

## CHECK OUT OUR WEBSITE AT [WWW.FREERIDERSPRESS.US](http://WWW.FREERIDERSPRESS.US)

### Lifesaving Tip: The Art of the Soft Lane Change

The most death-defying feats performed by motorcyclists today are those that involve heavy traffic, particularly on freeways where the speeds are high and the consequences of mistakes even higher. The soft lane change has saved my life and is a simple and powerful inclusion into any riding strategy, any time, and any where. Let me first tell you the story.


Riding back to Minneapolis from Michigan City, my unfortunate choice was I-94 through Chicago to Milwaukee. Posted 55, the traffic on that Sunday morning whipped along at a modest 75 with very little variation in speed from vehicle to vehicle.

In the Chicagoland area, however, packs of young, aggressive drivers frequently move at 15 to 30 miles per hour faster than the rest of the traffic. This appears to be some sort of race and involves a half a dozen or more cars weaving, swerving, braking, and passing the slower traffic in a hurry to get to the next toll booth or fast-food joint or wherever they're going.

As I said, I was in the middle lane of the three-lane freeway and literally practicing and honing the technique of the soft lane change, which I had only just discovered. I was surprised by a blue and white Dodge Ram pickup, you know, the one with the big stripes up the center to make it look like a race car? The driver passed me on the left going about 100. I was surprised, but not alarmed. I only became alarmed when a half-second later, a Mustang GT also passed me on the left at what must have been more like 110, cut in front of me and then blew past the Dodge and then back to the left lane. Yikes!

I signaled, quickly checked my right hand mirror and blind spot, and moved softly into

the right lane, thinking there may be more. Just as I crossed the dashed white line to my right, a red Pontiac Grand Am or Grand Prix or some other poor man's race car roared by my right elbow, its draft pulling me forward and to the right, causing me to nearly swing in behind it as it cleared my front tire. The driver had to be going at least 100 while I was still hanging at 75. Young Richard Rasierre (a.k.a. Ricky Racer) came within about four feet of my right mirror, then swerved hard left and back across the center lane and into the far left lane. Immediately afterward, about six more vehicles passed me at well over 90 in the left and middle lanes, weaving in and out of traffic, all chasing the leader in the Mustang. It was lucky for me that kid had good, eighteen-year-old reflexes.



**Hoover's Live Bait Inc.**  
"Live Free or Die"

BILL PARKER  
715-824-3200  
800-936-4053  
Cell: 715-572-8313

9970 Cty. Road KK  
P.O. Box 98  
Amherst, WI 54406

*Motorcycle Riders Depot*

639 Grand Ave. Schofield, WI 54476 715-359-0989



Full Service Dept. - Custom Builds - Repairs - Performance - Dynojet Dynamometer  
Large Show Room - Parts & Accessories - Jewelry & Clothing - Winter Storage

### What saved me that day was the soft lane change.

The purpose of this technique is to allow yourself and other road users time and space to make mistakes. This is realism, folks. Everybody makes mistakes, why not allow for them rather than suffering from them? You can actually create time and space where there was none before, just as banks, through loans, create money that did not exist until you signed the paperwork. On any road, traveling any direction, and making any maneuver, changing lanes softly rather than "hard" is a risk-reduction technique that does its job every single time, no matter where, no matter when. It is especially useful on busy freeways and in busy urban traffic situations where things happen fast and drivers change lanes and position often, cutting through traffic to reach an exit or zig-zagging along trying to beat everyone to the next stoplight. The soft lane change allows you to pick a different position or direction while allowing the most margin for error in judgment, whether that error is yours or theirs.

Here's how it works: when you move from one lane to another, after you've checked your blind spot carefully and your mirror thoroughly, flash your turn signal and move over. But instead of sliding smoothly from the center of the old lane to the center of the new lane, move quickly, but just barely, up to the line that divides the two lanes, and then hold that position, leaving your turn signal on. Wait a moment for a honk or some other indicator that you've missed some important information. After a couple seconds if you hear or see no problems, smoothly and deliberately over the dividing line, not quite in the next lane yet, just barely. Wait another second or two for traffic to adjust. Then adjust your position to the area of the new lane you prefer. Once you've reached your new path of travel, then turn off the blinker. Basically, you're turning what was one motion into three, giving others an additional chance to make room for you. When it's life or death, I'd always choose a second chance, wouldn't you?

The degree of "softness" has everything to do with the amount of room available. If the opposite side of the lane into which you're moving has a large shoulder, obviously you have a lot of room to work with. If it only has a limited amount of space, such as on a bridge or against a jersey barrier, you have very little room to work with. Think of the space that you leave open and the room left available beyond that as the run out. In case of a mistake, this is the other driver's obvious or default path of travel. If it has only a thin strip of concrete or asphalt, the amount of space you initially take up in the new lane should be no more than the width of the shoulder area-that way, even after making a lane change, you still leave, in theory, an entire lane for someone else to work with if they need to.

Making your lane change precisely, but softly and gradually, leaves a tremendous amount of room for error. In my case on I 94 that day, when I moved from the center lane to the right lane, by initially holding my position just to the right of the centerline, I left nearly the entire right lane plus the equally-wide shoulder for that stupid little moron in the Pontiac. Both of our paths of travel converged in that one point in time and space, but because of the soft lane shift, we could share it for a moment rather than flipping a coin for it. (In a coin toss between a car and a bike trying to share space, the bike never, ever wins.) My mistake was that I didn't expect a right-hand lane change problem to come from my left side. The other driver must have come from the far left lane and tried to pass me on the right by swerving over two lanes.

My effort at leaving room for someone who may need it worked, and the problem vehicle only had to move over a couple more feet, rather than an entire lane (and onto the shoulder). If I had moved directly to the raised oil-slick area or the right-hand portion, I probably would have been rear ended at 75 miles per hour in heavy traffic. The consequences would have been severe.

By using this technique every time, if you overlook a vehicle in your blind spot and move over, you've only just barely encroached in their road space and both you and the other person have the time and space to make up for it. You can speed up or move back over to your original lane if you need to. The other driver can back off or change lanes or speed up and get around you with space to spare.

Another example would be the situation in which the car directly behind you decides to change lanes at the same time and sharks you into the next lane. By changing position softly, you've still left nearly an entire lane to make up for the mistake and the time in which to do it. By contrast, if you accidentally ignored a vehicle in your blind spot or one in the next lane moving quite a bit faster than you, and you quickly change positions from the center of one lane to the center of another, you've cut off that other person's path of travel and his or her simplest escape route at the same time. That's not leaving yourself much room!

You can this technique absolutely anywhere. When making any kind of turn, instead of immediately proceeding to your favorite position in the lane, hug the closest edge of the lane for a few seconds to allow other people to get used to you being there. A vehicle you missed, or one that changed lanes after you last looked, will still have room to get around you, rather than running into the back of your bike and adding you to the collection of mangled riders in the hospital. Or morgue.

We all make mistakes, and battling urban traffic is always a mixture riding smart and understanding the habits and weaknesses of traffic, including your own. Using the soft lane change creates a new and larger margin for error, allows you and other drivers to make sudden adjustments at a more manageable pace, and can make changing position or direction on any roadway less of a life-or-death situation. Think. Ride Smart.

Patrick J. Hahn

[www.motorcyclesafety.state.mn.us](http://www.motorcyclesafety.state.mn.us)

10700 WEST PARNELL  
HALES CORNERS, WI 53130  
(414) 427-1155



BUILD, REPAIR, PARTS, ACCESSORIES, SERVICE, SALES