

Fools ride without helmets

There are two kinds of motorcyclists: those who have crashed and those who will crash.

I want all black men and boys who ride motorcycles to read this column. And I want them to remember the good fortune of Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger who wasn't wearing a helmet when he crashed his Suzuki "crotch rocket" into a car earlier this month.

Let me establish my biker bona fides: I have owned and ridden motorcycles since 1958, when my father gave me his custom Harley-Davidson Panhead. I was 13. In 1963, I bought a Harley Sportster, and in 1977, I bought a Harley Superglide FX. I've also owned a Triumph and a Honda 750.

I never rode the Panhead, which was a Hardtail, or the Sportster on trips of more than 500 miles one way. They would numb the rump after about 100 miles. But I rode the Superglide round-trip from Florida to California six times and round-trip from Chicago to Daytona Beach at least 10 times.

My most memorable trip was in 1978, when my son and I voyaged from Fort Lauderdale to Scottsdale, Ariz. The trip took 14 days. We camped every night because I wouldn't ride on dark rural roads.

During my nearly 50 years of riding, as a road captain and as a lifetime member of the Smokin' Wheels Motorcycle Club of Madison, Wis., I have learned that there are only two kinds of motorcyclists: those who have crashed and those who will crash. Period.

I had four crashes, one of them serious. Drunk on rum and coke, I lost control of the Superglide in Big Pine Key. The bike skidded off the road and plunged into a stand of



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mangrove. I tumbled and slid about 20 yards on the hot asphalt. Passing vehicles missed hitting me by inches.

Besides an ugly case of road rash, I broke three ribs, twisted an ankle, broke my left thumb and bruised my forehead. I'll never forget the words of an emergency worker as I was being loaded into the meat wagon: "Brother, if you hadn't had that helmet on your head, your brains would be scattered all over U.S. 1."

When I crashed, Florida had a helmet law, and I was one of its vociferous opponents. I wrote letters to state lawmakers, and I wrote angry columns and poorly researched articles for biker publications and any local newspaper looking for a crackpot view of helmets.

To my juvenile comrades and me, "domes," our name for helmets, were hot, uncomfortable and, of course, too sissified for real bikers.

We wanted to fly in the wind, free to become one with the world around us. That accident on Big Pine Key, however, permanently altered my thinking.

During my current trip from Tuscaloosa, Ala., to St. Petersburg, I saw the aftermath of a wreck involving a motorcycle and a pickup. I rarely gawk at accident scenes, but I did so this time because I saw a crushed Harley dresser on its side, the rider unconscious on the easement.

I read in the newspaper the next day that the biker, a 22-year-old local man, died of massive head injuries en route to a Tampa hospital. He wasn't wearing a helmet.

Since Florida repealed the helmet requirement for adult



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bikers in 2000, the number of deaths of bareheaded bikers rose dramatically. In 1999, according to federal statistics, 22 motorcyclists died in crashes, but in 2004, 250 died — overwhelmingly from head injuries.

Doctors and insurers lobbied hard against the repeal of the helmet requirement, but lawmakers and Gov. Jeb Bush gave in to the persistent motorcyclists.

Now, taxpayers and hospitals must pay heavily for the irresponsibility of bikers who see the helmet as government intrusion and unmanliness.

The rest of us are footing the unpaid medical expenses of injured bikers because Florida requires bareheaded bikers to carry only \$10,000 of medical insurance, a drop in the bucket when serious injuries occur.

My hope is that lawmakers will go back and require motorcyclists who don't wear helmets to carry enough insurance to fully cover their hospital and medical expenses if they are injured. The public shouldn't be forced to underwrite the stupidity of bareheaded bikers.

Since my accident in 1980, I've worn a helmet. Apparently, Ben Roethlisberger's crash knocked some sense into his hard head: He says he always will wear a helmet — if he ever rides again.

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