

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

