

Drinkin' in the Name of Science

By Pat Hahn

When Karen Kadar of Comprehensive Safety Systems (CSS) asked me if I wanted to participate in a drinking-and-riding experiment last fall, I immediately volunteered. Free drinks on the government's tab? Count me in!

Comprehensive Safety Systems was awarded a grant by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to study impaired riding in Minnesota. Alcohol is a huge factor in motorcycle fatalities, and Minnesota has one of the highest rates in the country. Among other activities, such as a new motorcycle-curriculum package for driver-ed classes and two "saturation" patrols in June 2001, CSS staged an impaired-riding event to showcase the effects of alcohol on riding skills.

There were five of us who volunteered: Dirk, Sue, Greg, Michele, and I. We arrived by limousines around 11 in the morning—well, not limousines, exactly—more like passenger vehicles driven by limo drivers. Well, not limo drivers, exactly—just friends who, for some reason, volunteered a day off to haul our drunk butts home. Anyway, we arrived before breakfast, which is to say we were forbidden from eating anything until after the experiment.

We met at the Highway Safety Center in St. Cloud, Minn. That's the same place where law enforcement can learn cool stuff like pursuit techniques and how to ram other vehicles. They also have a testing pad for motorcycle riders, identical to the ones used by the state for skill tests. In addition to CSS staff, we were treated to the undivided attention of the Minnesota State Patrol's "Trooper Doug" and Gordy Pehrson, a senior license examiner for Driver and Vehicle Services. Doug's job was to administer the breathalyzers; Gordy's was to score the tests. A film crew from SAGA Marketing was there, as were two members of Minnesota Dial-A-Ride.

We took the state's motorcycle test three times: once sober, once at 0.04 percent BAC, and once more at 0.09 percent. The test consists of a sharp left turn, a controlled stop, a cone weave, a U-turn, a quick stop, and a swerve. While the applicability of these particular maneuvers to the street is debatable, the skills needed to perform them demonstrate overall control, balance, confidence, skill, reflexes, and knowledge. On the sober round, we all performed passingly. I believe we each made a couple of minor mistakes but not enough to fail the test.

For weeks before the event, I was very nervous, grinding my teeth and wringing my hands. I didn't know how the booze would affect me. I didn't know if I could make the bike do those things after I'd tipped a few. I didn't know if I even could stay upright. Being deathly afraid of pain compounded the flashes of anxiety I was having about my wedding the following week. I knew how PO'd my fiance would be if I showed up for wedding pictures with each arm in a big white cast. I was filled with dread at the possibilities. I almost turned in my breathalyzer straw and let the others do the dirty work. Sadly, while my brain was busy trying to find a way out of my predicament, my feet already were taking me toward my destiny—funny how that works.

After our first test, we were ushered into the "laboratory": a big semi-trailer. Inside were 24 of those driving simulators, complete with steering wheels, speedometers, pedals, shift levers, and tiny windshields. We each slid into a cockpit that suspiciously resembled the dashboard of a late 60s Impala—don't ask me how I know—and accepted a complimentary beverage.

Carla the Bartender doled out vodka and sodas (known as "loudmouth cocktails") shortly thereafter, for Dirkie and me; canned beer, a.k.a. "brown whizz-

ers,” for Greg and Michele; and white zinfandel for Sue. Our immediate goal was to pound three drinks in an hour and then retake the test, so we got down to business.

Phase one was astounding. I’m sure you can imagine. The dumbest things became howlingly funny. We turned up the volume—way up. Halfway through my first drink, I already was thinking about the second. “I’d like two limes in the next one, please.” By the second drink, Sue and Michele started getting all flirty. So did Greg, now that I think about it. You could count the number of drinks they’d each consumed by counting the number of times they touched you or squeezed part of your body during any

60-second time period. They each eventually downed seven—yikes! Dirkie target-fixated on a wallet photo of someone’s 20-year-old daughter, hinting loudly that he still would be eligible until March. Michele and I somehow managed to fit two people in my simulator—too bad I forgot my make-out tape.

I’ve seen those blood-alcohol cards where you can measure your BAC by figuring your weight and number of drinks, but I was astonished at the way my body reacted to three highballs on an empty stomach. I bounced around the trailer steps and out into the sun and cheerfully blew a 0.04—less than half the legal limit—already feeling W-a-a-a-y past the point that I would attempt to operate a motor vehicle.



Trooper Doug asked me if I'd ever ridden a bike drunk before. I sheepishly told him no. I'd been that drunk before, to be sure, but not while driving—I always had assumed I was over the limit. I always must have played it safer than I'd thought. I never would have guessed, but, even at 0.04, I was narrow—you know? Tight. I never knew what that meant until then: Your attention comes to an abrupt halt about 20 feet in front of you. Your hearing narrows, your vision narrows—tight. I began to entertain the thought that the legal limit is disturbingly high.

So when round two of the test came, I was liquid with confidence. My cup spilled over. I felt strong...powerful...smooth. I was gonna ace this test. I had forgotten all about wedding pictures. I had forgotten all about personal injury. I had forgotten where my car keys were. I didn't care; I was a motorcycle god. I could do this baby in my sleep. There was nothing I wanted more than to be on that bike. I threw on my gear and performed flawlessly on the scored test.

Well, not flawless, exactly. The directions seemed a little unclear. Lining up the bike on the little white "T" was particularly troublesome. I almost dropped the bike when I set my right foot down hard on a

small patch of sand. My clutch control was dubious, but I managed the cone weave without actually hurting anyone, though the SAGA guys with the big, expensive camera looked alarmed for a few seconds. I performed the test perfectly—no points off—but how embarrassing! Fortunately, no one saw the mistakes I made. Nobody was watching that close, right? Well, I mean, except for the eight or 10 people standing there smiling at me. I didn't stick around to watch how the others did because I lost interest and headed back to the bar.

Four more drinks and an hour later, I again was out in the sun, this time lit up like a scoreboard, pinching butts, and ready to "...get this show on the road." I blew a 0.09 for Trooper Doug, who, for some reason, seemed terribly amused. I gave him a quick salute, threw a leg over, and proceeded to ace another one—every maneuver perfect...every stop, every start smooth...no cones, no lines, no trouble. Well, I had a little trouble with the "T" again, and I guess I had a little trouble with the cone weave. Somehow, it felt like my clutch and throttle hands no longer were connected to my arms, but that was OK, because instinct took over—I think. And I did cut that one turn a little





Air Force photo by MSgt. Sam Shore, USAF

Participants in an Air Force base standard field-sobriety-testing course blow into a portable breath tester to measure blood-alcohol content. Monitoring the test is a member of the local police department.

close, but I still made it. “Sorry to wreck the experiment, Karen. I won’t tell anybody if you don’t.” I was very pleased with myself.

That is, until I saw the score sheet. Not only had I gone over on the braking, amateurishly skidding the rear tire, I completely had blown the sharp turn, running over the boundary on the inside with both tires. The scary thing was I hadn’t realized either mistake—and I knew this test, inside and out. I help train license examiners every spring. In the real world, it would have sounded more like this, “One minute, I was just riding along, and the next minute, I woke up in this hospital room.”

Gordy and Trooper Doug were grinning at me and asking me how I felt. “Great and thirsty. I passed, didn’t I?” Doug told me that if he had seen me out in public somewhere, he would have stopped me. My weight had been shifting from side to side while Gordy had read the instructions; my awareness of things around me was gone, and I dismounted before putting the kickstand down, almost dropping the thing. I told Trooper Doug, “But I’m only at a point oh-nine,” to which he taunted me with, “Wanna blow another one, hotshot?” I tactfully declined. I don’t know if that same refusal would have gone over so well on the side of the road.

Again, I didn’t pay much attention to the rest of the show, but I learned they all did pretty much the same thing. Dirkie almost dropped the bike, too. Sue didn’t even want to get on it. Michele failed her final

test so miserably they stopped her halfway through. I believe she threw up shortly thereafter.

The consensus was that we all thought we rode better than we actually did. The little stuff gave us a lot of trouble, and the big mistakes we made were ones that could have been pretty dramatic in the real world. Fortunately, no one got hurt, and we were all sort of relieved when it was over. Back in the trailer, Carla flatly refused to serve me any more drinks and, instead, force-fed me a sandwich.

I’ve never had to make a decision about whether to drink and ride, so I didn’t learn anything that will change my behavior. But what I learned about BAC—how bombed I was, even when I was well below the legal limit—was a real wake-up call. I know that a person can be arrested at less than 0.10 percent, but I never realized just how badly two or three drinks can jam up your senses. It bothers me a little to know that a person could have seven cocktails in two-and-a-half hours and still be “legal.” Actually, it bothers me a lot.

Watch yourselves out there. 🚫

[Reprinted with the author’s permission.—Ed.]

Pat Hahn is the author of two motorcycle-safety books: “Ride Hard, Ride Smart” (2004) [a very advanced (mental) riding-strategy book] and “How to Ride a Motorcycle” (2005) [a guidebook for riders in their first year or two]. The article reprinted here first appeared in Minnesota Motorcycle Monthly (www.motorbyte.com). Go to that website for more safety articles by this author and others.