

## Going whole hog too soon

By Steve Miller

STURGIS, S.D. - After his Harley hit a median curb at 30 mph in LaCrosse, Wis., Mike Eckman began to think that maybe learning to ride on his way to the annual motorcycle rally at Sturgis, S.D., wasn't such a good idea. With little riding experience, Eckman, formerly of Rapid City and now of Ocala, Fla., bought a new Harley-Davidson Road King in the spring of 2000. "I barely knew how to ride," he recalled. But he rode the 700-pound bike from Ocala to Minneapolis, left it with a relative and flew back to Florida. A month or so later, he flew back to Minneapolis, picked up the bike and rode it to Sturgis.

It was an adventure. Eckman remembers looking away, hitting the throttle and then bouncing up over the curb onto a median in LaCrosse. "I kept on going, rode off the median and broke my kickstand and bent the front fork," Eckman said. "I wished I had a bike that I could handle better. Here I was on this big bike, and I wasn't very good at riding." But, he thought, "let's go to Sturgis while I learn."

When he finished the trip, Eckman thought, "Damn, that was crazy," he recalled in a phone interview last month. Eckman's novice ride to Sturgis, although not recommended, is certainly not unique, according to law enforcement and motorcycle safety experts. They say many bikers at the rally in recent years make two common mistakes: They come to the rally with too little riding experience and too much motorcycle. Thousands of motorcyclists from across the country are en route to Sturgis for this week's rally.

Riding motorcycles is, by nature, risky. The rider and passenger are exposed, and if they fall at 60 mph or get hit by a 4,000-pound pickup, they're likely to get hurt.

Sturgis Police Chief Jim Bush said he has been seeing more novice riders come to the rally in the past four or five years. "It might be their first year riding when they come to the rally," Bush said. And inexperienced riders, especially those who come from places that have few curvy roads, are doubly vulnerable when they cruise the mountainous curves of the Black Hills, Highway Patrol Capt. Greg Ingemunson of Rapid City said. "We're seeing more inexperienced riders, people trying to get the feel of the rally on the back of a motorcycle and not really having a background in riding," Ingemunson said. "And then, they get into some of our curves here and get over their head and can't pull out of it."

Another common mistake of many new riders is buying a first bike that is too

big for them, said Ted Erlewine of Rapid City, who has ridden motorcycles since 1957 and now teaches motorcycle safety for the South Dakota Safety Council. Erlewine estimates half the people in the motorcycle classes go directly from one week on a course bike weighing no more than 350 pounds to a full-sized motorcycle weighing 600 to 800 pounds or a racing replica with 100 horsepower or more. "They're buying what they can afford, and they can afford what they want.

What they want is a big Road King or a big Gold Wing. They aren't necessarily buying the best bike for a beginner," Erlewine said.

He urges people who graduate from the safety classes to buy a smaller bike to ride for a few months before going to a bigger motorcycle. He said the smaller course bikes loaned by dealers usually are available for sale at the end of the instruction season. Erlewine said Japan and some European countries require new riders to ride a smaller bike first. He also said bigger isn't necessarily better. A recent trend, he said, is the move toward dual-sport motorcycles that can travel on dirt tracks as well as paved highways. They often weigh 200 or 300 pounds less than the big highway bikes. On the other hand, Erlewine said, larger motorcycles are involved in fewer

accidents overall, probably because they are easier for other motorists to see.

Erlewine has taught motorcycle safety classes since 1981. He said more people are taking the safety classes. That's a plus. People who have completed motorcycle safety classes show up less often in accident statistics, he said. "A lot of that has to do with the fact that they have specific strategies," said Rick Kiley, motorcycle safety program director with the South Dakota

Safety Council. "They have learned braking skills. Accidents often involve people with poor

braking skills and absence of the ability to swerve," Kiley said. Ingemunson said inexperienced riders, as well as riders impaired by drugs or alcohol, are over-represented in accidents.

Last year, seven bikers died during the rally in western South Dakota, according to the Highway Patrol. Eight died in 2002, six in 2001 and 10 in 2000, according to unofficial tallies. For all of last year, there were 21 motorcycle fatalities in South Dakota.

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