

Acceptable Risks?

LIKE MANY OF you, I'm sure, I have been following Ken Condon's two-partner on "Risky Business" here in MCN, and took the time to grade myself on his "Risk Assessment Questionnaire" in last month's issue. I am not too proud to tell you that I scored a 27 on Ken's test, which is in the high one-third of the "moderate risk" group, tending toward the "high risk" group. That's not very good, and about the only thing I can say in my feeble defense is that it is a whole lot better than I would have scored if I had taken this test much earlier in my riding career. Slight comfort, I suppose, should I awaken in some hospital's emergency room someday.

The first question, on helmet use, was one of only two on which I could claim a perfect score. I wear a quality, full-face helmet all the time when I ride—no exceptions. Well...even that is not *entirely* true. Sometimes I need to move a bike from our Moto-Hut in the back of the office building to our parking garage in the front. If I am already down in the back parking lot, rather than walk around to the front, into the building, up a flight of stairs, back to the back of the building where my office is, pick up a helmet, go back to the front, back down to the ground floor, and back to the back parking lot again, I will simply get on the bike and ride it around to the front. All the riding is inside our parking lot, and I ride at walking speed, but that doesn't completely absolve me, and I know it. But I'm still giving myself a five-pointer here, because I don't believe I have ventured out onto the street without a full-face helmet in the past 21 years and 3 months. I can remember the date so precisely because it was in June of 1983 that I was riding about 100 feet behind a good friend of mine when he was struck by an illegally-turning pickup truck. He was thrown off the bike, and landed on the pavement, face-first. After the paramedics loaded him up on the stretcher, I picked up the helmet they had removed from his head, and carried it with me. As I sat in the waiting room at the hospital, I had the helmet on my lap, and had a good chance to study it. It was a full-face Arai, I believe. The faceshield had literally hundreds of deep abrasions, and the brow of the helmet looked like someone had taken a hacksaw to it and sawed away about a six-inch wide section. But the most telling damage was to the chin-bar, which had been crushed inward about two inches, and had all the outer plastic and most of the inner Styrofoam abraded away. It seemed like an awful lot of damage for having slid only about two feet on the pavement, but then again, I reasoned, it was car-



rying pretty much his entire body weight at the time of impact. I was amazed to find out later that his neck wasn't broken, considering the way he landed, but attribute that to the heavy, padded neckroll at the back of the helmet shell. My friend was also an amateur go-kart, stock car and dune buggy racer, and insisted on nothing but the best professional racing helmets no matter what he was riding or driving.

Anyway, as I sat there with the helmet on my lap, waiting to hear about my friend's condition, I began to think about what my condition would be if our situations had been reversed. I was wearing my standard, el-cheapo, K-Mart "blue light special" open-face helmet. I think it cost me \$19.95. I had always argued that a full-face made me feel claustrophobic, restricted my vision and hearing, and was too heavy. Besides, it seemed like a waste of money.

Looking at my friend's helmet, I realized that if I had the same kind of accident he just had, I would most likely be dead from injuries to my face. Probably from having my chin, teeth and nose slammed about six inches backwards through my skull. Then and there, I made a life decision.

The doctor came out soon after that, and told me that my buddy was going to be "just fine." I thanked him and left, and at 9:00 the next morning I walked into my local motorcycle dealership and purchased two (one for me, one for the wife) of the best full-face helmets I could afford. I haven't ridden without one since that day.

Anyway, getting back to the test, my other perfect score was for "Riding and Alcohol," because I never, ever ride within eight hours of having had an alcoholic drink. However, I have to take my lumps for "Full Coverage Riding Gear," because though I virtually never ride without an

armored jacket, gloves and boots, I still resist wearing proper riding pants. I'm not really sure why, but I just prefer riding in jeans, and have taken considerable criticism from a number of our readers who have noticed this from my pictures in this magazine. One of those being just last month, on page 12.

I also scored poorly on "Riding at Night," though I am tempted to ask Ken for a variance on this one. Sure, I ride at night quite a bit, but I don't feel that I should be downgraded on my safety for this quite so much as someone who might live in a different climate zone. Just this past weekend, I needed to ride home from near the China Lake Weapons Testing Facility in the Mojave Desert. Rather than cross 200-plus miles of desert in the daylight, with temperatures running around 110 degrees F, I holed up in a cheap motel room until around 3:00 a.m., and rode home in the dark, in temperatures in the high 80s. This, I felt, was actually safer, as I wasn't exposing myself to possible heat exhaustion, and the loss of concentration and motor control that comes with extreme heat. Also, I slowed my riding pace by about 10–15 mph, to compensate for the reduced field of vision. C'mon, Ken! Should I really lose valuable points for this?

I also had to honestly downgrade myself on succumbing to "Peer Pressure," as I sometimes still let it get to me that I can't keep up with all those former racers that represent the other magazines at press intros. Though I'm a lot better at "letting it go" than I used to be, I sometimes still find myself riding over my head, trying to keep up, when I know full well that I really shouldn't.

If you didn't read Ken's articles on risk, I strongly suggest you pull out last month's issue, and go through both parts, and take his little test. Sure, it's kind of dry reading—not a whole lot of entertainment value there—but it might help open your eyes a bit to just what kinds of risk you are taking, and your reasons for doing it. It certainly helped me analyze my own riding habits a bit more closely, even after over 35 years in the saddle.

I may be an old dog, but I like to think I'm still capable of learning the minor trick or two.

—Fred Rau
Senior Editor