

Taking it slow – the fine art of riding a big bike at low speeds

Becky Tillman, regional lead instructor, Rider's Edge, the Harley-Davidson academy of motorcycling explains the fine art of riding at slow speeds



It's a fun and popular event at U.S. state H.O.G.® rallies around the country, as well as events around the world: the "Slow Ride." But there's more to being able to keep your Harley® upright at slow speeds than the chance to win a prize. It's also a practical skill in the real world of riding.

Going slow and straight is not the most difficult part, however. Riding slowly while maneuvering your bike through a turn (or turns) is where the real excitement lies. With proper technique, patience, and practice, you can soon be weaving through tight spaces like a seasoned professional.

Watch and Learn

One of the best examples you'll find of great slow riding is at a drill team exhibition at a H.O.G. rally. Teams such as the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Motorcycle Drill Team – regulars at the U.S. Annual H.O.G. Rally – are showmen, to be sure, but they're also consummate professionals. As you watch the mounted officers circle tightly on their fully dressed Harley-Davidson® Police motorcycles, watch how they use their bodies: Instead of leaning into a turn, as you would at

higher speeds, they shift their weight to the outside of the turn, helping the bike lean further over, and turn more tightly, without tipping.

Also keep an eye on their heads. It's never more important to look your way through a turn than when you're circling slowly.

Slow, Look, Press, and Roll

In Rider's Edge and other Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) sanctioned rider courses, we teach the "Slow, Look, Press, and Roll" technique for turning. For low-speed, tight turns, the process is similar, but it's helpful to break it down and look at the steps one at a time.

Slow. When preparing to perform a slow, tight turn like a U-turn, don't slow down sooner than you need to. Your bike is less stable going slow, so maintaining a bit of speed will help keep you upright. Approach the turn at a speed that won't require you to slow down while in the turn.

Look. Perhaps it goes without saying (but we'll say it anyway, for emphasis) that the first part of the "Look" step entails making sure it's safe and legal to perform a U-turn. Check to be sure you're well clear of traffic, and that there are no obstacles or debris in your projected path. Also, check to see if there's any sort of a "run-off" area on the far side of the road, in case your U-turn ends up being not quite as tight as you intended. If there's a steep shoulder, deep gravel, or other hazard there, it may be better to move down the road and find a better spot to turn around.

Then, as you prepare to redirect your motorcycle, turn your head and look in the direction you're turning. Look through the turn, not at the ground directly in front of you. This is especially important when making a long, tight turn like a U-turn. Keep your head up and your eyes level, and turn your shoulders if necessary to let your head lead your body (and motorcycle) in a smooth, sweeping arc.

Press. To begin the turn, press forward on the handgrip in the direction you're turning. The "counter-steering" effect will lean the bike in that direction, initiating your turn, but at very slow speeds you'll then have to turn the handlebars in the direction of the turn. To make the tightest turn possible, shift your weight to the outside peg of the bike (more on this later) as you begin to turn.

Roll. One of the most important aspects of low-speed turning is perhaps the least intuitive – to make sure to maintain a steady throttle speed through the turn. Keep the engine revving a little above idle and feather the clutch if needed to control your speed. If you feel yourself start to fall inward, your natural instinct may be to ease off the gas, but this will just exacerbate the situation. Instead, giving it a little more throttle will help stabilise the bike and help you complete the turn without putting your foot down (which can be dangerous). As you complete the turn, accelerating slightly will pull the bike back up out of the lean as you head off in the opposite direction.

Lean Out, Not In

During high-speed turns, racers commonly shift their weight dramatically to the inside of the turn, often hanging so far off the bike their knee drags on the track as they ride. This moves the motorcycle and rider's combined center of gravity toward the center of the turn, and lets them take the turn with less lean angle at higher speeds.

In low-speed turns, the opposite of this technique is desired. In order to maximise the bike's lean angle – and thereby decrease the turning radius – at low speeds, skilled riders shift their weight to the outside of the turn.

It's not necessary to shift your weight a lot to help facilitate a tight turn – even a little bit will help. But skilled riders (such as the drill team members mentioned earlier) may shift their weight dramatically. To make very tight low-speed turns, lift your butt out of the seat entirely and slide it well to the outside of the bike. Most of your weight should be on the outside foot-peg. This "counterbalancing" technique allows you to increase the lean angle of the bike, and tighten up your turning radius, without needing the centrifugal force generated during a higher-speed turn to keep you upright.

Take a walk

Of course, it's not always necessary, or even desirable, to ride your motorcycle through a tight turn. In parking lots, for instance, you may often find the best way to maneuver your bike is by straddle-walking it. In many instances, this is clearly the "safer" way to go, but it's not without some risk – or some skill required. When bikes go down, it's often while they're being walked or pushed in a parking lot.

Backing up a bike can be awkward, but it's especially tricky (and sometimes impossible) when you're trying to walk it backwards up an incline. Avoid the rookie mistake (hey, even Rider's Edge instructors sometimes do it!) of parking your bike facing downhill in a space you can't ride out of. Better to walk it in backwards so you can ride back out.

One thing to be careful of when backing your motorcycle into a parking space is not to turn your head too much. I know – that's the opposite of what we instructors usually say! But turning your head is one thing – turning your shoulders, shifting your weight, and straining to turn your whole body can easily make you lose your balance. And if your bike starts to tip, you'll be in an awkward position to keep it from going over.

Before you start backing up, do your best to position your bike so that you can guide it straight back, rather than having to maneuver it backwards. And use your mirrors as much as you can to guide yourself, rather than twisting around backwards.

Go slowly. You'll need to use your front brake to slow and stop the bike as you go backwards, but keep in mind that if you grab too much brake while the motorcycle is turning or even slightly tilted, the machine's momentum will tend to pull it further over. So apply it gently and keep the bike as upright as possible.

If you find yourself in a situation where your only choice is to back out of a parking space, and the grade is too steep to push it on your own, don't be afraid to ask for help. Have your passenger or a riding companion (or a random passerby, if necessary) push you slowly and carefully backwards, until you're in a position to ride away safely.

If you're a rider of shorter stature, walking your bike is one situation where it's very important that your motorcycle fits you properly. If you can barely touch the ground with your toes, your ability to maneuver the bike properly (or catch it if it starts to tip) will be severely compromised. Remember: Lower seats and suspensions are available through your Harley-Davidson dealer to help customise your bike's fit.

Putting it into practice

As always, the best way to improve these skills is to practice them. Find an empty parking lot and pick out three parking spaces. Practice turning around within the width of the three spaces. If you can successfully complete two consecutive turns within this width (about 27 feet), you will have bettered the practice width used in the Rider's Edge Skilled Rider Course (28 feet). And be sure to practice in both directions. Right U-turns are generally harder than left, as your throttle hand does most of the work. You'll be surprised at how quickly your skills improve with just a little practice (assuming you're using the proper technique, of course).

Better still, sign up for and take a Skilled Rider Course at a participating Harley-Davidson dealership near you, or another Advanced Rider Course sanctioned by the MSF.