

Coach's Wheel

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Most learn how to ride a bike very young with the help of parents or friends. Once we can keep the bike balanced and get around the block the training stops. This is too bad as there is so much more to riding a bike. This is true of even the most experienced professionals. Davis Phinney (7-Eleven, Motorola, over 200 wins) writes about only learning to "counter-steer" after many years as a professional. My comments today will relate to riding on the road. Mountain bike and cycle cross bring other dynamics.

Cornering a bike is much safer and faster when done properly. Most riders go around a corner in what I will call "turning". I will go through this along with "counter-steering" and "steering". Each has its place when maneuvering your bike. I am also going to start with dry, clean pavement conditions. Late in article will cover rain and sandy conditions.

Turning is most commonly used method. This involves leaning the bike and your body into the turn. For moderate corners this is a good method. But, to get around faster and safer Steering and Counter-steering provide much better options. Whether you are descending the Italian Alps or taking the 90 degree turn on the way to work, practice these methods to be safe and as fast as you would like.

The most important direction I can give you is to Look Where You Want to GO! Keep your head up and look ahead. I want this to be positive and always positive about this. Look Where You Want to GO! I am not going to tell you where not to look, nor will I tell you all the places riders look. Just know, you will go exactly where you are looking. Take this so far as to turn your head and look where you want to come out of the corner. This is a bit odd to learn. Turning your head does feel right initially. Practice will show the success of this method. Look Where You Want to GO!

Set up the coming by starting as wide as the road will allow. Brake to a speed you are comfortable with through the corner, then swoop into the turn. You don't want to have a 'round' corner (see wet conditions below). You initiate the turn and then get the bike back to upright when you hit the apex of the turn. I often demonstrate two turns per corner; one coming in, upright at the apex, and a second turn coming out of corner.

Brake before the corner and then get off the brakes through the turn. If you must, you can scrub a little speed in the corner, but know that braking will bring the bike more upright and force you wider. There is some disagreement about braking in the coming, some say only the rear brake. I prefer both front and back evenly and lightly. The better advice is to lean more instead of braking.

Next, put your outside foot down and weight this foot. If turning left, stand very hard on the right foot. This should be almost all your weight for both Counter-steering and Steering (with an exception, I will get to).

Now the differences come into play. Counter-steering is best on tight corners, descending, hairpins, and high speeds. Steering is better on the 90 degree corner and in crowded conditions.

Counter-steering: Look Where You Want to GO! Weight the outside foot. Shift your weight slightly back and lean the bike into the turn. Keep your body, head, and eyes upright and level. Pull the inside knee into the top tube (old school has you point the inside knee out into the turn). Your hips press the bike down into the turn. Push your inside hand down. Davis Phinney and Ron Kiefel teach pulling up on outside hand. In either case keep your hands light on the bars so you can adjust your line.



Steering: Look Where You Want to GO! Weight the outside foot. Keep the bike upright and move your shoulders to the inside of the corner. Push the handle bars away from you. Now, turn the front wheel into the corner. You will hear the distinctive sound of the tire ripping at the road. The farther you lean your body into the turn the tighter you can make the turn. A good way to feel this is by going very very slow and making as tight a turn as possible. Steering, done well, also allows you to pedal through (exception to weight on outside foot) a cornering without striking a pedal on the ground.

With wet or dirty road conditions Steering is method of choice. You will also want to round out the corner. Don't dive in or make sudden changes. Counter-steering in less than ideal conditions can work if done gently, but if the rear tire slips, I can assure you, you will go down. With Steering, slipping sideways, does not have to mean a fall. You can slide sideways and still recover to stay up and continue.

Practice can not be emphasized enough. These skills are not automatic. Find a quiet parking lot and go round again and again. I encourage my clients to take an easy day once a month and practice these skills. Living in the Midwest we do not have mountains to practice descending. But, Counter-steering can be learned in a parking lot. Steering gives you a much better body position for incidental body contact. Take some friends and make the practice day a fun day.