

Freedom Isn't Free

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By Nicholas Worrell

Chief of the NTSB's Office of Communications' Safety Advocacy Division.

The Fourth of July is coming, and so are motorcycle rallies around the nation—from Fly Our Flag High in Minnesota to the Hollister Independence Day Motorcycle Rally in California. Riding is about freedom; maybe that's why bike rallies are such a natural fit with the Fourth.

But freedom isn't free.

As a motorcyclist myself, I know that the feeling of freedom we experience out on the open road needs to be balanced with the good forethought to take smart precautions. Responsibility comes with freedom—or vice versa—and it's not only responsibility to yourself, but to your family, your friends, and others on the road.

If I might be forgiven for quoting an Englishman in a Fourth of July blog, actor Hugh Laurie once said that riding a motorcycle is “like flying. All your senses are alive.” He also recently tweeted, “As they used to say... there are old motorcyclists, and bold motorcyclists, but there are no old, bold motorcyclists.”

So you young motorcyclists, listen up. And you old motorcyclists spread the word. The price we pay for the freedom to ride is not just the cost of the bike – it is the constant attention to safety.

I see young riders taking to the streets on bikes like a Kawasaki ZX10R Ninja, Yamaha FJR 1300, or a Harley Davidson V-Rod shortly after passing their motorcycle tests. I wonder whether they know and understand the power and speed of such models.

I started off with a Honda 150, moved up to a 250, and finally learned to operate bigger bikes like a 600, 750 or 1000. That longer learning curve gave me a chance to improve my physical and mental skills.

At the same time, as I moved up through different models, I learned first-hand the value of proper protective gear. When—not if—you lay that bike down, you need protection between the pavement, the bike, and you.

Brett Robinson, executive director of the National Association of State Motorcycle Safety Administrators, reminds us that “gearing up” is not just about wearing the right protective clothing. “Gearing up also means training and lifelong learning.”

According to Robinson, “If you haven't received training, you should seek training. And don't just get training once and think you're done. We need to get training throughout our riding careers, continuously improving our skills. And not only our physical skills but our mental skills as well, because riding is so much mental.”

Robinson also says there's a lot of merit to mentorship programs, where new riders ride with more experienced riders. But, he says, "the experienced rider should ride at the level of the new rider, and not vice versa."

One of the greatest riders and stuntmen ever, Evel Knievel, said, "Riding a motorcycle on today's highways, you have to ride in a very defensive manner. You have to be a good rider and you have to have both hands and both feet on the controls at all times."

Concentrate and focus on the riding task, not on distractions. Be on the lookout for distracted drivers who don't see you, and stay mentally engaged. (With all the new technology on the bike today, operating the vehicle itself can be a tall order – don't complicate it with distractions that aren't related to operating the vehicle!)

Don't ride if you're too tired, and don't ride while impaired. And that doesn't just mean alcohol and illicit drugs. Prescription medications and over-the-counter medications could also be sources of impairment.

What about "the other guy," the one in the passenger vehicle who should share the road?

"Never trust anybody," Robinson says. "You have to ride like you're invisible."

But while Robinson recognizes that any given motorist might not see a rider, he also urges riders to make themselves as visible to motorists as possible. "Being conspicuous is so important," he says. "When I ride I wear a reflective vest, and I think it makes a big difference."

This Fourth of July, get out there and celebrate freedom in the way motorcyclists do. But remember that, as Thomas Jefferson said, "the price of liberty is eternal vigilance."

Safe riding takes a commitment to protecting yourself, other riders, and motorists.