



Ross Bentley's High Performance Driving Tips - #21

LEFT FOOT BRAKING

Of all the techniques a High Performance Driver uses, left-foot-braking has got to be the most controversial. So, let's take a look.

First, I'm assuming we're talking about left-foot-braking in an automatic transmission car on the street or using it in competition driving. I'll comment on the advantages and disadvantages of both one at a time.

In an automatic on the street, left-foot-braking is only effective if you drive with your left foot poised just above the brake pedal, ready to brake in an emergency. This saves the fractions of a second it takes to lift your right foot off the gas pedal, move over to the brake, and then apply. The argument goes that fraction of a second can mean avoiding a collision.

However, the disadvantages **may** outweigh the advantages. I'm sure you've seen the most obvious problem with left-footing it - the driver who allows the left foot to rest on the brake pedal. As you follow this driver down the road, with his brakelights ablaze, don't you ever have this overwhelming desire to rear-end them right now to get it over with? You know someone is going to do just that, soon. By the way, they are probably on their way to the brake shop to have them replaced for the fifth time ("cheap car!").

This is not, as far as I'm concerned, the most serious disadvantage. What is worse is not having the left foot available to brace the body under heavy braking, and not having the sensitivity for smooth braking that your right foot has. The right foot is in use probably 80 to 90% of the time on the gas pedal. This educates a driver's right foot to become very sensitive, so that when you apply the brakes, it's a smooth application. Even if you always left-foot-brake, your left foot is only being used at most about 30 to 40% of the time, and never becomes quite as sensitive as the right foot. And you know how smooth and sensitive you should be with the brakes!! A driver needs to brace his or her body under heavy braking - and using the steering wheel and the seatbelts is not good enough. By left-foot-braking, you are sacrificing the support your left leg gives, and smooth braking will suffer.

Getting back to the so-called advantage of it taking less time to react by having the left foot poised above the brake pedal. A study showed that 90% of your reaction time is mental - the actual time it takes to move your foot from the gas pedal to brake pedal is a non-factor. The advantages mentioned above are real factors.

Now, rally, slalom or racetrack driving are a different story. Left-foot-braking in rallying is almost a must - it is used to help pitch the car into a turn. In slaloming, again it can be used to help pitch a car into a turn, while helping save time moving the right foot - not to mention being able to keep the right foot on the gas while braking to avoid having the engine bog out of a corner. Left-foot-braking in road racing is used by a few drivers. When it is, it is usually to either transfer a little weight onto the front tires (to aid turning-in) without really slowing down (still keeping a little throttle on at the same time), or to help keep the boost up on a turbocharged car (again keeping the throttle on while braking). Or, the drivers became so accustomed to it from karting or after a leg/foot injury, it has just become habit. These techniques are not for the novice.

In fact, left-foot-braking for competition driving is a technique which takes quite a bit of practice to become very proficient at it. This is when I would recommend left-footing it during street driving - to practice. Otherwise, use the right foot. I believe that the minor advantage of left-footing on the street is heavily outweighed by the disadvantages. On the slalom course (and sometimes on the racetrack), however, perfect it and you're on the way to many more wins.

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