

Fearless U-Turns

(Ride like a Motorcycle Officer)

By Richard Bennett

If you have been riding for any length of time, you have been faced with making U-Turns in traffic. Depending upon your level of confidence, it was a chance to show your slow-riding skills or a nervous exercise to prevent a tip over. Although it is one of the drills taught in Motorcycle Riding 101, it still an under-developed skill for many of us. Maybe it is time to revisit the technique and gain some much needed confidence.

You may find yourself in many different circumstances where you need to go in the opposite direction; on a two lane road, at an intersection or in a parking lot. Watching skilled riders make U-Turns and smoothly accelerate away in the opposite direction is impressive, but in my riding experience, these tight U-Turns are the exception, rather than the rule.

Most riders in my group go wider than necessary; some actually turn onto a side road or driveway and re-enter the highway. Some dog-paddle, steering with handlebars rather than using the motorcycle dynamics to make the turn. The fear of a slow-speed fall down overcomes the use of proper techniques, especially on larger, heavier motorcycles. If this sounds familiar, you don't need to be that guy.

Most Motorcycle Officers go to quarterly training to maintain their skills. They practice emergency drills, but just as importantly they practice low-speed operation. One of the recurring drills is the U-turn.

Motorcycle Officers often travel in formation. Formation riding is one of the practiced skills, and includes how to stay in formation when making a U-turn. Using and practicing the basics of U-turning results in an impressive maneuver at an intersection, and maintains the integrity of the group. You, and any group you regularly ride with, can do the same.

The secret to fearless U-Turns is really no secret: learn the proper techniques, and then practice, practice, practice. I will share with you the techniques that make Motorcycle Officers so confident and impressive when they make U-Turns, both individually and as a group.



The basics: No matter what size motorcycle you ride, the techniques for making a U-Turn are the same. Sit comfortably upright in the saddle. Slow to about a walking speed as you approach the turn. Pull in the clutch and rev the engine to about 2500 RPM. Slip the clutch, but don't fully engage it. Use the clutch to keep your momentum up and your speed smooth. At the same time, lightly engage the **rear** brake. This is where practice is important; you must coordinate the throttle, clutch and rear brake to make the smooth arc in the turn. Now for the MOST IMPORTANT component: **Turn your head and look in the direction you want to go.**

Turning your head, and "eye placement" are the key to making the motorcycle go where you want. Motorcycle Officers use the head turn and easily transition from lane number one to lane number one in the opposite direction.

Most traffic lanes are 10 to 12 feet wide; some are wider. At intersections, there is often extra width provided by a raised or painted island. This gives you 20 to 30 feet of space to make your turn.

Your objective is to smoothly turn from the inside lane (lane one) to the inside lane in the opposite direction. Initially it will seem impossible, but with some parking lot practice you will be confidently making U-Turns at busy intersections to the envy of your fellow riders.

Practice method: During my Motorcycle Officer training, the instructor used painted parking spaces in a vacant lot as a guide. The objective was to make figure eight turns within four stalls. Individual parking spaces are eight to ten feet wide, and there is no penalty for going outside the lines. This is a very effective and simple exercise that doesn't require cones or chalk.

Locate an empty parking lot area and select four connecting parking spaces. Start slowly, and don't worry about staying inside the lines until later. The first objective is to practice the basics of the U-turn.

I know the fear of "dropping" your 'sickle will be in your head, and that is normal. Rest assured that every Motorcycle Officer has dropped his motorcycle at one time or another, so if it happens to you, know that you are in good company. If cosmetic damage is a concern, remove any bags, and tape the edges of your fairing or any other surfaces that may contact the tarmac. Then practice with confidence.

Start your figure eight at the outside edge of one parking space. Use the four spaces as a reference, but concentrate on the basics. The HEAD TURN is the most often forgotten part of the basics. Don't forget the HEAD TURN. Look where you want to go, and make U-turns at the end of each set of parking spaces. It is OK to go wide, but your objective is to eventually stay within the lines: practice, practice, practice!!

No one ever became proficient at playing the piano just by knowing the basics. Practice is necessary to develop the skills for piano playing and motorcycle riding. Motivate yourself to finally make figure eight turns within the four parking stalls.

The next time you go riding with your friends, you will have the confidence you need at intersections. Make your U-turns like a Motorcycle Officer; you will enjoy your ride and you will get some envious looks from those around you.