

# QV

# Opinions

## Confessions of a motorcycle enthusiast

By ROBERT LAFORD

### My Turn

I am a motorcycle enthusiast. Beyond that, I have a passion for motorcycles riding about 15,000 miles a year on my bike. Whenever I have the chance I use my bike as transportation.

I look forward to that mode of transportation for my commute to work, to run errands, or just for the enjoyment of a ride.

I also have a stack of motorcycle magazine subscriptions; I vacation with other motorcyclists, and belong to several motorcycle organizations. As an "enthusiast," when I cannot ride, in the winter for example, I get together with other motorcyclists to talk about motorcycles.

One of the motorcycle organizations I belong to is the Red Knights Motorcycle Club. With about 8,000 members world-wide, the Red Knights is a club for firefighters who are fellow motorcycle enthusiasts ([www.redknightsmc.com](http://www.redknightsmc.com)).

Some people might think that being a firefighter as well as an Emergency Medical Technician for twenty-five years would have deterred me from being a motorcyclist, but everything we do in life, from crossing the street to driving our cars, puts us at some risk.

And, if you choose to ride a

motorcycle, there are some risks that you do not encounter when driving a car.

Motorcycles must constantly be balanced by the rider and do not offer the protective "cage" that an automobile does, leaving the rider more exposed to other vehicles, external hazards, and the weather.

Also, a motorcycle is not as easily seen as cars, trucks, or other motor vehicles on the road because of its size. As motorists see an approaching motorcycle, they may not perceive the oncoming vehicle as a motorcycle.

Consequently, this interaction between an automobile operator and the motorcyclist places the rider at even more risk. As a firefighter and an EMT, I have learned that, with proper preparation and training, activities which may seem dangerous can be accomplished within a level of protection and safety — whether that activity is fighting a fire or riding a motorcycle.

Most people, including me, ride motorcycles for fun. I enjoy the solitude of riding my motorcycle alone; I enjoy the companionship with my wife as a "two-up" passenger on a ride; and I also enjoy the opportunity to ride with a group of friends.

With over 5 million registered in the United States, motorcycles are a valuable, energy efficient mode of transportation.

At an average of 50 miles/gallon, motorcycles are extremely fuel efficient, produce fewer emissions and take up less space in our traffic-impacted world. According to the United States Census Bureau and the Department of Transportation, over eighty million cars and light trucks are used for daily commuting on America's roads.

Approximately 200,000 motorcycles and scooters comprise a regular part of this mix. Scooters and motorcycles are more commonplace in European countries, having become a viable solution to their traffic congestion.

As fuel prices continue to soar, more and more people are turning to motorcycles and scooters as a transportation source in the United States as well.

However, along with the freedom and enjoyment of riding a motorcycle is the added responsibility to ensure proper road safety. Automobiles and motorcycles must "share the road."

In more than two-thirds of all crashes involving a motorcycle, another operator violated the motorcycle's right-of-way.

Each individual, whether in a car or on a motorcycle, must take personal responsibility for road safety.

Often after a motorcycle and automobile have been in an accident, the automobile operator admits, "I didn't see that motorcycle!"

Translation, "I didn't look for the motorcyclist." Drivers tend to look for other cars, not motorcycles. Due to its smaller profile, a motorcycle is harder to see and more difficult to estimate its speed.

In addition, a motorcyclist's riding pattern is different from that of an automobile.

Different responses may be needed for the same road or highway situation.

For example, while driving your car you may ignore a piece of road debris. However, that same road debris may be deadly for a motorcyclist. Traffic, weather, and road



LAFORD



The thrill of the open road.

File photo

conditions also require a motorcyclist to react differently.

Thus, for the driver of an automobile it is more difficult to predict the evasive action that a motorcyclist may need to take in order to avoid being injured, or worse.

The motorcyclist must never assume that he or she is visible to the automobile driver; it is the responsibility of the motorcyclist to make his or her presence known.

Select and wear an appropriate helmet with reflective material. Wear bright, contrasting protective clothing. If you choose darker clothing, wear a fluorescent vest to increase your visibility. Proper lane position is important in order to be seen and for protecting your "riding space."

If you can see the driver in his or her side view mirror, the driver can see you. Never "hide" in the driver's blind spot! Clearly com-

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municate your intentions by signaling properly and appropriately. Let the driver know what you intend to do.

As an operator of an automobile, what can you do to make the roads safer? First and foremost, hang up your cell phone and focus your attention on the road and your driving.

With regard to motorcycles in particular, respect the motorcyclist's right to share the road and allow him a full lane of travel.

Look for the motorcyclist at intersections, when a motorcyclist may be making a turn, and on the highway when a motorcyclist may be changing lanes.

Clearly signal your intentions and anticipate a motorcyclist's possible maneuver. Turn signals on a motorcycle many times are not self-canceling.

Sometimes a rider may forget to turn them off after a turn or lane change. Allow plenty of space between you and the motorcyclist in front of you.

That motorcycle can come to a stop in a shorter distance than you can in your car. The added space creates a buffer zone should the motorcyclist need to take evasive action because of road obstruction,

or other driving hazards.

By being aware of the risks associated with motorcycling, a rider can learn how to manage them.

As an operator of a motorcycle, your biggest asset is your training and experience. Take advantage of a formal motorcycle operator training through the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF).

Whether you are a new rider or a seasoned veteran, this training offers each individual the knowledge and skills to handle a motorcycle before heading out on the street.

The "beginner's" course offered through the MSF offers important skills and lessons for a new or returning rider. No matter how long you have been riding a motorcycle, the "Experienced RiderCourse" is an invaluable learning tool to improve your riding skills.

For more information about training courses in your area visit the Registry of Motor Vehicles Webpage at [www.mass.gov/rmv/motorcycle](http://www.mass.gov/rmv/motorcycle).

An operator of a motorcycle has an obligation to follow the rules of the road like the operator of any other motor vehicle. As the MSF stresses, "Sharing the road means 'getting along' not 'getting ahead.'"

By adopting this driving attitude,  
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tude, both motorcyclists and other highway users will help make our roadways a safer place for everyone.

When you see a motorcycle in motion, think of it as a person, not just a motorcycle. That next motorcycle you see heading down the road just might be your neighbor, your doctor, your child's teacher — or it may be me. Ride safe.

Bob Laford is President of Massachusetts Chapter 2 of the Red Knights Motorcycle Club and Editor of the Red Knights International's publication "The Red Knight Rider." He is Safety Services Manager with Environmental Health and Safety at the University of Massachusetts and Deputy Fire Chief with the Petersham Fire Department.