

Safety Corner (September 2008)

“Stupid is as stupid does...”

Those words were uttered by Tom Hanks in the movie “Forrest Gump,” and I saw plenty of examples while riding around town during the Harley-Davidson 105th anniversary celebration in Milwaukee from August 27th – 31st. Although Wisconsin is a helmet-optional state (things have changed in the 30-plus years since I left), I still couldn’t understand some of the risks my fellow riders were taking, such as:

- This guy definitely wanted to show off his tan and his tattoos. While riding down Interstate 43 from the Capitol Drive power-train assembly plant, this “stud-muffin” was wearing leather chaps on top of his blue jeans, a respectable pair of boots, and Oakley wrap-around sunglasses – and not much else (no telling if he was riding “commando” as well). Anyway, not only was he not wearing a helmet or any other head gear, he had no shirt, vest, jacket, gloves, etc., and he was moving along at a healthy 70 mph. Right next to him was the sort of thing that would make a casual observer think, “What’s wrong with THIS picture?” Another biker, whether he was his “wing man” or just happened to be riding in the next lane over, was wearing a three-quarter helmet, sunglasses, gloves, a T-shirt, leather vest, jeans and boots. Although it wasn’t ATGATT (all the gear, all the time), it was a far-cry from the almost totally unprotected style that the first rider had adopted. Want to guess who is going to suffer more “road rash” (and other injuries) if he and the bike go from vertical to horizontal?
- Having just left the Milwaukee H-D dealership (which shares the parking lot with the Botta-Bing dance club and bar), after giving up some green to the local vendors set-up there, I got on my bike to return to the house. Behind me and up a sloping driveway, another rider straddled his Electra Glide – and promptly tipped over to his right, hitting the pavement with the bike on top of his right leg! I started to get back off my bike when two other gentlemen ran over to help him right the bike, as two half-empty beer bottles rolled out from under the bike and down the driveway into a ditch. Luckily, these two “friends” (old or new, I couldn’t tell) saw that this biker was in no condition to ride his motorcycle and, arm-in-arm, they led him away from the bike and sat him down in the shade under a nearby tree. As I pulled away, one was putting the bike’s keys in his pocket, while the other was making a call on his cell phone – hopefully, to hail a taxicab.

I could list countless other situations that I observed, most of them involving alcohol consumption or improper/nonexistent riding gear, but I think you get the point. The one person who can provide the best protection is the one between the handlebars and the seat – you, the rider, and nobody else. Because you never know what sort of hazards are out there and how you will react to them. Case in point: on August 29th, the third day of the celebration, the following was reported in the local newspaper* and on several local radio and television stations:

Charges are expected today against a suspected drunken driver who struck and killed a Harley-Davidson motorcyclist Friday on the east side, according to the Milwaukee County district attorney’s office. The victim has been identified as Michael V. Fleming, 55, of Ann Arbor, Mich., who was in town for Harley’s 105th Anniversary Celebration.

Fleming had previously visited Milwaukee for Harley’s 95th and 100th anniversary celebrations, said Ron Betts (who met Fleming through a Michigan Harley Owners Group 12 years ago), 60, of Brighton, Mich. The friends were eastbound on North Ave., on their way to see a Harley dealership,

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when a woman attempted to make a right turn from Humboldt Blvd. Fleming was struck about 2:15 p.m. and died on the way to the hospital of injuries to his head and torso, according to the medical examiner's report.

"I saw this car hit an eight-inch curb, she went up on the sidewalk and came up behind me. I thought she missed Mike," Betts said. "I saw her keep going down the road. When I looked back I saw him lying in the road, the bike next to him."

Kathleen Boland, 61, of the 2300 block of N. Humboldt Blvd., is charged with one count of homicide by intoxicated use of a vehicle and one count of homicide by use of a vehicle while operating with a prohibited blood alcohol concentration. According to the complaint, her blood alcohol concentration tested 0.182 percent more than an hour after the crash. Investigators estimated her blood alcohol level at the time of the accident to be at least 0.202 percent and at most 0.232 percent, nearly three times the legal limit. The legal blood alcohol concentration in Wisconsin is 0.08 percent. Boland, heading south on Humboldt, ran a red light and swerved wide as she turned right onto North, according to the complaint. Her 1997 Mercury Grand Marquis hit the south curb of North Ave. then sped up as she hit Fleming while she attempted to move into the westbound lane. A witness told police he saw Boland holding the sides of her head and mouthing the words "Oh my God," as she brought her car to a stop, according to the complaint.

In the aftermath of the crash, people went out of their way to help, Betts said. A biker who had been getting gas nearby chased the car down the block and grabbed the keys out of the ignition. A couple who lived in the area invited Fleming's friends into their home. A taxi driver who had witnessed the collision dropped off his fare, then returned to the scene. And after Fleming's death, people who didn't know him contributed to a makeshift memorial at the intersection.

Although Fleming was not wearing a helmet, his injuries were so extensive a helmet likely would not have saved him, Betts said. It angered him that anyone would try to deflect the blame for Fleming's death away from the woman who hit him.

*[*Excerpts from the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel articles "Charges expected today in death of biker" by Gina Barton and "Woman in cyclist's death was drunk, complaint says" by Crocker Stephenson.]*