

Motorcycle cops pass on expertise to aging novices

BY MATTHEW GAUK Times Colonist staff

Frustrated with reconstructing crash scenes involving inexperienced motorcyclists, two Saanich police officers have launched their own private motorcycle training course.

Advanced Rider Training is the brainchild of constables Ryan Austin and Paul Luhowy. The two self-described diehard motorcycle fanatics want to change the way Islanders ride.

"If you look at the stats for motorcycle crashes, a huge percentage are single-vehicle crashes where the rider simply fails to negotiate a turn, for example," said Austin, a 14-year police veteran who has been with Saanich since moving to the West Coast from Ontario in 2004.

"The sad thing is when we go out to do crash reconstruction, on a large percentage of those, the bike could have made the maneuver, but the rider wasn't capable of it. They just didn't have the practice or the skill."

Austin and Luhowy, who both patrol on their BMW 1200s and teach other officers how to ride, decided to launch the program after they took a trip to Sacramento, Calif., to participate in a two-week police motorcycle instructors' course. When they came back, they realized the lessons they learned could be useful to civilians as well, Luhowy said.

There have been at least 10 fatal motorcycle crashes on Vancouver Island this year, up from four all of last year. The RCMP found that eight of the 10 crashes were due to rider error and that a significant number of the riders involved were baby boomers.

"What we're focusing on is, rather than the new rider, we're aiming at training the rider in his 30s, 40s or 50s, who maybe hasn't been on a bike in 10 years, but pulls out his licence and says, 'I want a bike again,'" said Luhowy, who has been a motorcycle officer with Saanich since 2004. "He's going out and buying a nice BMW or Harley and hasn't been on a bike in a long time and hasn't brushed up on his skills."

The "advanced" part of the rider training is what distinguishes Austin and Luhowy from the rest of the motorcycle-instruction pack. In most training programs, novice riders are too preoccupied with learning basics like the clutch and throttle to get the hang of more complicated issues like counter-steering (a high-speed turning technique where the rider pushes the handlebars in the opposite direction of the turn) and threshold braking (the maximum pressure a rider can apply to the brakes without the wheels locking), Austin said.

All of the training will be done on a closed course, most likely a parking lot, but Luhowy said that slow-speed skills do translate to open-road riding and that one of the first steps in avoiding crashes is learning how to finesse a heavy bike.

Their students are required to have Class 6 motorcycle licences and bikes of their own, and they're expected to provide background on their riding experience.

Austin is adamant that these skills won't facilitate speeding or aggressive driving. You're not teaching somebody that so they can go out and drive like a fool," said Austin. "My experience over the years is the people who are going to spend time and money to go out and get rider training, they're the people who want to be good riders, who want to survive out there, who don't want to be killed."

Austin and Luhowy had to get approval from the police board and their chief to launch the business, because of possible concerns about using publicly funded training for private gain. Advanced Rider Training isn't affiliated with the police department in any way, however, and since they're ultimately making the roads safer, there was no problem getting a go-ahead, according to Luhowy.

The first weekend course, priced at \$450 per person, is scheduled for Sept. 21-23. It will include 2 1/2 days of instruction and practice.



Saanich officers Paul Luhowy, left, and Ryan Austin will be offering motorcycle training.