

Drinkin' in the Name of Science

When Karen Kadar of Comprehensive Safety Systems asked me if I wanted to participate in a drinking and riding experiment in the fall of 2000, I immediately volunteered. Free drinks on the government's tab? Count me in!

Comprehensive Safety Systems (CSS) was awarded a grant by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to study impaired riding in Minnesota. Alcohol is a huge factor in motorcycle fatalities, and Minnesota has one of the highest rates in the country. Among other activities, such as a new motorcycle curriculum package for driver-ed classes and two "saturation" patrols in June of 2001, CSS staged an impaired-riding event to showcase the effects of alcohol on riding skills.

There were five of us who volunteered: Dirk, Sue, Greg, Michele, and I. We arrived by limousines around eleven in the morning. Well, not by limousines, exactly: more like passenger vehicles driven by limo drivers. Well, not limo drivers exactly: just friends who for some reason volunteered a day off to haul our drunk asses home. Anyway, we arrived before breakfast, which is to say that we were forbidden from eating anything until after the experiment.

We met at the Highway Safety Center in St. Cloud. That's the same place where law enforcement can learn cool stuff like pursuit techniques and how to ram other vehicles. They also have a testing pad for motorcycle riders, identical to the ones used by the state for skill tests. In addition to CSS staff, we were treated to the undivided attention of the Minnesota State Patrol "Trooper Doug" and Gordy Pehrson, a senior license examiner for Driver and Vehicle Services. Doug's job was to administer the breathalyzers. Gordy's was to score the tests. A film crew from SAGA Marketing was there, as were two members of Minnesota Dial-A-Ride.

We took the state's motorcycle test three times: one time sober, once at .04% BAC, and once more at .09%. The test consists of a sharp left turn, a controlled stop, a cone weave, a U-turn, a quick stop, and a swerve. While the applicability of these particular maneuvers to the street is debatable, the skills needed to perform them demonstrate overall control, balance, confidence, skill, reflexes, and knowledge. On the sober round, we all performed passingly. I believe we each made a couple of minor mistakes, but not enough to fail the test.

For weeks before the event I was very nervous, grinding my teeth and worrying my hands. I didn't know how the booze would affect me. I didn't know if I could make the bike do those things after I'd tipped a few. I didn't know if I could even stay upright.

Besides being deathly afraid of pain, compounding my anxiety were flashes of my upcoming wedding the following week and how pissed-off my fiancé would be if I showed up for wedding pictures with each arm in a big white cast. I was filled with dread at the possibilities. I almost turned in my Breathalyzer straw and let the others do the dirty work. Sadly, while my brain was busy trying to find a way out of my predicament, my feet were already taking me toward my destiny. Funny how that works.

After our first test, we were ushered into the "laboratory": a big semi-trailer. Inside were twenty-four of those driving simulators, complete with steering wheels, speedometers, pedals, shift levers, and little tiny windshields. We each slid into a cockpit that suspiciously resembled the dashboard of a late sixties Impala, don't ask me how I know, and accepted a complimentary beverage.

Carla the Bartender doled out vodka and sodas, shortly thereafter known as "Loudmouth Cocktails," for me and Dirkie, canned beer a.k.a. "Brown Whizzers" for Greg and Michele, and white zinfandel for Sue. Our immediate goal was to pound three drinks in an hour and then retake the test, so we got down to business.

Phase one was astounding. I'm sure you can imagine. The dumbest things became howlingly funny. We turned up the volume. Way up. Halfway through my first drink I was already thinking about the second. "I'd like two limes in the next one, please." By the second drink, Sue and Michele started getting all flirty. So did Greg, now that I think about it. You could count the number of drinks they'd each consumed by counting the number of times they touched you or squeezed part of your body during any 60-second time period. They each eventually downed seven. Yikes. Dirkie target-fixated on a wallet photo of someone's twenty-year-old daughter, hinting loudly that he would still be eligible until March. Michele and I somehow managed to fit two people in my simulator. Too bad I forgot my make-out tape.

I've seen those blood-alcohol cards where you can measure your BAC by figuring your weight and number of drinks, but I was astonished at the way my body reacted to three highballs on an empty stomach. I bounced down the trailer steps and out into the sun and cheerfully blew a .04--less than half the legal limit--already feeling WAAAAAY past the point that I would attempt to operate a motor vehicle. Trooper Doug asked me if I'd ever ridden a bike drunk before. I told him sheepishly no. I'd been that drunk before, to be sure, but not while driving--I had always assumed I was over the limit. I must have always played it safer than I'd thought. I

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