

The Art of Heel-Toe Downshifting

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Brakes seen better days? Fancy yourself an automotive and manual enthusiast? Ever advocate for #savethemanuals? You should probably be heel-toe downshifting.

I know, I know, “brakes are cheaper than clutches.” Hear me out (especially my fellow Americans). European drivers are taught to always stay in gear. None of this neutral coasting that is so ubiquitous in the States. And for good reason. Being in gear gives you an “out” should you need to perform an evasive maneuver—namely, accelerating past a point of conflict, should one arise.

To learn how to properly heel-toe downshift, I recommend some good, flat shoes, and some empty, open road. Much like left foot braking, there will be an initial tendency to slam on the brakes, but finesse is the name of the game here.

Begin by plain old rev-match downshifting. Blip the throttle with the clutch depressed and downshift through the gears. Once you can do this smoothly, with the proper application of gas, you’re ready to add braking to the method.

Start with light braking using the leading edge of your right foot. Pivot your ankle to the right and practice the movement while you’re at a standstill. Your knee should stay relatively motionless. Once comfortable with the positioning, start in 3rd or 4th gear, then practice applying light brake pressure and pivoting your heel to blip the throttle. It WILL be jerky at first.

Once you’ve gotten to a stage where you feel comfortable with the brake sensitivity, and are able to pivot your heel to blip the throttle accordingly, you can start applying more and more brake pedal. To be perfectly honest, it’s almost *easier* to do when you’re at full brake application simply because the gas and brake will, naturally, be closer together. But I would warn against braking at the limit until you can smoothly finesse the brake and blip the throttle the appropriate amount.

Practice, practice, practice. It’s not something that you can learn to do in a day. I’ve easily driven over 500k miles on manual transmission cars and have never had to replace a clutch, including putting over 200k miles on the clutch in my 2002 Sentra SE-R Spec V, so it’s something that comes quite naturally to me at this point.

Practice on your way to and from work. Practice on empty roads, and then, when you’re comfortable, start doing it in traffic when you’re approaching stoplights or signs. Practice modulating the brake to different degrees, and learn where the revs need to be in the next gear down so it all comes together smoothly.

Within a matter of months, you’ll have it down to a science, and you too can pretend your daily driving is a time attack trial. Even if you aren’t going to be doing it every time, you should know how to do it if you ever plan on calling yourself a master of the stick.

By Scott Taylor