

The Female Connection

by Genevieve Schmitt

WHEN I FIRST STARTED riding in 1990, I was just a rider. Now I get letters from women all the time introducing themselves as a “woman rider.” (“Well, I gathered that from your name,” I’m thinking.) In the mid-90s when I went on a long distance ride with my girlfriend, we went on a “ride.” Now, women riding with women are calling these road trips “girl rides.” One woman wrote to me recently saying, “My friend and I did a girl ride to Texas this weekend.” I laughed to myself: “A girl ride.” Is that what women are calling it today?

What I conclude about the addition of the female qualifier is that women getting into motorcycling today and in recent years see themselves as riders who are women, not just riders. They want all the attention that goes along with being a woman rider in today’s motorcycling world. They expect more in terms of motorcycling gear and apparel made specifically for them. They expect to be accepted wholeheartedly in today’s motorcycling culture. Some are even wearing pink jackets and riding pink motorcycles to make sure you know they are women. Pink is the new black, one journalist remarked to me.

On the other end of the spectrum are the women riders who don’t like being referred to with that female qualifier. They’re not used to being set apart like that. When they started riding, women riders were just riders. That’s what we were called when I started riding nearly 20 years ago. Sure, we were women riding motorcycles, but this whole awareness of women as riders was not present at the time. I rode mostly with men and learned the code of how to fit in.

What I want to share with my fellow veteran riders is that we are the reason so many women are getting into the sport today. The women who have hopped into the front seat of a motorcycle in the last three to five years have done so partly because they saw us “old-timers” riding along with smiles on our faces. They thought to themselves, “If she can do it, so can I.” This is the copycat effect in action.

Because of the greater awareness of female riders as part of the general motorcycling population, today’s female riders have no problem using that woman qualifier. Women are now being included prominently in some motorcycling advertisements and marketing campaigns, women’s motorcycling events are being held at dealerships all over the country, and women-only rallies and events are springing up in towns across America including July’s AMA/FIM Women and Motorcycling Conference in Athens, Georgia, and Femmoto,



the all-women’s demo ride day held in October. Plus, journalists like me are being invited by publications like this one to write specifically about the women’s motorcycling market.

If you just woke up from a century-old slumber, you’d think (judging by all the hoopla) that women had never been part of the motorcycling world before. In fact, women have been straddling the front seats of motorcycles for as long as motorcycles have been around. What we’re seeing now is the largest number of women in history piloting their own bikes. The latest Motorcycle Industry Council ownership survey numbers indicated 9.6 percent of the motorcycling riding population is female, but that number is four years old. When I look at the most recent J.D. Power and Associates Motorcycle Competitive Information Study’s numbers (gathered in the fall of 2005), it confirms the growth I’ve been noticing over the last few years, revealing that, in fact, 12 percent of the motorcycling population of riders are women. Small growth, but nonetheless significant.

Another important connection among women riders today is this whole idea of mentorship. Several national women’s clubs are advocating the mentoring concept, as is one major manufacturer, Harley-Davidson. The idea is that a seasoned rider takes a beginner rider under her wing to help her through the early stages of her riding life. Similar to how a mentor provides compassionate coaching in other areas of life, a riding mentor can help a new rider deal with the frustrations and mistakes a newbie rider often makes, like dropping her bike or forgetting to latch or buckle up the saddlebags.

The women and motorcycling section of Harley-Davidson’s website has advice and steps encouraging women to ride their own bike. One part mentions hooking up with a buddy. When I started riding, it sure would have been nice to have had a woman by my side to not only prepare me for the mistakes I would inevitably make, but to also mentor me through the frustrating moments. I would have gone through a lot less trial and error.

As for veteran female motorcyclists, don’t underestimate the influence you have on future women riders. The all-important female connection is very much a part of why we’re seeing so many women today cruising or zipping along on the front seat of a motorcycle. You newer riders are part of a larger movement taking shape in motorcycling today: the quest to understand and reach out to women riders—the fastest and most influential market of new motorcyclists. **FZ**

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