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Pittsburgh Rides: Put on your boots

November 4, 2010 12:00 am



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This is what not to wear on your feet while riding a motorcycle.

By Garry Nelson

I used to stoke arguments just for sport, even though I knew that I would never change my opponent's mind. This sport was forever changed when I met my Plano, Texas, brother for a trip to Deals Gap, N.C., and the marvelous roads of the Smoky Mountains. We were to meet at Meriwether Lewis' Grave on the Natchez Trace Parkway, 20 miles farther for one of us.

We traveled east to a Southern restaurant that could have been on location for a movie based on a Faulkner tale. Location was the south side of Fayetteville, Tenn.'s town square. The counter and six tables occupied the front half of the eatery while the rear had three pool tables waiting for the evening crew to rack 'em up.

My brother is a 20-plus-year Texas Republican and I am a lifelong Allegheny County Democrat, and after 10 minutes we decided that we could never agree on politics. Brother loves Bush and I despise him.

Ride and Write

Welcome to Pittsburgh Rides, our regular feature on motorcycling. Here we bring you the latest in rides, trends and events, but we need your input. We're looking for voices from the local biking community willing to share (in roughly 500 words) your experiences on the road and what you think is hot on wheels. Send your story or pitch to Weekend editor Scott Mervis at smervis@post-gazette.com.

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That night I placed two other topics into this no-talk spot. Helmets vs. bareheaded riding is the first. Regarding helmets, brother and I share the same beliefs. From our road trip from Oklahoma City to Pittsburgh when we were 17 and we were starting college at Duquesne University in 1967, lids are a must.

Others have just as strong beliefs against head protection as my brother holds about Republican policies, and who am I to change their minds?

Harley/Cruiser riders and I agree on the freedom and rush provided by riding the two-wheeled machine, and we also agree with the foot protection provided by heavy lace-on boots. These boots will stay on the feet and protect ankles and toes when, if ever, a rider finds himself separated from his bike and sliding down the blacktop after reality collides with the rider's rosy plans.

Two recent observations brought forth a new argument that I was not going to let lie fallow.

I spied a nice high-performance motorcycle being ridden up Forbes Avenue by a fellow wearing a full face helmet and leather riding gloves. Further observation showed that he was wearing shorts -- not bad, as jeans are scuffed off in seconds -- but the shocker was that was wearing slip-on rubber sandals.

Later while walking up Negley, I saw a beautiful blond, long-limbed girl riding a Vespa scooter. She was wearing khaki shorts with a bright T-shirt. I can assure you that it was not the Vespa that caught my eye. When her feet came into view they were as scantily clad as she, a pair of cheap rubber flip-flops like she just returned from the shore. Unfortunately, I was camera-less.

What if a car pulls in front of these riders and runs a stop sign, or some traffic abnormality occurs? What if reactions cause the rider to extend his foot down to retain balance or he gets separated from his machine?

I had a close friend who was surprisingly separated from his cycle. He watched the world go by while he slid down a farm to market road at near 50 mph. Upon stopping, he picked himself up to find -- except for a bruised ego, a flat spot on the back of his helmet and slight pain -- that he was basically unhurt. Safety gear prevailed.

I am just asking other riders to think of the consequences of an unseen event during their toot around the city. It would not take much to scrub off a few digits and really ruin one's day.

After thinking about footwear, one question remained, did Meriwether Lewis commit suicide or was he murdered?

Garry Nelson is an attorney in Pittsburgh.
First Published November 4, 2010 12:00 am

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