

# The Wild One

Dick Teresi, 05.03.99

ABATE, OR AMERICAN BIKERS AIMING TOWARD EDUCATION, is a nationwide organization of helmet-hating Harley riders. Mensa is an international organization of geniuses and near-geniuses. Its members must score in the top two percent of the population in an intelligence test.

The Gator Alley chapter of ABATE challenged its neighbors in the Southwest Florida chapter of Mensa to a whiz-kid test of knowledge. No bikes, no chains, no colors. Just tough questions, such as "What was established by the Lateran Treaty of 1929?"

The showdown took place in Bonita Springs, Florida. It was a seesaw battle, but in the end, the bikers won. To be truthful, Mensa played without the services of its president, Jeff Avery. On the other hand, the ABATE team played without Avery also. He disqualified himself, being president of both clubs. After their loss, the Mensans sat down with their opponents and listened to arguments for the bikers' favorite cause: the repeal of motorcycle helmet laws for bikers over the age of 21. Several Mensans, swayed by the logical arguments, joined ABATE, even some who were not bikers.

I cite the Mensa-ABATE showdown to demonstrate that not all anti-helmet-law activists are intellectually challenged, which is the prevailing media consensus. The TV reporter interviews a helmet-law advocate, a scientist (smart) in a white lab coat pointing to a hard, spiffy helmet. Then she interviews a drunken, tattooed biker (dumb) who screams "Helmet laws suck!" as he falls off his barstool.

It seems intuitive that wearing something hard on your head would help you survive a motorcycle accident. Many state legislatures agree. Twenty-two states and the District of Columbia now have laws mandating helmet use by adult motorcyclists. The laws appear to work. A study by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) indicates, quite conclusively, that motorcycle deaths per 1 million residents are lower in states with helmet laws.

That sounds good, but we could make the same argument for surfing helmets. Let's say Kansas, Nebraska and Wyoming pass laws requiring helmet use by surfers. California does not. The CDC then does a study, finding that states with surfer-helmet laws have fewer surfing deaths per 1 million residents than California does. This would be a ridiculous argument. People don't surf in Kansas, and if they did, it would be relatively safe, helmet or no helmet, there being no ocean.

Similarly, you find a lower density of bikers in helmet-law states. For many bikers, motorcycling with a helmet is like surfing without an ocean. Compare Florida, a helmet state, with Iowa, a no-helmet state. Florida has a beautiful, year-round riding season. Iowa has a long, brutal winter. Yet Iowa has more than three times the number of registered motorcycles per hundred population as Florida. In California, a onetime biker paradise, registrations dropped by 22 % (138,000 fewer bikes) in the first four years after its legislature passed a helmet law. Overall, states with no helmet laws had 2.6 motorcycle registrations per 100 population compared to 1.3 in helmet-law states. In other words, non-helmet states have twice as many bikers.

Let's go back to those CDC statistics that show helmets prevent deaths. If we use the same statistics, but count fatality rates per 10,000 registered motorcycles rather than per all residents, one finds that helmet-law states actually suffered a higher average fatality rate (3.38 deaths per 10,000) than non-helmet-law states (3.05 deaths). This is not sufficient evidence to prove that not wearing a helmet is safer, but it demonstrates that helmet laws do not reduce deaths.

Another way to measure the difference is to look at deaths per 100 accidents. Not even helmet advocates suggest that helmets will reduce the number of motorcycle accidents. The purpose of a helmet is to help the rider survive an accident. The numbers indicate otherwise. During the seven-year period from 1987 through 1993, states with no helmet laws or partial helmet laws (for riders under 21) suffered fewer deaths (2.89) per 100 accidents than those states with full helmet laws (2.93 deaths).

How can this be true? Is it possible that helmets don't work? Go to a motorcycle shop and examine a Department of Transportation-approved helmet. Look deep into its comforting plush lining, and hidden amidst the soft fuzz you'll find a warning label: "Some reasonably foreseeable impacts may exceed the helmet's capability to protect against severe injury or death."

What is a "reasonably foreseeable" impact? Any impact around 14 miles per hour or greater. Motorcycle helmets are tested by being dropped on an anvil from a height of six feet, the equivalent of a 13.66-mph impact. If you ride at speeds less than 14 mph and are involved only in accidents involving stationary objects, you're golden. A typical motorcycle accident, however, would be a biker traveling at, say, 30 mph, and being struck by a car making a left turn at, maybe, 15 mph. That's an effective cumulative impact of 45 mph. Assume the biker is helmet-clad, and that he is struck directly on the head. The helmet reduces the blow to an impact of 31.34 mph. Still enough to kill him. The collisions that helmets cushion effectively--say, seven-mph motorcycles with seven-mph cars--are not only rare but eminently avoidable.

Another reason helmets don't work: An object breaks at its weakest point. Some helmet advocates argue that while helmets may not reduce the overall death rate, they prevent death due to head trauma. Jonathan Goldstein, a professor of economics at Bowdoin College, in Brunswick, Maine, wondered how this could be. If fatal head traumas were decreasing, then some other kind of fatal injury must be rising to make up the difference. Applying his expertise in econometrics to those aforementioned CDC statistics, Goldstein discovered what was happening. In helmet-law states, there exists a reciprocal relationship between death due to head trauma and death due to neck injury. That is, a four-pound helmet might save the head, but the force is then transferred to the neck. Goldstein found that helmets begin to increase one's chances of a fatal neck injury at speeds exceeding 13-mph, about the same impact at which helmets can no longer soak up kinetic energy. For this reason, Dr. Charles Campbell, a Chicago heart surgeon who performs more than 300 operations per year and rides his dark-violet, chopped Harley Softail to work at Michael Reese Hospital, refuses to wear a helmet. "Your head may be saved," says Dr. Campbell, "but your neck will be broken."

John G.U. Adams, of University College, London, cites another reason not to wear a helmet. He found that helmet-wearing can lead to excessive risk-taking due to the unrealistic sense of invulnerability that a motorcyclist feels when he dons a helmet. False confidence and cheap horsepower are a lethal combination. I called a local (Massachusetts) Suzuki dealer, and told the salesman I was a first-time buyer looking for something cheaper than the standard \$15,000 Harley. He said I could buy the GSXR 1300 for only \$10,500, a bike that could hit speeds in excess of 160 miles per hour. He recommended that I wear a helmet, even in non-helmet-law states. Imagine: a novice on a 160-mph bike wearing a plastic hat that will reduce any impact by 14 mph. It's like having sex with King Kong, but bringing a condom for safety's sake.

Why the enthusiasm for helmets? Mike Osborn, chairman of the political action committee of California ABATE, says insurance companies are big supporters of helmet laws, citing the "public burden" argument. That is, reckless bikers sans helmets are raising everyone's car insurance rates by running headlong into plate-glass windows and the like, sustaining expensive head injuries.

Actually, it's true that bikers indirectly jack up the rates of car drivers, but not for the reason you might think. Car drivers plow over bikers at an alarming rate. According to the Second International Congress on Automobile Safety, the car driver is at fault in more than 70% of all car/motorcycle collisions. A typical accident occurs when a motorist illegally makes a left turn into the path of an oncoming motorcycle, turning the biker into an unwitting hood ornament. In such cases, juries tend to award substantial damages to the injured biker. Car insurance premiums go up.

Osborn sees a hidden agenda. "They [the insurance companies] want to get us off the road." Fewer bikes means fewer claims against car drivers. Helmet laws do accomplish that goal, as evidenced by falling motorcycle registrations in helmet-law states. It is interesting to note that carriers of motorcycle insurance do not complain about their clients. Motorcycle liability insurance remains cheap. Osborn pays only \$125 per year for property damage and personal injury liability because motorcycles cause little damage to others.

Keith R. Ball was one of the pioneers of ABATE, its first manager in 1971 and later its national director. What annoys him most is the anecdotal approach taken by journalists who have a penchant for reporting whenever the victim of a fatal motorcycle accident was not wearing a helmet. When was the last time you saw a news item mentioning that a dead biker was wearing a helmet?

Which is not to say that Ball opposes helmets. He thinks anyone who rides in a car should wear one. After all, he points out, head injuries make up only 20% of serious injuries to motorcyclists, but they account for 90% of all car injuries. If Ball's idea catches hold, one day I suspect you'll see angry men stepping out of Volvos with odd T-shirts beneath their tweed jackets. The T-shirts will read: HELMET LAWS SUCK.