

2 X 4 X 18 Side by Side or “Hey Good Buddy”

By Charlie Brown, CA-1F

Having ridden a motorcycle for 5 years and driven an 18-wheeled behemoth for 3 yrs, I would like to mention a few things that I have observed from the interaction of 2-wheelers and 18-wheelers. First of all, there is a good possibility that the driver of the big rig is also a motorcycle enthusiast. I don't have actual statistics but my own informal surveys link about 30% of the truck drivers to motorcycles. What does this mean to me? Most of them do not ride Gold Wings. They do not know that you can or want to communicate with them. There may be times when you don't, but that is another subject. The ability to communicate with them is a big plus. If you let them, they can guide you through a variety of tough spots. Understand that the truck takes a lot longer to get up to speed and also to stop. It is not a big thing for a motorcycle to slow and let the truck pass a slower vehicle you can roll it on and be back up to speed in no time. They can't so let them know on the CB that you are back there and that they can “bring it on over” to get around that slower vehicle. Most truckers use Channel 19. Stay out of the “NO ZONE” blind spots where they can't see you. Truckers are trained to continually scan both right and left mirrors.

As in other traffic interactions, the key is to be visible. If the trucker cannot see you, he or she will have a tough time being your friend. When approaching from behind or being passed by a truck, position the bike so that you can always see the eyes of the driver in their mirrors. If you can't see the driver's eyes, they can't see you. On a straight road, being in the left track will make you the most visible. In a right turn or curve, it will be necessary to swing to the right track for the driver to continue to keep you in sight. It is extremely disconcerting for the driver of an eighteen-wheeler to lose track of someone coming up behind them. They do not know what that person is doing. When you pass them or they pass you, their scan/vision level is above you so avoid being too close in front of them. If you are in close, the driver will likely lose sight of you. When it is obvious that the driver is going to change lanes in front of you, let them know on the CB or by flashing your bright headlamps that it is safe for them to bring it on over. Generally when you approach the rear of a big rig the wind will tend to keep you away from the trailer. Conversely when you approach the front of the tractor the wind flow will tend to pull you in toward the cab. Be prepared for the differential wind currents and maintain your track by counter-steering.

Keep in mind that at 65 mph, a fully loaded, 80,000 lb big rig will take two football fields to stop. That is 200 yards or 600 ft. At the same speed, it will take a motorcycle about 120 ft to stop. If you pull into the truck's path after passing less than 480 ft ahead of them and have to make an emergency stop, guess where you will be when the truck finally comes to a stop... Not a pleasant thought. The visibility from the cab of the truck is good, but be careful when passing on the right. Cancel that just don't pass a big truck on the right. I know there are times in traffic and in town when you find your self on the right side of a big truck. **More than likely they will not be able to see you.** Minimize the time you spend in that position. Here is a good time to communicate with the driver if you can that you are there. Between the tandem wheels of the tractor and several feet ahead of the front wheel is an area that the driver will not be able to see you. Stay out of that situation when you can. Watch for the truck for lane changes or a right turn while you are next to them. Always leave yourself an escape route.

I have had some very good experiences with truckers on the road and a couple of not so good ones. In general, the good experiences far outnumber the bad ones. One early morning, we left Tucson for El Paso and just west of Benson we ran into a fog bank so thick that we couldn't see the fog line. We would have gotten off the road if we could have found an exit. We got on the CB and told the trucker ahead of us that we were behind him and to please alert us of any hazards that he could see. He came back with the length of time that we would be in the fog and stayed with us all the way through it. Helpful? Very. We have also contacted truckers for information on traffic and routing when we wanted to avoid heavy traffic due to an accident or were looking for a twisty back road vice the super-slab. Some people are hesitant to contact truckers on the radio. Lets face it, they can be intimidating. However, I would advise you not to be intimidated. If you treat them with respect they are usually more than happy to be of help. It sometimes helps get their attention if you let your female co-rider communicate with them. For some reason, they tend to be a lot quicker to respond to females than males. This is not a sexist statement on my part, simply an observation. I hope this helps if you have any questions don't hesitate to ask, as there are several of us in the group that have experience driving 18-wheelers.

Ride Safe, Be Visible, and Communicate.