

Women bikers riding to save a dying sport



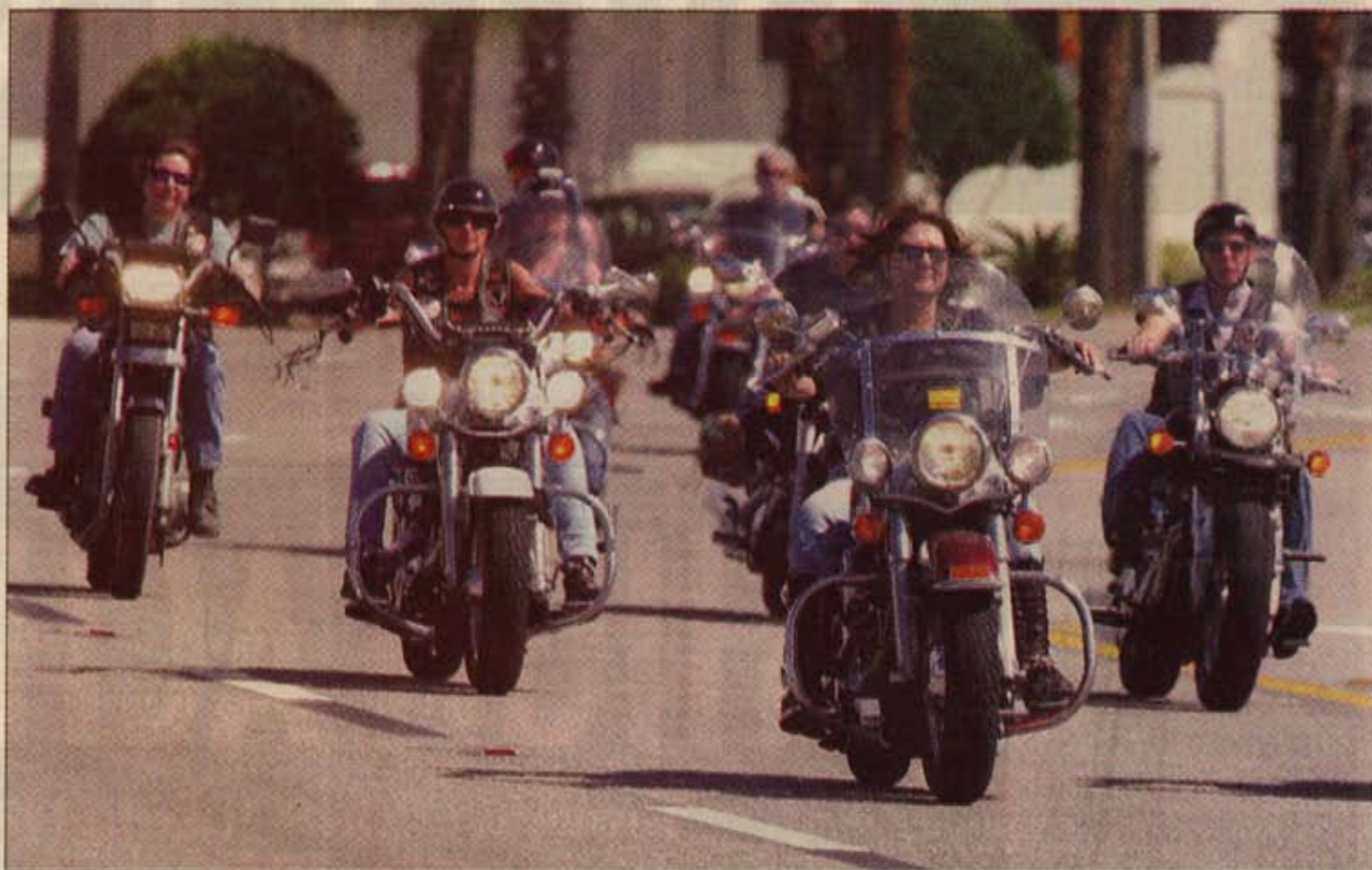
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Motor Mouth

Like all men of a certain age, I assumed wrong. There were two bikes idling on their kickstands, their owners a slight, twentysomething babe and a strapping young buck, standing at least six-foot-two and looking suitably macho. Since the two motorcycles in question were a bone-stock, puttering little Kawasaki ZX-6 that was at least five years old and the other a brand spanking new, thrumming Ducati 1098 (for the non-motorcycling crowd, the former is the equivalent of a cute little Miata while the latter is meaner than a snarling Lamborghini Gallardo), I assumed he would throw a leg over the booming Duke and she would follow demurely on the Kawasaki.

Of course, you know what happened next. He folded himself onto the diminutive Kawi and she hauled butt out of Mosport

International Raceway's parking lot aboard the big Duke. And while threading through parking lots is no indicator of actual riding talent, it was obvious from her confidence that she was no dilettante. Once again, the wise old adage of assuming making an ass out of you and, especially in this case, me, proved true.

Nor should it come as any surprise that there is now a Women's Cup class included in the Parts Canada Superbike Championship. And while one may argue women will never be able to compete equally with men in motorcycle racing (unlike car racing, flogging a bike around a race track takes an extraordinary amount of upper-body strength — just ask Team Rigor Mortis' rider, 47-year-old Pat Barnes, who finds the spirit willing but his Guinness-fuelled body flagging), there can be no doubt that last Sunday's race winner at Mosport, Shawna Aron of Halton Hills, would have dusted my pathetic old butt rather unceremoniously. In fact, the entire pack of mostly Quebec-based women would have left me for dead. And though the crowd watching the women scurry around the track was greatly diminished (they had the unfortunate timing of following the much-delayed Superbike final), the Women's Cup class may eventually prove equally important.



BARRARA V. PEREZ / ORLANDO SENTINEL

Women riders, such as members of the Leather and Lace women's motorcycle club in Florida, are increasingly important to the sport.

Why?

Because motorcyclists are, quite literally, a dying breed. Having famously failed to attract a new generation of riders, motorcycling has become the sport of choice for the balding male in mid-life crisis. Call them what you will — Rich Urban Bikers, Born Again Bikers — it still adds up to the same thing, a bunch of boring old farts trying to recapture their youth straddling an overly chromed penis extender.

According to the American Motorcycle Industry Council (MIC), while, in 1980, 50% of bikers were under 24 years of

age (and half of those under 18), today, fewer than 4% are under 18. The current stats reveal that half of all bikers are over 40 and more than 25% will never see their 50th birthday again. And, unlike European youth who continue to take to the sport with the fervour of their forefathers, our North American progeny seems more interested in Xbox and MTV. Motorcycles might muss their hair.

So it might be women who save the sport from an economic collapse worse than that of the early '80s (when bike sales plummeted since all those

24-year-old males began buying Porsches and three-bedroom suburban bungalows). The MIC says that one in 10 bike owners in the United States is a woman. Harley-Davidson, that bastion of male pulchritude, sold 30,000 Hogs to women in 2005, a far cry from the 600 that the fairer sex purchased 20 years earlier. Even more promising is that the numbers keep growing. From 1998 to 2003, the number of women licensed to ride motorcycles in the U.S. rose by 34% compared with the virtually stagnant number of males registered to ride. Closer to home, Honda

Canada is virtually sold out of the CBR125Rs that it imported for its New Rider Program geared toward women.

The point is that women are becoming increasingly important to a sport that desperately needs new blood. That, occasionally, one is a svelte young twentysomething in a snug leather jacket riding an impossibly red piece of Italian exotica can only, ahem, ensure that we balding old guys defer our purchases of Winnebagos and walking sticks a few more years.

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