

Did you see a motorcycle today?

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(Editor's note: The following guest column was written by Tom Nugent, State Director of Safety Education, ABATE of Florida, Inc.)

You should have seen at least one. After all, the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (DHSMV) Licensing Division said they have issued over 863,000 motorcycle endorsements to Florida riders as of 2007. According to the 2004 census, the entire population of Clay County was only 164,394. That means there are five motorcycle riders in the state for every person in Clay County. If you didn't see one today - that is hard to believe.

If you never left your home you would not have seen one unless you have a rider in the family. Perhaps you live in a very rural part of the county with few multi-lane streets but lots of quiet two-lane roads. This is just the place bikers like to ride. So it is hard to imagine that you did not see even one. More than likely, it was because you were not looking for one. People tend to see those things that interest them, things that heighten our senses and cause us to perk up our ears. Quite honestly, most people are just not that interested in motorcycles and certainly would not like to ride one. As a result, the smaller size of a motorcycle does not trigger the same response as you would experience from even a small car or truck.

The problem arises when you the driver don't see me the motorcyclist; when you change lanes without taking that extra look; when you make that left turn in front of me, or you pull out from a parking lot or side road. You don't do this intentionally. You do not want to be in a crash. You just did not see us. Why? You didn't see us because you are not trained to look for motorcycles. We are a small portion of the vehicles on the road but our numbers are growing. Registrations increased 15 percent between 2005 and 2007. Motorcycle endorsements increased by 44,900 in the same period. These numbers are sure to increase even more as the price of gas and automobiles increases; as more baby boomers take to the roads; and as scooters become a more popular way to get around neighborhoods.

Now some of you are saying that motorcycles should be looking out for cars. Believe me we do! No motorcyclist intentionally challenges a car for a piece of the road. You out weigh us twenty to one. You are encased in steel and we are exposed to all the dangers you pose. However, Florida Statute 316.208(1) states "Any person operating a motorcycle or moped shall be granted all of the rights and shall be subject to all of the duties applicable to the driver of any other vehicle..." That means that motorcycles are allowed to use the entire width of a traffic lane and no one is allowed to attempt to share it with them. We are allowed to ride on Florida roads just like other motor vehicles.

The horror of it all is that in 2008 Florida lost 502 motorcycle riders to traffic crashes and approximately 75 percent of these were not the fault of the rider but that of the driver of another vehicle. While this is a reduction from the 517 riders who died in crashes in 2007, it is still unacceptably high number of lives cut short because

of inattention. Some of these riders were doctors, nurses, teachers, law enforcement personnel, carpenters, plumbers, your neighbors, your friends, your co-workers, and perhaps your family.

The easy fix clamors for mandatory helmet laws. The truth is 80% of the hospitalizations were for injuries to other parts of the body that a helmet would not protect. According to the 2008 DHSMV Traffic Crash Statistics Report helmeted riders accounted for 52% of the fatalities compared to only 32 percent of non-helmeted riders. Clearly helmets are not the answer. Prevention of crashes is the only sure way to reduce injuries and fatalities - for if there is no crash there can be no fatality. Awareness on the part of motor vehicle drivers and safer defensive riding practices on the part of motorcycle riders is paramount to saving lives and reducing injuries.

The Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (DHSMV) web site motorcycles.hsmv.state.fl.us/ provides information about the Florida Rider Training Program and a list of schools that offer the Motorcycle Rider Foundation – Basic Rider Course. This course is mandatory for all Florida motorcyclists and provides a wealth of information that will help even experienced riders. This site is directed at those who want to ride motorcycles

But what about the person who only wants to be a safer driver but doesn't want to ride a motorcycle? ABATE of Florida, Inc. is a non-profit motorcycle group dedicated to protecting the rights and lives of motorcyclists. They offer a free presentation on Motorcycle Safety Awareness to help the non-rider understand how to safely share the road. This presentation is available to any group or commercial enterprise that would like to educate their members on safer driving habits. Commercial organizations may be able to incorporate this into their safety training requirements while non commercial entities benefit by having their members become better drivers.

All it takes is an e-mail to the state-safetydirector@abateflorida.com or visit the website at www.abateflorida.com/ and follow the links to a chapter near you. We want you to see that motorcycle and prevent another crash.

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