more useful there.

The dangers involved in lane splitting are the close proximity of other vehicles, the limited space for maneuvering and the fact that few drivers anticipate your presence. My standard visibility ploys--headlight on high beam during the day and a day-glow orange Shoei helmet--serve me well lane-splitting as in other traffic situations, but the key to painless lane-splitting is

understanding the dynamics of the cars around you and knowing what to expect. For example, though you may feel more squeezed when passing between two vehicles side by side, you are more likely to get bunted when overtaking a car that has an open space next to it, especially if the lane on the other side of you is moving significantly faster. If the driver tries to jump to that space, he may forget to check for you. Whether lane-splitting or not, use caution when riding through the blind spot of a driver when you are between him and a place he is likely to want to put his car.

Other pointers:

- You should be alert and ready to concentrate fully on the matter at hand.

- Enter the lane-splitting zone cautiously. Wait until both lanes are slowed down, so that you aren't being overtaken by a car in the adjacent lane. You may be starting from a slow speed, so your bike won't be completely stabilized, and you don't want to weave into an overtaking car.

- The most dicey time is when traffic is slowing down. Some cars pull under braking and some drivers choose this moment to jump to another lane. If one lane is slowing more than the other, the likelihood of a lane-jumper increases. If the lane next to the one you are using is going faster, entering the lane-splitting zone may put you in the path of an overtaking car that isn't expecting it. I like to wait until both lanes are moving at similar speeds.

- Keep your speed just slightly above that of the cars you are passing. A large speed differential reduces your chances of avoiding a collision when something goes awry. However, you should also be overtaking traffic, so that you can focus exclusively on what's ahead and next to you. This puts you in control of the situation.

- Set a maximum speed for lane-splitting and stick to it. When traffic hits about 30 mph, I get back in line.

- When traffic speed picks up, try to merge back in front of the last car that you will completely pass at normal lane-splitting speeds. Plan ahead to be sure you don't get stuck behind a large vehicle that you can't see past.

- Watch for other motorcyclists overtaking and let them by.

- Acknowledge drivers who move over for you, but don't get mad when someone overlooks you.

- Look for those subtle first signs of a direction change by drivers -- a change in speed, the glance to a mirror, the repositioning of hands on the wheel, the car's front wheel actually beginning to steer. If you look ahead and watch for events that will slow one lane down, you can usually anticipate when driver will want to change lanes.

- As always, stay ahead of the game. Keep your eyes up the road, several cars ahead of you to see those first signs of a change in speed, debris on the road or other event that changes the

speed or direction of traffic.

- If you come to a place where two vehicles are uncomfortably close together, bide your time and wait for an opportunity to pass them safely.

- Don't hesitate to honk if the cars next to you get uncomfortably close together. It will probably annoy them less than if you snap off one of their mirrors or bang your head on one of their rear fenders.

- The gap between the two left lanes is usually the largest and most consistent because drivers in the left lane, with no traffic to their left, move well to the left to see ahead and to open the gap on their right side.

- Watch for abrupt changes when another roadway merges with either of the lanes you're between.

Cruisers have some advantages as lane-splitting weapons. The sit-up riding position offers a good view over cars. The torque power characteristics provide good response, though you shouldn't let revs drop too far. There are negatives, too. Cars are widest at their mirrors, which, unfortunately, are often about the same height as cruiser handlebars and mirrors. Ultra-wide bars like those of the Vulcan 1600 Classic limit the gaps you can traverse. In fact, if you split lanes regularly, a narrow bar (or sawing an inch off each end of the stockers) is a good idea. The best lane-splitting weapons are dual-purpose bikes because they are narrow and you sit quite high.

I have heard some lane-splitting horror stories over the years: the rider who hooked a crash bar on a car bumper (unconfirmed), the riders who have had doors flung open in front of them either intentionally or unintentionally (at least one confirmed) and the rider who split lanes alongside a big rig which wasn't aware of him and then crept forward, first pushing the bike over (rider and passenger jumped off) and then running it over without ever knowing it. I have only encountered one driver intent on keeping me from passing ("Kick his damn door in!" was the unheeded advice shouted by a nearby trucker), but thousands who have pulled over to give me extra room. There are also tales of non-injury encounters with drivers disposing of coffee, over-filled ashtrays or the contents of an upset stomach, but I haven't encountered anything worse than the stuff people sometimes throw in your face even when you're in the middle of your lane.

And I spend a lot less time out there in path of danger or trash when I'm tearing along the dotted line.

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For more information on safe-riding equipment, strategies, techniques and skills, see the [Street Survival](#) section of MotorcycleCruiser.com.