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Saving Lives Through Motorcycle Education

by Mo Ismail

(English 1101)

Motorcycle fatalities are at the highest level they have been in ten years, with deaths of motorcyclists accounting for 11.3 percent of all traffic fatalities nationwide, with 4,810 riders dying in 2006. That is roughly 1 death per every 1,300 registered motorcycles (U.S. Dept. of Trans., 1). Deaths on motorcycles are increasing significantly every year and show no signs of slowing down. It is a serious problem that affects all of us in the motorcycling community, yet how much does the average rider really think about the statistics before he / she goes for a ride? Understandably, it's not something that we like to think about or purposefully bring to the forefront of our minds on a sunny summertime morning. Yet if you look at the four most common causes of fatal accidents involving motorcycles - lane errors, speeding, alcohol, and inattention - you realize that many accidents are attributed to what I like to call "the human factor", which, simply put, is something that we can easily fix ourselves (Washington State Dept. of Licensing, 9). And yet, the problem still exists; the human factor is still the largest cause of accidents by far. We, as motorcyclists, as well as many others in the motorcycling community, need to step up and take more responsibility if we wish to reduce the amount of our friends and family dying on motorcycles. For most of us, giving up riding is not an option. There are, however, many things we can do, either voluntarily or not, to fix as much as possible. I realize that fatal motorcycle accidents cannot be eliminated completely, but we need to acknowledge that we put ourselves at a higher risk than the average motorist in a car simply by getting on our bikes. We need to counteract this higher risk with a higher level of responsibility on our parts.

Northern Illinois University, in conjunction with the Motorcycle Safety Foundation, offers a basic course for motorcyclists which not only teaches riding fundamentals, but also street-riding strategies, the ability to deal with special situations, and rider responsibility (NIU Motorcycle Safety Project). The course is offered free of charge and they provide the necessary motorcycles and helmets to take the class with. It's an excellent course for beginning riders, or even experienced riders who wish to refresh their knowledge of basic riding skills. Still many new riders never take this course. It's difficult to get a seat in a class, the course has a very limited number of available seats in any given class location and time. Reservations for the season typically open up in March and fill up almost immediately. It's very surprising considering how beneficial the course is to riders that it isn't available on a more widespread basis, or that more people don't take some sort of training course. Some private companies do offer a similar course, for example, Harley Davidson's Rider's Edge, but at a higher cost (Rider's Edge). Street riding skills and rider responsibility really need to be given more emphasis to new riders, and to be more accessible than they currently are, so that hopefully they will put them into practice when they ride.

Currently, in Illinois, you cannot obtain a new license to drive a car without taking a state approved driver's education course (Illinois Secretary of State, 2). Many take the course as part of their high school curriculum, and others opt for private instruction. The course teaches new drivers how to properly operate a car, how to deal with emergency situations, and how to mentally prepare oneself to be a responsible driver. In contrast, in order to obtain a motorcycle license, you simply need to pass a simple written test of basic rules of the road and then operate a motorcycle on a closed course, which basically amounts to slaloming through a few cones and performing a U-turn (Motorcycle License). At no point do you need to deal with any real traffic situations; at no point do

you need to show any sort of responsible riding attitudes. It doesn't make sense to have a driver's education class required to drive a car, and yet not one to ride a motorcycle, an inarguably more dangerous form of transportation. To make matters even worse, you don't even need a motorcycle license to purchase a new motorcycle. My first brand new motorcycle, bought back in my less intelligent days, was purchased without a motorcycle license, and I rode it off the lot that day. A motorcycle safety course should be required to obtain a motorcycle license. Furthermore, a motorcycle license should then also be required to purchase a new motorcycle, because it will show that you have taken the course and should hopefully put some of what you learned into practice.

There are several ways that rider's education could be more widely available. The most obvious way would be to have the course available in schools alongside driver's education. Although due to the costs involved in maintaining motorcycles and safety equipment, this may not be feasible for many public schools, not to mention the actual percentage of people who want to ride motorcycles probably wouldn't make this sensible. A better answer would be to have an increase in privately available courses. If a rider's education course was required, it would open the door for many existing private companies and for new companies to begin offering a similar course. Perhaps the course could be offered by other manufacturers that take place at the local dealerships similar to Harley's Rider's Edge. This could also help fulfill requirements to have a valid license to purchase a motorcycle. Considering that motorcycle registrations have jumped 63 percent from 1997 to 2005 and show no signs of slowing down (U.S. Dept. of Trans., 1), there's the potential for private courses to be quite lucrative for companies offering the course, as well as the added benefit of expanding an entire industry of instruction and the jobs created by that.

Of course, putting what riders learn in a motorcycle safety course into practice isn't quite as easy as it sounds. Just taking the course doesn't guarantee that the street strategies and responsibly riding skills will make it to the road. This is where we as riders need to take over and realize that we need to be accountable for our actions. In 2005, twenty-seven percent of all motorcyclists who died in a crash were legally drunk, with blood-alcohol contents of 0.08 or higher. Forty-one percent of motorcyclists who died in single vehicle accidents, where no other vehicle was involved, were legally drunk. Add a variable of being a weekend to that number and you get sixty-one percent being legally drunk (U.S. Dept. of Transportation A Growing Safety Problem, 3). There are reported instances of fatally injured riders having BAC levels of 0.30 or higher (Washington State Dept. of Licensing, 12). This is roughly the equivalent of having 18 drinks in one hour, then going for a ride. Being taught about responsible riding isn't enough. We need to put into practice what we learn and set an example to newer riders. Bikers, by definition, are proud and stubborn, and can at times be overly confident about our mortality. It would be hard to admit sometimes we aren't fit to ride, and even harder to tell a fellow biker that. This is where being taught responsible riding and the actual effects of alcohol on the system is important, and sorely lacking in today's motorcyclists, so that we may be able to admit to ourselves when it's not safe to ride.

If motorcycle safety courses become mandatory to obtain a motorcycle license - and they should - there are a few obstacles to overcome. One problem, as discussed above, is the simple lack of available slots in the current NIU / MSF course. The easiest solution there is allowing privately owned companies to offer a state-approved course that would also fill the requirements to get a license. Without state subsidized funding, however, the cost for these courses would need to be passed along to the student. Harley's Rider's Edge offers a basic course as low as \$195 per student, depending on class type and location (Rider's Edge). Now I can't speak for every motorcyclists out there, but how many of us would even blink an eye at spending that much on a piece of decorative chrome? Considering the thousands upon thousands of dollars we spend on not just the motorcycles themselves, but in customization, another 200 bucks to actually learn how to properly ride it? Sounds like a great deal to me. Dealerships could even slightly raise the sticker price of motorcycles to include the fee then offer the course "at no additional charge" right there at the dealership,

fulfilling both the course requirement for the license as well as the license requirement to purchase. Not to mention the good marketing and PR image this would create by showing themselves as pro-safety on their motorcycles.

Eliminating deaths on motorcycles may be an unrealistic goal, however there must be some way to reduce the amount. Recent history has shown us many advances in automotive safety, yet the motorcycle remains for the most part unchanged. The most important safety feature on a motorcycle is the knowledge and skill of the rider himself / herself. The only way to improve upon that safety feature is to increase that same knowledge and skill. Requiring all motorcyclists to take a safety course may not be the final solution, but it has many benefits that go way above and beyond the current license requirements. The costs and logistics involved would only really be a factor in the short term, as many may not welcome the change, however safer roads for all of us certainly are worth it. If we can save just one life a year, then the gains far outweigh the costs.

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