

## BIKER CHICKS

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A single image has shaped the image of motorcycling in the United States for more than five decades. The image, a black-and-white photograph taken in 1947 in Hollister, California, depicts a drunken biker lounging on a motorcycle, a beer in each hand, surrounded by dozens of empty beer bottles. Despite the fact that the photo was staged and that the Hollister "riot" was grossly exaggerated by the media, the Hollister incident provided the impetus for a 1954 movie *The Wild One*. Starring a young Marlon Brando, the movie invented the stereotype of the angry, outlaw biker and ensured the passage of the Hollister incident into the realm of American myth. A few bumps and bruises and two arrests for public intoxication, couple with a compelling image and an even more compelling, if hyperbolic, movie, created a black eye for motorcycling that has persisted to this day.

Not insignificantly, that image is male. Although the nature of the sport of motorcycling is such that women and men can enjoy it equally, since World War II women have been relegated to the back seat, when they've been included at all. A recent series of ads by the Japanese manufacturer Kawasaki, however, indicates a new awareness of the market potential of women. The advice offered in the ad is "Don't take a back seat to anyone," presumably by buying a Kawasaki product (Kawasaki advertisement, 2000). Buell, a domestic manufacturer wholly owned by Harley-Davidson, is marketing a motorcycle, the Blast, that is clearly aimed at the novice female market. The motorcycle is stylish, yet lightweight and with a low seat. To understand how revolutionary these seemingly simple steps are, a little history is in order.

Although women have been documented as active motorcyclists as far back as 1903 (Siegal, 2001), their stories have remained largely untold. Early in the twentieth century, for example, the Van Buren sisters rode their motorcycles coast-to-coast to demonstrate the fitness of women for military courier duty. Despite the success of the trip and their fame as female pioneers, neither was called to duty. They did distinguish themselves in other careers, however, in an era when women were disenfranchised and rarely worked outside the home. In the 1940s, the talented Dot Robinson fought the motorcycle establishment for the right to race, but retired from racing after only two seasons. She founded the Motor Maids, a women's motorcycling group that exists to this day.

Motorcycles in the postwar years were the exclusive domain of men for at least three reasons. First, World War II introduced an entire generation of American men to motorcycling through the military. About 90,000 Harley-Davidson motorcycles were produced for the military; many of those military vehicles ended up in private hands after the war, purchased by veterans who were looking for cheap transportation, or perhaps post combat excitement in a generally staid America, when they returned stateside (Motorcycle Museum Online, 2002). Sales of the civilian versions of motorcycles also boomed for the first few years after the war. Second, the brands of motorcycle the military unwittingly touted to its personnel were more suited physically to males. Harley-Davidson were, and are to this day, large, cumbersome, and extremely heavy, even when "chopped" to reduce excess weight. (Indian also supplied motorcycles built to the military's specifications, but in smaller numbers.) And finally, the myth surrounding the Hollister incident ensured that anyone who rode a motorcycle was perceived to be somehow marginalized, perhaps even dangerous. Motorcycles, in the conventional wisdom created and perpetuated by the media, were fueled by a volatile combination of gasoline and testosterone, with a little alcohol thrown in as needed.

Motorcycling took a turn toward gender inclusiveness in the early 1960s with the advertising campaign Honda chose for its initial foray into the American market. "You meet the nicest people on a Honda" became an American catchphrase, and seemingly overnight, an obscure manufacturer of piston rings became the world's largest motorcycle manufacturer. Significantly, the machines that built Honda's reputation were small, lightweight, user-friendly, and reliable. Crew-cut young men and wholesome young women were pictured whizzing about town on their 50cc and 90cc Hondas, a far cry from the drunken lout commonly associated in the public's mind with the large, loud motorcycles that had dominated the market for nearly two decades. As Honda and the other Japanese manufacturers expanded their product lines, the image of motorcyclists became correspondingly more diverse. The British motorcycle industry marched lockstep into bankruptcy, and Harley-Davidson retreated to a market niche defined by image, not performance. The latter area was quickly appropriated by the Japanese big four (Honda, Kawasaki, Suzuki, and Yamaha), and a rivalry between Harley riders and the riders of Japanese machines sprang up. Harley riders often see themselves, if only vicariously, in the Hollister image, while sneering at the Japanese machines as "rice burners." despite the incursion of the Japanese and their easier-to-operate motorcycles, motorcycling in general remained a man's domain.

Women's role in motorcycle-related advertising rarely has acknowledged them as more than mere window dressing, an aesthetic addendum with no meaning beyond the advertising truism that sex sells. The Honda ads from the early 1960s, for example, always showed the man as the operator and the woman as the passenger. Although the women's movement gathered momentum in the 1970s, women as motorcyclists stalled. In the mid-1970s, Norton, a British manufacturer, embarked on a massive advertising campaign to save the marquee from extinction. Faced with the runaway success of Honda's CB750, Norton attempted to stimulate sales of its 750cc motorcycle line by introducing the Norton Girls. Slender, attractive, and provocatively posed, the Girls wore clothing, but not too much of it, that was obviously unsuited for motorcycle riding. Although the advertising campaign has been fondly recalled in the motorcycling press, it was not enough to save Norton (*Cycle World*, 1999). The campaign also did nothing to encourage women to become active motorcyclists.

By the time the boom of the 1970s had gone bust, all of the manufacturers were in a holding pattern. The young males of the first postwar generation, now known as the baby boomers, were graduating from college, getting married, raising families. The economy was unstable. Motorcycle sales plummeted, and with them, funds for research and development dwindled. In the 1980s, the situation grew so desperate that Harley-Davidson petitioned the federal government for help just to stay in business. A punitive tariff was imposed on imported motorcycles above 700cc, those that would compete directly with Harley's huge beasts, making the Harley more attractive, dollar for dollar, when compared with the Japanese machines. It seemed a perfect opportunity to reinvent motorcycling as a gender-neutral sport, as the Japanese were faced with returning to their roots in the form of smaller machines. Instead, they bided their time, preferring to retrench instead of investing in initiatives aimed at unproved markets such as women. Advertising for motorcycles continued to feature men in the driver's seat. All of the major Japanese manufacturers survived the 1980s, as did Harley-Davidson, but the sport remained overwhelmingly male.

The dawn of the 1990s brought a rejuvenated economy and the return of the baby boomers to motorcycling. Male boomers were reaching midlife and were responding to professional success (or midlife crises) by spending their discretionary income on motorcycles. Advertising trends at the turn of the twenty-first century seem to indicate that manufacturers are using an era of unprecedented prosperity to diversify their target audience, perhaps sensing that a wider range of buyers will protect them in the event of a downturn. Saturation of the male

market might also be a factor, of course. In any case, women are enjoying a newfound respect in the media related to motorcycling.

Consider, for example, Kawasaki's recent campaign, "Don't take a back seat to anyone." While the campaign does not overtly sound any feminist themes, the ads feature women on motorcycles and tout the virtues of the view and control found only in the front seat. The media themselves, primarily special-interest magazines, have discovered the benefits of adding women to the masthead. *Rider*, for example, featured an article in its January 2001 issue about the American Motorcyclist Association's second Women in Motorcycling conference. The story was written and photographed by a woman. The AMA's magazine has women on staff who write and help conduct road tests. A major article in the January 2001 *American Motorcyclist* magazine featured two women on a motorcycle tour of diners in the Midwest, for example. Kimberly Barlag (2001), an associate editor of the magazine, did the riding and the writing. *Cycle World*, the best-selling motorcycle magazine in the country, employs a woman editor and road tester. She has been featured in road test photos and often contributes to the "Off the Record" section of road tests, in which the editors offer their personal opinions of the motorcycle under scrutiny. The implicit message is that the particular product might appeal to women, although that fact is rarely stated overtly.

All of the major motorcycles carry advertisements from Progressive Insurance. A current series features a woman in a black leather jacket who clearly is being represented as someone who owns a motorcycle and wants an insurance company that knows about them. "When you told your insurance company you broke your swing arm, did they ask if they could sign your cast? one of the ads asks. "Call somebody that get is," the ad continues. The advertisement clearly implies that the woman in the picture "gets it" and owns her own motorcycle (Progressive Motorcycle Insurance advertisement, 2000). Other example, both in editorial content and advertising, abound.

The picture is not entirely gender-neutral, however—far from it. For every advertisement that recognizes women as a viable force in the sport, there are many others that perpetuate the window-dressing tradition. In the January 2001 *American Motorcyclist*, for example, a display ad touts "real women, real gear" (Mota advertisement, 2001). The advertiser is selling motorcycle-related clothing, such as jackets, pants, gloves, and boots, "in sizes that fit." The woman pictured in the advertisement is an attractive woman who may or may not be a professional model. She looks like a "real woman", in other words. She is wearing a jacket designed for women who ride motorcycles. Contrast that advertisement with one that appears in the November 2000 issue of *Cycle World* (Jamin' Leather advertisement, 2000). The advertising copy tells us that the company deals in "nothin' but leather!" The woman in the ad is wearing nothing but leather, and she's actually not wearing it. She appears to be embracing it. The reader is not able to discern any of the features of the jacket, but they appear to be secondary to the features of the model displaying it.

The fact that women are being represented in the motorcycle media in a role other than a decorative one speaks volumes about the evolution of a sport that really could become gender-neutral, were it to overcome its macho image. The industry is somewhat analogous to Harley-Davidson, whose riders want to be the baddest boys on the block, despite the fact that they're riding the least powerful big bikes currently available. The poseur may soon be unmasked as women discover the joys of motorcycling and the fact that the skills it requires are not linked to one's DNA code.

The readers may be ahead of the media and the industry. The Norton Girls retrospective prompted numerous letters to the editor decrying the image of a latter-day faux Norton Girl on the cover of *Cycle World* ("Hotshots," 1999). The magazine belatedly, and somewhat lamely, pointed out that the woman on the cover actually does ride motorcycles. The editors failed to point out, however, that she wasn't properly dressed for a motorcycle ride.

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