Twopers and Flirters
By David L. Hough

Last year in the Letters column there was a “conversation” between myself and a famous track guru. “Mr. Guru” had noticed what he felt was a “glaring error” in a Proficient Motorcycling column, and invited me to attend his track school training camp where he could straighten me out. When I declined the invitation he apparently felt scorned, and subsequently generated an online column for a major motorcycle magazine in which he attempted to lecture on why his path to “motorcycle safety” is right, and my path is wrong. By now, readers of Proficient Motorcycling should understand that “motorcycle safety” is an oxymoron. Anyone who still talks about ways to make motorcycling danger-free is so far out of touch with reality that continued dialogue is very difficult.

What Mr. Guru got right is that I’ve suggested the importance of shrinking rather than growing motorcycling. What I said in our aborted conversation was that statistics show that “growing the sport” above perhaps two percent of the population results in increasing the fatality rate to a socially unacceptable level. On average, if we count all vehicle occupants, motorcycling is about 27 times more dangerous than riding in a car. That’s disturbing enough, but if we ignore passengers and compare only drivers to drivers, motorcycle drivers are about 35 times more likely to die, mile for mile. And no one seems to have found tactics that can significantly reduce that danger level.
Billions of dollars have been spent over the years attempting to create ways to make motorcycling less dangerous, but none of the popular countermeasures have reduced the danger to anywhere near that of driving a car. Conspicuity tactics have not been effective at preventing crashes because the human brain refuses to “see” things when it’s focused on something else. Protective gear works to reduce distractions and prevent external abrasions, but can’t protect critical organs such as the brain. Rider training (as currently conducted in state programs) has been scientifically evaluated, and found to make no difference in the crash experience of course graduates within the year after training.

I agree with Mr. Guru that what passes for rider training in state motorcycle safety programs does a very poor job of preparing new riders for the real world, but I’m not quite in tune with the idea that advanced skills reduce the danger. Mr. Guru put it to his track school instructors this way: “Let’s make awesome riders and we’ll also be making safe riders.” That’s very truthy-sounding, but it’s like saying, “let’s make awesome Alaskan crabbers, and we’ll also be making safe crabbers.” The danger of fishing in Alaskan waters, and the danger of motorcycling are both the antithesis of “safety.”

Mr. Guru suggests that the solution to avoiding crashes is getting every motorcyclist trained to a high skill level, similar to that of a military fighter pilot. It’s entirely possible that advanced training such as the Yamaha Champions Riding School could help reduce an individual rider’s danger level. But there’s no evidence that more training or more comprehensive training would reduce the number or severity of motorcycle crashes nationwide.

One big issue in both flying and motorcycling is that crashes are triggered not only by poor control skills, and lack of mental skills such as situational awareness, but by hazards such as systems failures which cannot be avoided.

My friend “Phantom Phil” (a retired “Top Gun” instructor pilot who flew the McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom) notes that the danger of flying fighter jets is very high, because a pilot can easily attempt maneuvers that send the aircraft out of control. A shocking number of very skilled pilots crash and die, even after years of high level training.
Perfomance riding.

Some motorcycle gurus suggest that motorcycling could be “safe” if riders became as highly skilled as fighter pilots. However, the truth is that a shocking number of skilled pilots crash and die. Becoming more highly skilled has little relation to decreasing danger because greater skill leads to taking greater chances.

Phil notes that “Fatalities have gone down over the years because the equipment has gotten better. In other words fly-by-wire airplanes (F-15, F-16, F-18, F-22) will not allow you to do stupid things as in the past. They will not go uncontrollable unless something fails.” That blows a big hole in the theory that advanced training is the road to “safety.”

But let’s dream for a moment that advanced motorcyclist training could prove to be a big advantage in reducing danger. Would we push state motorcycle safety programs to dump their beginner training and instead offer only track-school type courses? Could we replicate such training for the eight million or so motorcyclists in the USA? How would we convince large numbers of motorcyclists to take advanced courses that would involve hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars? In my opinion, making advanced rider training widespread is a pipe dream.

And of course, even if countermeasures such as advanced training or tougher licensing or improved helmets were 100% successful, that wouldn’t put a dent in the 3,500% danger of motorcycling. So, what CAN we do?

Mr. Guru made a claim that he apparently felt was preposterous: “None of us will be hurt riding a motorcycle if we only sit on the couch. So there’s an answer: Don’t ride. Fewer riders will be fewer fatalities.” Frankly, Guru had it correct, although he implied that there are only two choices: take advanced track schools or stay on the couch. I can think of other choices, say filtering out people who aren’t really serious about motorcycling.

Let’s face it: many people don’t have the motivation or passion to become serious motorcyclists. Some want to flirt with motorcycling, but have no intention of taking the time or effort to become proficient. Experiments have shown that many motorcycle students will opt out when the relative danger is fully explained. It would be better for all of us to have the flirters filtered out. In fact, I’ll suggest that if we don’t find a way to reduce the number of motorcyclists, the sport will be put out of its misery.
Twopers

Photo, Frazier stuck in sand again, Stuck Frazier 01

Dr. Gregory Frazier is a serious Twoper, having made five or six trips around the globe.

Danger be damned, a serious motorcyclist will get on a motorcycle and go places. Never mind the expense, the statistics, pressure from mom or the family doctor to not do it, the pain of injuries, or the bother of getting stuck in yet another sand dune. Given no outside pressures, about two percent of the population will take up motorcycling. Sitting on the porch is not an option. Of course it’s dangerous. The serious motorcyclist accepts that. And because the serious rider understands the danger and the importance of proficient skills and knowledge, he or she may choose to read books, practice maneuvers, and take training to build skill and knowledge.

I’m calling such dedicated motorcyclists “Twopers” to recognize that they are a very special two percent of the population. If motorcyclists added up to only two percent of the general population, the danger to an individual might be no different, but the total numbers of crashes, injuries, and fatalities would be fewer. The Transportation Safety Board wouldn’t have to list motorcycling as the most dangerous transportation mode. The Centers for Disease Control wouldn’t have to list motorcycling as a “disease.”

Over the past couple of decades our sport has grown from 3.7 million registered motorcycles in 1994 to 8.4 million in 2014. No one knows how many licensed motorcyclists there are in the USA, but if we guess one motorcyclist per registered machine, that means 3.7 million riders in 1994—a little less than 2% of 261.6 million people. In 2014 there would have been 8.4 million riders—almost 3% of 321.4 million people. Note that “Twopers” is a concept, not a specific percentage.

I don’t know why more people decided to become motorcyclists. I do know that state “motorcycle safety” programs typically think of their mission as rider training, and measure success as number of students trained. According to the Motorcycle Industry Council (MIC) the number of students trained in the USA each year rose from 130,000 in 1996 to 370,000 in 2006. I’d say that’s a pretty good description of “growing the sport.”
State motorcycle safety programs and training sites argue that they aren’t trying to attract more people to motorcycling; they are merely offering training to those who are already motivated to ride. But they do run ads to attract more students, and newbies are not filtered to determine suitability for motorcycling. Few students in learn-to-ride courses are given the facts about the danger. And it’s rare that anyone gets flunked out. The result is that the number of motorcyclists has grown, and so have motorcyclist fatalities. Total USA motorcycle fatalities were around 2,000 per year in the 1990s, doubling to around 4,000 per year since 2004.

Think of the situation this way: of today’s motorcyclists, about half (two percent of the population) are Twopers. The other half, “Flirters” are just dabbling with bikes, unaware of the danger and not really interested in gaining skill or knowledge. Filtering out the Flirters would reduce the number of crashes and fatalities.

What about the role of state “motorcycle safety” programs? Administrators are just beginning to realize that countermeasures such as training and license endorsements can be evaluated scientifically. Eventually more states will come to understand that the correct measure of success is not the number of students trained, but a drop in the number of motorcyclist fatalities. A few are starting to understand that their mission should be to help reduce the danger of motorcycling to citizens, not to help the industry “grow the sport.” Several states have worked up the nerve to separate from the motorcycle industry, including Oregon, Idaho, California, and Pennsylvania.

And what about awesome track school proponents like “Mr. Guru? Advanced training schools could focus on helping serious Twopers become better riders, and drop the “safety” hype.

If motorcycle fatalities are allowed to increase above the current 4,000 per year, we should expect governments to react. “The feds couldn’t outlaw motorcycles” you might be thinking, momentarily forgetting that the industry used to market three-wheeled ATVs. The concept of Twopers is pretty heady stuff, huh?

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