

Snowmobiler's aren't the lunatics of legend

by Craig Nicholson

I'm a snowmobiler and I'm upset. Every year there are media reports of snowmobiling accidents that by inference and omission create the impression that anyone who snowmobiles is either dangerous or certifiable. I prefer to think it's bad breath.

Not that snowmobiling can't be dangerous. That potential always exists when motion, hard objects, and humanity combine. Like when I got beamed at a Blue Jays' game. But that doesn't mean that all snowmobilers are reckless. Or that all snowmobiles are wrecked. Or that all spectators get ball-bopped.

Media reports

Most media reports state that so and so was injured or killed while snowmobiling near such and such a place. They may indicate that a rock or a car or a tree was involved. And they never miss the opportunity to say that someone went through the ice. As if all ice is too thin. What they rarely note are the real reasons behind the accident.

Was excess speed a contributing factor? Most snowmobile accidents involve loss of control or going too fast or both. With the recent proliferation of muscle sleds, speeds are increasing. Certainly the manufacturers must accept some responsibility for this acceleration, but the irresponsible drivers of these too-large machines are the real culprits. But not every snowmobiler owns a high performance sled. Or abuses it.

Do we need to go so fast? Do we need to have the police enforce trail speed limits as they do in some New England states? Does the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (OFSC) need to consider prohibiting muscle machines from our trails? Like on our highways, speed is a contributing factor in too many snowmobiling accidents. But that doesn't mean that all snowmobilers are

reckless speeders.

Alcohol related

Is the accident alcohol related? Most are. The sad truth is that too many people drink and drive. It happens on our highways, so it's no surprise on the snow. Too many do on a snowmobile what they might never do in their car. Too few realize that they can lose their driver's license or insurability from snowmobile drinking offenses. The Ministry of Recreation & Tourism (MTR), in cooperation with the OFSC Safety Committee, has launched a "RIDE SAFE, RIDE SOBER" and "BOOZE 'N SNOW DON'T GO" campaign this season to combat snowmobile bar-hopping. But most snowmobilers are not impaired.

Darkness is another contributing factor. Night driving involves differences in visual perception, temperature and snow conditions that can be lethal. The assumption that one can safely drive off into the night has seen too many snowmobilers lost or injured or worse. How many deaths occur in familiar locale because the rider has become disoriented? Danger happens

faster at night and personally, I no longer ride after dark because I don't like the odds. And many other snowmobilers do likewise.

Media reports that do indicate a collision with a rock or a car or a tree, or even another machine, often fail to say where the accident occurred. Most do not happen on OFSC trails. So the victims were not snowmobiling in the right place. So whose fault is that? Certainly not that of the thousands of snowmobilers who regularly use OFSC trails without incident.

The same applies to going through that all-too-thin ice. Clubs try to route trails to avoid water crossings entirely, or to cross bridges, or at worst, to choose the safest crossing possible and mark them well.

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Happen elsewhere

The great majority of drownings happen elsewhere, where no one has gone before, where the day-to-day conditions are in doubt, or where there simply was no ice. If you don't know, don't go, and if in

doubt, ask. But the fact is that most drownings do not occur on OFSC trails, so what does that say about where you should be riding?

Slanted reports

Rarely do I read that the deceased was not wearing a helmet, or that there were three people on a one-person machine, or that the driver was inexperienced or that horseplay was involved or that many of the other contributing factors occurred simultaneously. Just that there was another incident in a lunatic sport. Are we all so dangerous and reckless and careless? I think not.

Police and media reports should contain all the facts, both to promote snowmobiling safety and to encourage local sledders who snowmobile with caution, control and care. Then maybe my friends will come out from behind their smirks. And I'll wear my snowmobile helmet to the ball park next summer.

Phillips - In loving memory of a dear husband, father and grandfather, Leo, who passed away Feb. 11, 1986.

*We are sad within our memory,
Lonely are our hearts today
For the one we loved so dearly
Has been forever called away.
We think of him in silence
No eye may see us weep,
But many a silent tears are shed
When others are asleep.*

Lovingly remembered, so sadly missed by Marg & family.

In loving memory of my dear mother and friend, Irene Nicol who passed away February 8, 1990.

*Everyday in some way,
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and very dear*

Much love always, Paulette

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