

# The Alternative Line

by Joe Holzer

for Publication in CNY-PCA Redline Report

Copyright 2000 im@holzerent.com

Last evening (5/17/00) was interesting in a number of ways. Not least of which; for the first time in my life, I was an earwitness to a fatal accident. More about that in a few minutes, dear readers.

I have been working with Kodak in Rochester since mid March. As usual, I live from my motorhome, visiting my actual home only as frequently as reasonable, although I know there are some who make the commute daily. I think they are likely to duplicate the accident above, so that's not for me. Again, more on this below. I also take my car trailer with me to these jobs, both because I like having brakes, and because I like to have options should something "break" (as was the case with the 993 at the Glen last year - the trailer let me get it home). But I noted that its brakes were not working well when I last towed it, so I worked on them last night. They are electro-magnets which grip the inside face of a brake drum, causing a leveraging of the brake shoes to grip the drum and exert the braking action. A proportional control adjusts current to the magnets, thereby regulating the amount of leverage exerted. A wire had fractured, and was quickly fixed.

I am staying at the campground nearest Rochester with capability to serve my needs, the Canandaigua KOA. It is about a quarter mile east of the intersection where the collision above occurred. Between them there is literally nothing but grass, which is why I heard it all. When I started at the KOA, they had no water in the "long-term" sites, so I was in a front site to start, but I moved to site 90 last week. Feel free to visit. We have seen a lot of rain, so the ground has been soft. Accordingly, I've used my '87 Audi 5000CS Turbo Quattro for all but two weeks so I wouldn't get stuck. Two weeks ago it had a problem; the left front brake caliper siezed while enroute to the camp. So I had to park on the paved road in front of the campground, which runs straight for miles in each direction, for jack support while I cured the problem. That brought a cop who parked behind me with his lights on for safety because "people come flying down here and might not realize you are there". Then on my way home that weekend, the left REAR caliper decided to sieze. After consuming a lot more gas than I wanted, I got home and reworked both rear sides at the house that weekend. Damned if the RIGHT front didn't sieze last evening! But now the ground was firm enough to drive across the grass to the concrete slab of the campground's pavilion, which worked fine as a jacking platform. Now they are ALL fixed, but this must be my month for bad brakes.

Anyway, it was while I was working on the car in the pavilion, which has an unobstructed line of sight to the intersection in question, and the sole item standing between the two; a Stop sign. I was looking away at the time, so can only surmise based on the data when I looked a few seconds after I heard the sound:

a) There was a sudden sound of compressive metal structures impacting one another (you know, a car crash!), FOLLOWED by screeching which is only evidenced by tire sliding. There had been NO sound beforehand.

b) I was looking westward from the north side of the road in front of the campground, and saw a stationary red car with a crushed front pointed essentially north. I could not immediately see the second car, as it was on the northwest side of the intersection in the low-lying grass. By the time I was able to get to the scene, the ambulances, etc. were all there. They had the road north from the intersection blocked in both directions, and were re-routing anyone approaching the intersection to the road which left to the west or east; the road I was on. The red car on the road was a Geo or Saturn. The grey car in the weeds, with its driver side pushed in about half the car width, looked to be a full-size Buick. It was facing southwest, and there were uncrossed tire drag marks leading to it across the damp grass. The sun was not low enough to have been a factor, and the road granularity provides little reflection of glare.

c) From each of the four possible directions to approach this intersection, there is a minimum 100 yards completely unobstructed view of the other three.

d) The news report the following morning announced that one of the drivers had been killed, and the other sustained only minor injuries.

First; is it important who was in which car? Certainly to their families. One was luckier than the other. Is it possible to predict which vehicle had the fatality? Almost certainly the Buick, because side impact is FAR more likely to cause brain injury when compared with belted head-on. Is it possible to reconstruct what happened? Certainly. NEITHER driver was paying attention. I'd like to know if a cell phone was in use in either car. On the other end is somebody going "Hello... hello... anybody there?". Given the limited injury information, it is probable the driver of the red car was wearing a seatbelt. If not, the severity of the damage to the larger car would mean they would submarine beneath an airbag if such deployed, and so would have severe leg injuries. The only thing a bag MIGHT have added to the belt could be an elongation of the time-base for deceleration of the driver. But the BELT saved his/her life. Now the Buick driver might have benefitted slightly were the car to have side impact bags, but few cars are so equipped, and none of those is a GM.

My father, who passed away a few years back, always refused to wear a belt because he had slid into a tree sideways in 1956, and was certain he would have been trapped in the then-available lap-only belt. He was wrong then, and now that we have three-point belts. In both cases, the physics are identical; shoulder portion simply slides on chest, hips will go wherever the seat is pushed, while heads travel toward the impact. Bad combo. So in any case I want to always have my seatbelt on, but those side-impact bags sound to be worth the effort. The front ones are more dangerous than helpful, as far as I (and most honest data) are concerned. But I digress.

Ever since humans started swinging through trees, at least according to Carl Sagan, they have had to calculate speed and distance of dynamic devices closing on one another. It is how they have managed to survive; hitting moving prey, avoiding moving predators, getting home from the mall. So here, obviously, we have a grey car travelling westbound on a straight road with unimpeded view of the red car traveling northbound at Grey's southwest. Grey does not stop for the sign, while Red takes seemingly no action whatsoever. The Big Bang.

Here's merely the TOP few of a long list of things that did NOT happen correctly:

a) Grey should have seen the sign AND Red and stopped. (S)he missed all three. Dumb.

b) Red should have been able to judge it, and realized that Grey is traveling too fast at the point of no-return to be able to stop, and applied the brakes (we won't even discuss the concept of EVASIVE action, which requires more than mere REACTIVE skills). They didn't. Mindless.

c) Each should have picked up the other peripherally, precisely because of their differential motion vs the background. Also nada - what were they doing, 'cause it sure wasn't DRIVING?

d) Neither assumed that the other was a potential threat, and therefore worthy of filing contingency flight plans. Excuse me; what was that... ?

And so on. It is hard not to feel sorrow for the family of the fatality. But it is also hard to look at the data above and not think of Charles Darwin, too. NONE of us can honestly say (s)he has always been in complete control and aware. As you can see, it takes only once. But the evidence is overwhelming that accidents occur only after TWO mistakes at least.

Consider the same scenario, but with the following changes:

- a) Grey recognizes Red after no-return and at least hammers brakes. Sound startles Red, who swerves to other lane, thereby resulting in glancing blow at worst. Still two mistakes; Neither saw the other because no tire squeel preceded the crash. In this case, you'd hear tires before the impact.
- b) Red sees Grey coming and nails brakes, swerves around BEHIND Grey, continues on swearing at moron. My kind of driver. No bent metal. Still, Grey made two bad errors, but Red made up for them.
- c) Grey happens to be the latest Ruf Twin Turbo in disguise, and waits until WAY past the seeming point of no-return before nailing the newest Porsche ceramic brakes, and the earth's rotation slows just enough to stop before the intersection. Two possibles for Red:
  - Mindless as original, is completely unaware. Turbo thinks "schmuck".
  - Feels earth move, thinks (s)he's going to die, swerves, brakes, whatever. When Grey doesn't actually enter intersection, thinks "schmuck", then goes to clean pants. (So don't try this at home... )

The issue in c) is one of dependency; So long as Grey does that which the sign says, without entering the intersection, Red can be mindless and still have no problem. Until Red reaches his/her stop sign a few miles up the road. Then watch out. And what DID happen is a reinforcement of the "drive defensively" trademark of the safety Nazis, whose code is that if you are doing NO speed, you'll never have ANY accidents. You'll also both; never get anywhere, and increase the number of mindless boneheads. If you doubt that, drive the 25 miles from my campground to Kodak Office via 490, and note the number of cars in the left lane you pass in the RIGHT lane. Now if they didn't notice my closing speed, my lights, or the mere fact that I am behind them, what hope have we that they will notice the car which misses the Yield sign at his entry ramp?

Is there something we can do to prevent our personal vindication of "The Origin of Species"? Yes. In fact, most of us do so subconsciously most of the time. The Red above, who would swerve to the BACK of the Grey or brake to avoid the surprisingly competent turbo, would demonstrate it. And our brains are VERY good at such calculations. It is the reason in NASCAR they say to aim for the car which is sliding; because by the time you get there, they CANNOT be there. It's called contingency planning. I happen to make my living doing so, but it really takes more discipline than genius. As you do WHATEVER you do, make note of all the things outside your control which could adversely affect you. Since "the ground erupting and swallowing me whole" is neither within my purview to affect, nor very likely to occur, it goes to the back burner intellectually. But "moron in front of you decides to stop for a squirrel stupid enough to race across a highway" has a much higher probability of occurrence. What would you do, besides plowing into his butt? That can depend. What is on your left or right? Why and when did you know that? (Because now is too late to look!) Will the traffic pattern be likely to place me in a position where I have no maneuver room? Can I avoid that situation, and which pedal will be most helpful in assuring that? If I need to swerve right, what can I do which prevents the SUV sleeping in the third lane from darting in to block my escape route? If I go there and move forward, will he even KNOW it?

The strange thing is you will also find yourself aware of a lot of things going on around you that would never have been on your radar otherwise. And if you doubt this is meaningful to saving your life, ask any Trooper why (s)he has a love/hate relationship with the people traveling 15% faster than the average flow of traffic. The answer is they KNOW they will be a target for radar, so they are constantly watching for cops, so they can't help but notice other things, so they are the least likely people to actually be involved in an incident, because they've already formulated and acted on the contingency plan. Makes it hard to set governmental policy, to suggest that the vast majority of scofflaws are actually GOOD for the overall accident rates.

When you compound that with the Ruf Turbo brakes, it makes for a very safe package indeed. Me. Just remember; the fact you are DUE the right-of-way doesn't mean you HAVE it.