

SHOULD WE APPLAUD MORE MOTORCYCLISTS ENTERING THE FRAY?

The transportation crisis Americans face, from skyrocketing gas prices to hopelessly congested highways desperate for overdue repairs, is often the subject of intense debate. Obviously, more people on motorcycles would help to quell some of these issues. But given current licensing standards, is it really a good thing if more people become motorcyclists?

The knee-jerk reaction is usually an enthusiastic "YES!" After all, if riding was more of a mainstay activity, it would result in increased awareness of motorcycles among the public at large, which should translate into better behavior when the masses get behind their steering wheels. With greater acceptability would come higher demand for technologies such as ABS and protective clothing, which would potentially make riding safer. The aforementioned environmental factors would be addressed, and perhaps more Americans would finally awaken to the fact that you really don't need a 3-ton Hummer to get to the local corner store.

But it's all a pipe dream, and the reasons why are as fraught with tangled complication as they are with ideological politics. Essentially, it can no longer be denied that the very incompetence which we loathe in our fellow four-wheeled drivers infects us motorcyclists as well. This is why, given current licensing standards, it might not be a great idea to see more people on bikes. Before you declare this unabashed elitism, consider the following:

We've just been avalanched with a heap of grim statistics from the National Transportation Safety Board's meeting last September. In 2005, 4,553 motorcyclists died in riding accidents, accounting for over 10% of all motor vehicle crash fatalities, even though motorcycles are under 3% of all registered motor vehicles. About half of these fatalities were single vehicle accidents on rural byways, giving credence to studies (e.g., Team Oregon's) which reveal rider error hovering around 90% as the root cause of the accidents. Data is still being gathered for 2006, but by all indications the death rate went up yet again for the ninth straight year, far outpacing any growth in new motorcycle registrations. Why are we dying at such an alarming rate?

First, the standards one needs to meet in order to obtain a motorcycle license in America are abysmally low. If you can complete a few wide turns at the DMV lot aboard an automatic 50cc scooter, the state will grant you a license to ride the liter-class superbike of your choice. Contrast this to Germany, where to legally ride a motorcycle, one has to:

A) Obtain a "theory" license demonstrating comprehensive knowledge of traffic rules

B) Pass a 60 minute practical test which encompasses riding in various kinds of traffic including highways, byways, rural towns, and cities

C) Successfully perform at least 5 evasive maneuvers such as emergency braking, swerving, and tight turns, all of which require a reasonable degree of skill

D) Comply with tiered licensing, which limits the displacement of motorcycle one can buy until the age of 25

Given this level of testing, it's not rocket science to guess which country has the lower motorcycle accident and fatality rates.

Second, MSF Rider Education curriculum has been gutted to the point where one practically needs to kill either themselves or someone else on the training range in order to fail. MSF is still better than the state's completely undemanding approach, but many veterans of the scene have observed new riders passing the Beginner's Ridercourse who had no business being on the road, and have also lamented the Experienced Ridercourse getting easier to pass over the years as well. Standards are continually dumbed down, perhaps because the MSF is partially funded by the big manufacturers, who are more than happy to usher as many potential customers through the program as they can.

Third, there is the uneasy foray into the politics of it all. We motorcyclists are a fiercely independent bunch, and we fear the Pandora's Box which opens when the subject of government licensing arises. Using the current example, with Germany's stricter licensing requirements come added bureaucracies to wade through, higher cost, and other Big Brother tactics like their notorious automated traffic enforcement. Manufacturers and their

dealers certainly won't support anything like tiered licensing or stricter standards because sales might be impacted. Any politician who makes it harder for citizens to enjoy the sport of their choice via stricter licensing is not going to win any popularity contests. Finally, there is the usual morass of subjective issues to get bogged down in, such as exactly how high to raise the bar, and the resulting cries from aspiring new motorcyclists as to why standards for boats, planes, and (especially) cars aren't rising as well.

All of these are fair points, and we haven't even touched on our cherished "personal freedom" yet! Today in the USA, 16 year old Junior has the freedom to buy a Hayabusa for his very first motorcycle, and Grandma also has the freedom to "drive," despite being half blind and suffering from acute dementia. We're ideologically trapped on the slippery slope between insanity disguised as liberty and the dreaded Nanny State which will protect us from Junior and Grandma - at a severely high price that none of us should want to pay. The answer lies in between: Yes, we do have the personal freedom to ride our motorcycles. Perhaps it's time to prove we can actually exercise that personal freedom - by riding competently - and verify it with higher standards.

It sounds harsh, but getting killed or maimed due to neglectful training is no less so. The newbie rider who sees motorcycling as merely harmless fun, or bought his bike only as a decorative object to gather approval, might benefit from some substantive instruction before venturing out. He should be taught that motorcycling is a potentially dangerous activity that requires serious attention to detail, being aware of your surroundings at all times, and practicing a fundamental skill set based on real world conditions. Better this than the unforgivable lack of mandatory instruction we endure today.

Which brings us back to the original question: Should we applaud more motorcyclists entering the fray? Until we're ready to give them proper training, let's keep the clapping to a minimum.

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POSTCARDS FROM THE HEDGE

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do to reboot your head after an adrenal attack (and obviously this isn't always possible) is to park the bike for a short interval, get off, stretch, and even go for a short walk to bleed off some of the hormones and get back to a calm, assertive state (thank you, Caesar Milan). This process really doesn't take too awfully long, and a break is always a good thing especially if you're on a long trip and/or have just had a really long day. There are tons of reasons why accidents occur, but having your mental state muddled by excess high-test in your bloodstream can certainly be a contributing factor.

Another factor here is plain old tiredness. It is my totally unqualified medical opinion that immediately after one of these hormonal moments you are more fatigued than you were before it happened, even though you may not realize it. You need to reset, relax, reboot. If you can't get off the bike for a few minutes, do some stretching on the bike when conditions permit, and mentally you can help get things back in to the calm state by checking over your ride. This means scrutinize your speed, mirrors, engine temp, fuel supply, anything you can to focus on the now rather than the event-that-just-nearly-screwed-the-pooch.

Which brings us back to that dang circling airplane in the Arizona desert. The adrenal attack in this enclosed space resulted in me not being able to go for much of a walk, so I had to diffuse the blood boost through casual conversation with the rather charming woman on my right, whom I got to know pretty well over the next 4 hours (and the subsequent six during our rescheduled second flight). Later, in a conversation with some pilots, I learned this interesting fact: While a 757 can't dump fuel, it can land with nearly full tanks if it has to and do so without any real danger of breaking things. When this happens, though, it's called an "overweight landing" and means the aircraft in question has to undergo a full structural inspection afterwards which is quite time consuming and expensive. So there is a big economic factor involved here, in addition to the safety issues. Who knew?

I do know this, though: all that adrenaline that flooded the gates was really not needed, as the danger was less that it initially appeared. I like not the great influx of this hormone, whether riding, flying, or dealing with the taxman. I prefer island time, bruddah.