



SAFETY SKILLS BY DON GOMO

Taboo Topics & Myths

In our community of Harley riders, there are various topics that always bring up controversy, and, at times, heated discussions, sometimes to the point that folks do what they can

to avoid them. Let's take a look at a couple of these taboo topics, and toss in some myths that have come to be accepted as fact.

Loud Pipes Save Lives: before you bust out your ink and quill and start writing to the powers that be at AIM, I'll preface my comments by letting you know that I have four motorcycles in my garage, each having a set of aftermarket pipes. Let's look at the bottom line and offer some points for deliberation.

First, I do feel there are times that having a louder exhaust may be helpful in preventing an unwanted encounter with another vehicle. I also believe that anything that can help with our collective street survival is a good tool to have. With that said, we also need to consider the sound-related properties associated with motorcycle pipes, i.e. the physics side of things. For the most part, the sound that emanates from cycle exhaust systems is low, similar to the characteristics of a bass tone. That level of tonality is essentially a nondirectional sound, which means it spreads, and it's harder to pinpoint its origin. While a hog roaring through the streets will indicate that a bike is in the area, it may be hard to know exactly where it is, and what direction it is moving. Include the fact that the exhaust sound is projected rearward as the bike rolls forward, thus adding more separation from the audible source. Unlike a siren on an emergency vehicle (which is higher in pitch than a motorcycle's exhaust and pointed forward), the rearward direction and lower ambient tone of a given bike's sound generator can be considered inefficient as a warning/awareness tool. Also remember that prime motorcycling season occurs during warmer months, and cars are usually cruising with windows up and AC on, thus making the exhaust sound issue a nonissue.

The legal side of the loud pipes equation is an entirely different matter. More and more, we see laws being passed to curtail the ability to change motorcycle exhaust systems and cut down on noise. I understand the complaint from nonbikers, but I also think most of this problem is attributable to users of straight pipes, where there is no form of baffling involved, and in part by riders who enjoy exercising their egos through their throttles. One can be respectful of sound, without trying too hard, with most aftermarket pipes.

To Lid Or Not: here's another controversial topic that gets folks typing pro and con e-mails no end. As a MSF RiderCoach, I promote the use of helmets, but I also admit that I've ridden without donning a lid. I understand and appreciate the risks (from my perspective) connected to riding

without a helmet, and have reviewed tons of stats from both sides of the helmet debate. On one hand, helmet manufacturers have spent a lot of research and development dollars to ensure that visibility and ventilation are not compromised while wearing helmets of any kind. Additionally, helmets work well when it comes to lower-speed crashes. When a rider makes contact with an object, whether the road or something else, there's a good possibility that he's done something to avoid an accident. In such a case, the rider's helmet may prevent impact-related injury. Conversely, if a rider is going fast, or is thrown from a bike at high speed, I'm not sure how effective his helmet will be. It could help or hinder when he hits the turf. There is also published information that points to potentially increased chances of neck injuries from collisions while wearing helmets. Whichever side you're on with respect to helmets, the best thing to do is take the time to research and review as much data as you can to help make an educated choice. Just be careful what material you evaluate, as there's a lot of false or biased information out there, and it may take some time to sift through it all.

Finally, here's a couple of myths almost all of us have certainly heard. **Riding with a group is safer than riding alone:** sure, you have the advantage of being more visible, but consider the potential risks within an average riding group: diverse riding experience and skill sets, varied ages, rider unfamiliarity with one another, and even alcohol consumption can contribute to making group riding considerably more hazardous than navigating the roadways alone. **Experience = Skillfulness:** having years of riding experience does not automatically translate into possessing adequate riding skills. Learning basic motorcycle operating functions can be accomplished in a short time frame (the MSF BRC is slated for 15-20 hours), but developing strong riding skills takes significant, and ongoing, education and practice. From my experience as a motorcyclist and MSF instructor, I assure you that such skills cannot be mastered by simply "riding around" for years.

Obviously, we could go on discussing these topics in greater depth, but let's consider this month's column as simply some food for thought. There are always two sides to each issue; the key is to consider all the correct information and choose what works best, and is safest, for us to keep doing what we enjoy: riding freely. Keep it safe out there and keep thinking things through. **AIM**