

GROUP RIDING PERIL

By Richard Bennett, Blue Knight Southwest Conference Safety Officer

There is no easy way to say this; recreational motorcycling gets more dangerous when we ride in a group. This is not entirely our fault. There is a plethora of motorcycle instruction sources, but very few that teach group riding, so it becomes a learn-as-you-go process, in which only the survivors become proficient. When I go to motorcycle rallies, I marvel at the formations and precision of drill team riders. They make complex moves with partners look deceptively easy. One of the reasons they impress me is that I know I will never have the skills to be this good. As a Motorcycle Officer, I often participated in group riding. I was trained to a high skill level during my initial training, and kept my skills current by participating in quarterly training with the Motor Squad members. This was important because we often went as a group to various destinations. Motorcycle officers are known for riding side-by-side when they travel in a group. I know it made an impressive sight when we arrived at the scene of disturbances, which gave us a psychological advantage against crowds. Police Administrators loved to have Motorcycle officers arrive with the sights and sounds that only they can produce.

Group rides by motorcycle clubs are one of the highlights of membership. It is fun to ride with friends and stop at places along the road. Group riding is a great source of bonding, building ride skills and enjoying the unique experience of motorcycle riding; and besides, we get a great sense of empowerment in a group, which is lacking with solo riding.

Some groups are very good at giving pre-ride information, others, not so much. Often, clubs meet, socialize and pick a destination for a group ride. A ride leader is chosen (or volunteers) to lead the group, and they are ready to go. Regular members have usually ridden in groups like this before, so despite the Motorcycle Safety Foundation training to the contrary, some leaders tend to give minimal, if any, ride instructions. The assumption is that this group ride will be like all the others, so the formation and riding protocol will be familiar. Most of the time the groups complete the rides, share a meal and the riders go their separate ways; But not always.

Over the years I have participated in group riding of all sorts; a small group of friends going somewhere together or hundreds of strangers riding down the highway. I thoroughly enjoyed some groups, and was lucky to survive others. My experience has been that the larger the group, the greater the dangers for individual riders. As I said, little formal instruction is available regarding group riding.

Since I have moved on from my Motorcycle Officer days, group riding has become much more casual for me; more like Club riding than Formation riding. Realistically, I no longer have riding partners with highly developed riding skills that make me comfortable in a lane-sharing side-by-side formation. For that matter, I don't have those skills anymore, either. That is why I don't ride side-by-side, and I don't recommend it for other "non-professional" riders.

Here are some actual group riding experiences that have shaped my opinion about group perils. (I am sure you all have similar stories if you have done any amount of group riding.) I attended an annual charity ride that began at a Harley Davidson dealership, and ended at a military cemetery about five miles away. The group was very large, and consisted mostly of American brand motorcycles.

The pre-ride instructions consisted of thank-you's for attending, and "we will see you at the end." No route was announced, and no maps were distributed. If you got separated from the group, you would not know where to go.

Many chose to ride side-by-side, and some rode in staggered formation. When the ride began, local motorcycle officers led the way. We immediately encountered signal lights, but officers on post waved us through. Because the group was so large, the officers had to leave their posts to leap-frog ahead and direct traffic at the front of the entourage. The motorcycle riders continued to ride through red lights without protection. Angry motorists honked, but none of the riders obeyed the traffic signals. Further down the road, one of the motorcycle riders was hit by a car at one of the unprotected intersections, resulting in serious injuries. The chaos caused me to skip any future rides with that charity.

Smaller groups have risks, too. On one occasion a group of off-duty officers invited their friends to ride in the back-country of San Diego County. We gathered at a parking lot, and did not have a riders' meeting. One of my friends had borrowed a motorcycle to give his wife a ride with fellow officers. He was a motorcycle rider that had taken time off, and had "rusty" skills. Despite that, he tried to keep up with the more skilled riders. He ran off the road on an off-camber turn and both he and his wife were hospitalized. They were lucky to have survived.

So here is the theme that runs through all of these examples: group rides appear to be comfortable, but without structure they have some additional dangers.

Assuming everyone is sober, the most common dangers come from riders who develop a "group mentality". As individuals, we set a comfortable pace for ourselves and we obey traffic laws. But in a group, riders often struggle to stay up with more skilled riders, often riding beyond their skill level. I have seen crashes that could have been prevented by riders who were riding too fast, or couldn't maneuver tight turns; all because they didn't want to admit to lesser riding skills than the rider ahead of them.

In addition, riders in a group feel the necessity to stay together to be a part of the group. Small groups can "tighten up" in high traffic situations, allowing them to stay together through traffic signals. Larger groups often get broken up by a red light or stop sign. Some riders get so desperate to stay with the group ahead that they run red lights or pass when unsafe. When that happens, following riders are often tempted to do the same. It's a "group", right?

Another peril is the mix of riding experience in a group. Novices are mixed in with veteran riders, and no one wears a sign that tells others what their skill level is. Undisciplined riders often break formation, pass others, lag behind (which creates a large gap for non-motorcycles to fill), and are discourteous to other motorists.

For the record, I want to make some distinctions. There are three popular types of group riding "formations" that I have experienced: staggered (MSF recommended), European follow-and-post, and side-by-side.

The staggered formation is most commonly used by groups traveling on fairly straight roads. When the roads get "twisty", the formation goes to single file until they can safely regroup in the staggered formation. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation knows about other formations, but endorses this one for American riders.

Some groups use "front door" and "back door" riders. Using CB radios, the "back door" rider keeps the "front door" (leader) informed about the group. A rider count is usually done early

in the ride so the leader knows how much time and distance to allow for merging, lane changing or roadside stopping. As the ride progresses, the "back door" tells the leader if everyone made it through signal lights or not. The leader also knows if one of the riders stops or leaves the group. A good leader keeps track of the group, making adjustments that minimize risk.

The follow-and-post group is most commonly used in Europe, where roads tend to be more challenging. The roads are often narrow and winding, especially in the mountain areas. The follow-and-post method allows the leader to ride at his pace, even if it results in distancing from the group. When the leader turns from the main road, he "posts" at the turn, meaning he stops until the following rider sees him turn. Then the leader continues on, leaving the following rider to post the turn until the next rider sees the turn. If all goes right, individual riders can set their own pace based upon their skill level. In the end, everyone gathers together. This type of riding is often used by BMW groups, and sometimes combined with staggered formations.

The side-by-side method is most successfully used by law enforcement and professional drill teams. It is less successfully used by motorcycle clubs and off-duty officers. As I have noted, Motorcycle Officers go through an intensive basic training class before being assigned a police motorcycle. About four times a year the motorcycle squad does "refresher" training, which includes group riding. These riders are highly skilled, as are their partners. They are trained to ride side-by-side safely, and they practice these skills regularly. So, if you are an active duty motorcycle officer or drill team member, side-by-side can work for you.

Of the three methods, the most dangerous is the side-by-side. When it is used by individuals who have not trained together, it greatly increases personal peril. There are already plenty of other hazards on the road, so lane sharing only adds to the risk.

The Motorcycle Safety Foundation has a video on the topic, as well as a two-page instruction that can be found on the internet. MSF has a lot of good examples of group riding in their video, and suggests many ways to ride safely. The video is about 20 minutes long, and the emphasis is on the most-used "staggered" formation. The text version has one page of highlights, and one page of hand signals. Go to www.msf-usa.org for details. If everyone followed the MSF example, there would be fewer incidents of group accidents. Unfortunately, to my knowledge, there is no MSF class for group riding as there is for beginner and intermediate riders.

So how do we reduce risk and increase enjoyment when riding in groups? Here are some suggestions:

- 1) Leaders should know and follow MSF guidelines for group riding. Watch the video or read the text. The riding formation must be announced by the leader, and understood by everyone.
- 2) Leaders should have a general knowledge of the individual skill levels in the group.
- 3) Leaders should know, and take responsibility for the status of all riders during the ride.
- 4) Leaders in the "staggered" formation should set a comfortable pace for novice riders. Everyone should take group riding seriously; stay in formation, and don't act independently.

Group riding is one of the unique experiences of motorcycle riders. It is too often an informal process that exposes all riders to increased risk. Knowing the correct way to ride in a

group and putting those techniques to use will lower risk and increase enjoyment. Maybe someone will even marvel at your formation as you ride by.