

Street Savvy: Riding in Wind

photographer: Kevin Wing



Nobody likes being pushed around, least of all at 70 mph on the freeway, or somewhere north of 100 mph on the track. But that's exactly what a stiff wind will do unless you understand what you're up against. Quickly moving air, you see, behaves a lot like water. Navigating against a steady crosscurrent is relatively easy; steer into it just enough to stay on course. Plowing through a turbulent patch is more complicated. Steer or be steered. Constant corrective pressure on the bars and pegs is the only way to maintain the desired compass heading.

No matter how strong you are, the wind is stronger. So be smarter. Give yourself a cushion of downwind real estate wherever possible so unexpected gusts doesn't shove you into something solid, or off the road altogether. Plug in to your surroundings and you'll see most gusts aren't entirely random. Expect a blast of air to coincide with gaps in traffic or terrain--a line of large trucks or a canyon wall or emerging from behind some big wind-blocking urban structure--and brace yourself. The same plan works at the track.

Figure out where the wind wants to stand you up or push you over and then compensate by pushing back--and easing off and pushing back--just enough to hold your line. Gale-force wind at the apex of a corner, for example, means you need less throttle and more weight on the front wheel. Scooting up in the seat and moving your head and torso forward will help. Know thy enemy and you'll develop what wily Willow Springs veteran and Dunlop tire guru Dennis Smith calls "wind guts."

"Being familiar with what the wind does and where gives you an advantage at any track," Smith says, "because you're calm while the other guys are freaking out." How do you learn that? The same way you get to Carnegie Hall. Practice.

Tucking in a bit makes it tougher for the wind to get hold of you. So does snug-fitting gear, as opposed to the XXXL Army surplus rainsuit that jerks you around like a racing spinnaker at speed. Big bikes with big fairings can be especially unruly. If you ride such a beast, pay attention to how it acts in the wind and plan your reactions accordingly. Wrestling with any bike takes more effort in the wind. Dehydration and fatigue arrive earlier, so dialing down daily mileage is a good idea on long treks. Above all? Know your limitations. When the Weather Channel is reporting 70-mph gusts, switch to a nice solid seat at Starbucks or Denny's until things calm down.