



THE WAY I SEE IT BY GENEVIEVE SCHMITT

Red Carpet Treatment For Women

The biggest event for women riders last summer was the AMA International Women & Motorcycling Conference. Don't be confused by the word *conference*. The

event, which ran from August 19 through 23 in Keystone, Colorado, was more of a rally, convention, and conference wrapped up in one. The vendors, banquet, and keynote speakers made it a convention; the demo rides and guided scenic tours made it a rally; and the seminars and educational workshops qualified it as a conference.

This was the fifth time since 1999 that the American Motorcyclist Association (AMA) organized this hybrid event, and the main reason the nonprofit motorcycling membership group continues to do so is to show its support for the fastest-growing demographic of new motorcyclists, women. "[Shining a bright light on the fact that women ride motorcycles, too, helps us demonstrate how mainstream motorcycling is," said Rob Dingman, AMA president/CEO. I can appreciate the AMA putting its money where its mouth is.

Nearly 1,000 people attended, which was the same number that showed up for the 2006 conference in Athens, Georgia. Attendance numbers were maintained despite it being a recession year, but I believe attendance could have been higher if there was better promotion. I talked to women early in the summer who were not aware of the conference. Too bad, because I know most women who ride would enjoy this event, even those who don't like to be called out as a "woman rider." It's hard to deny the tangible energy and excitement generated when hundreds of women get together with a shared interest, especially one not enjoyed by the majority of the female population. The atmosphere reminded me of the Girl Scout camp I went to when I was a kid; I was having such a good time I didn't want it to end. And this coming from a skeptic. Yes, I'm a skeptic, and a cynic. As a journalist, I have to be. If I'm not, I can't sniff out a good story and be objective when objectivity is called for. Even some of my skeptical colleagues who'd never been to a women's event were pleasantly surprised by the camaraderie, sharing, warmth, and smiles among the attendees. Nobody was a stranger. It was easy to make friends. Women who rode to the event solo quickly found a friend to hang with. And the fact that some women felt comfortable enough to attend solo is a testament to the type of event this is. I doubt many women ride to Daytona or Sturgis by themselves. And this was indeed a rider's rally, as most women rode out to Keystone, or flew into Denver and rented a motorcycle. I didn't see any trailers near the lodging areas. Men could

participate, too, if they paid the \$165 registration fee, and about 100 of them did, accompanying their female significant other.

It was no surprise with its commitment to the women's market that Harley-Davidson, along with Buell (RIP), stepped up again to be the presenting sponsor (the two companies sponsored the previous conference). These two manufacturers along with Yamaha, BMW, Kymco, and Ducati are to be applauded for hauling out their demo fleets during a recession year when a lot of OEMs were cutting back on consumer events. Staff and bikes were on hand that cater to women riders. For example, Harley-Davidson had certain motorcycles outfitted with a lower seat and pullback risers. I saw Harley reps stabilizing the front end of the bike so an interested rider could straddle it with both feet on the pegs to try it on for size. "It's great they accommodate us like this. The demo rides are why I signed up for the conference," said Bonnie Shelley of Harrisburg, Virginia. Tami Shay of Gardner, Kansas, was ready to upgrade from her Sportster 883L. She test rode the new Fat Boy Lo. "At 5'2" there are not too many bikes I can get off the kickstand. I tested it with the Reach Seat. I'm probably going to buy one." Going above and beyond like this will bring in more female riders to the Harley-Davidson family.

Women represent just 12 percent of new motorcycle buyers, but that doesn't take into account those buying used bikes, so I believe the percentage of women riders among the overall population of riders is much higher, more like 15 to 18 percent. I've seen a lot of women's events come and go over the years. The reason for the "going" has usually been because the event lacked proper promotion; it's certainly not for lack of riders, as the number of women motorcyclists continues to grow. The AMA has been building momentum with the conference, and I applaud the group for not wavering in its commitment to serving the women's market in this way, even in tough times. For more information visit www.WomenAndMotorcycling.com.

And, by the way, the big event for women riders in 2010 will be Harley-Davidson's Celebrate Women Riders event in Milwaukee May 22-23. Visit www.Harley-Davidson.com/WomenRiders for details.

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