

A stylized, high-contrast illustration of a road scene. In the foreground, a white car is on the left and another white car is on the right. In the middle ground, a cyclist is riding a bicycle on a road marked with a dashed line and an arrow pointing right. The background shows more cars and a person walking. The title 'BETWEEN THE LINES' is centered over the scene in large, bold, white letters.

BETWEEN THE LINES

BY CAROLYN SZCZEPANSKI
ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID POE

Dealing with Road Hazards

At first, the secret service agents didn't know what to make of us.

It was a blistering July day and The Ellipse behind the White House was swarming with tourists. And there we were, a parade of bicyclists, setting up mini-obstacle courses marked with sliced-up tennis balls.

As part of our training to become League of American Bicyclists Cycling Instructors, we were out there for hours, running through drills that taught us how to dodge, weave, turn, and stop on a dime. As bike advocates and retailers, we all had years behind the handlebars. But, for most, it was the first time we were learning tactics to deal with the most common threats to our safety as cyclists.

According to the League, approximately 50% of bicycle crashes are falls. But the majority of falls aren't caused by motorists—they're brought on by road hazards like potholes, debris, and storm grates.

The first precautionary step in dealing with road hazards happens before you even leave the house. Check your tires and make sure the rubber isn't cracked or damaged, giving road debris a perfect little nest to burrow into your tube. And while you're down there, look for the suggested tire pressure listed on the sidewall and air up appropriately. If your tire is squishy and you roll over a pothole, you're more prone to a pinch or "snakebite" flat. That's when your tire is flattened against the rim and your tube is punctured in the process.

Once you hit the road, your next line of defense is a good offense. Hugging the curb isn't just poor positioning, it's also asking for a minefield of rocks, litter, grates, and roadway cracks.

"Don't feel bullied into bad pavement sections," says Price Armstrong, program manager for MassBike, the bicycle advocacy and education organization in the Bay State. "We all have a right to be there,

so don't get flustered if an impatient motorist hits his or her horn."

But you can only avoid what you see in advance. Scanning ahead is one of the cardinal rules of riding in traffic and it's not just to keep an eye on the cars. It's also to safely avoid a run-in with a wheel-eating pothole or tire-puncturing debris.

If you spot an obstacle up ahead, signal and move assertively out of the line of danger. Luckily, many road hazards are manageable if you have enough time to prepare for a safe approach or pull a quick avoidance maneuver.

For instance, when approaching a significant pavement crack or uneven surface, ride across it at a right angle. The same holds for train/trolley tracks and sewer grates; make sure your wheel is perpendicular, so it doesn't get trapped in the fissure. When you know you're about to traverse one of these bone-jarring surfaces, stand up. That way, your arms and legs act as shock absorbers and help you maintain your balance.

On rainy days, be even more diligent in scanning for metal hazards in your path, because water makes them all the more slippery. A steel plate in a construction zone will be especially slick, so slow down and avoid braking or turning until you're clear. Armstrong adds another tip: "In rain, avoid all puddles to the best of your ability, since you don't know how deep they might be."

Unfortunately, some hazards aren't so apparent. Sometimes you don't—or can't—see dangerous debris or a patch of deteriorated pavement until it's right there, a few inches from your wheel.

"You have to deliberately practice at times, so that when these situations arise, you have some skills in handling them," says Leslie Luciano, communications director for BikeTexas. Take a rock or piece of glass. You can learn to not sweat the small stuff if you master a maneuver called the rock dodge. To pull it off, ride straight at the object. Just before your tire would touch, turn your handlebars suddenly to the left and immediately back to center. It's just a quick flick, but it automatically leans your body to the right for a split second, allowing your front wheel to snake around the rock. It sounds

simple, but you won't get it on the first try. In fact, I didn't get it on the 50th try. But, as the League of American Bicyclists attests: "It is an essential skill for any cyclist to master."

But even a bike-handling guru will face scenarios when there's no time or space to execute an avoidance maneuver. Say you're riding on a busy road and there's a beast of a pothole stretching across the majority of the travel lane. The lane on your left is a steady stream of cars and the flow of traffic in your lane makes a quick stop impossible. "In those cases, you have to know how to bomb through without crashing," says Jason Van Driesche, Director of Advocacy and Education at Local Motion, an advocacy group in Burlington, Vermont.

"The most important thing is to keep your front wheel out of the action," he explains. "Pull your handlebar upward as you go over the hole or debris so only your back wheel hits the obstacle. You're far less likely to crash if you drag your back wheel through a bad situation, than if you dive your front wheel into it."

If you're a bit more advanced, Luciano suggests another option for those emergency situations. "If you run up against a sudden pothole, you have to be prepared to go over it, or jump it," she says. "So a quick bike lift is another skill set that's good to practice. If you have clip-in pedals, with feet parallel, all you have to do is jump, and the bike will follow. With fitted cages, the case is the same. If you have platform pedals, you put your feet parallel on the pedals, squeeze your legs into the seat and lift with your body."

So find an empty parking lot and set up your own obstacle course. Practice dodging and standing and approaching at right angles. Work on transferring your weight and executing bike lifts. When we're out there tangling with traffic, we often think cars are our biggest threat. But, statistically speaking, the roads themselves are more dangerous than drivers. And we have the power to take those perils out of the equation.