

'Supersport' motorcycle bikers face high fatality rate

By [Vishal Persaud](#)

Staff writer

Sunday, January 13, 2013 at 6:30 a.m.

Joel Hickman says he always had a thirst for speed, which he fueled watching motorcycle stunt riders vault through the air on television and contort their bodies and bikes with great finesse.



Joel Hickman performs a stunt on his modified 2004 Kawasaki Ninja.

“Those were the guys that I wanted to be like at first,” Hickman recalled. “I was always into speed.”

Then, he began to attend motorcycle drag races on Friday nights, and he was hooked.

So at 18, Hickman bought his first motorcycle for about \$2,500. It was a 1992 Honda CDR 600, and he soon began doing wheelies and other tricks on public roads.

“It was an adrenaline rush,” he said. “It drew a lot of attention because it was pretty cool.”

And like many young men who feel invincible, Hickman thought he could handle the speed. That was until he took a corner too fast, careened into a telephone pole and broke his right leg.

“Back then, I thought that I could handle going that fast and just wasn't able to,” he said.

Hickman was fortunate.

The bike he was riding is in a class of powerful machines known as “supersport” motorcycles. Cheap, fast and affordable, these motorcycles are attractive and popular with young riders looking for speed and an adrenaline rush, experts say.

But the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, which tracks traffic accident statistics and trends nationwide, indicates that riders of supersport bikes are historically four times as likely to die in accidents as other bikers.

A 2005 report by IIHS revealed that the death rate for riders of supersports was 22.5 per 10,000 registered vehicles, four times the death rate for those who ride “cruiser” motorcycles like many of the Harley-Davidsons favored by older riders.

IIHS also found that, although supersports made up just 9 percent of all registered motorcycles in the U.S., they accounted for more than 25 percent of all motorcycle fatalities.

Since that report, sales of supersport motorcycles have surged. What hasn't changed is that their owners are dying at higher rates than other bikers.

Of the 4,007 bikers who died in 2010, 943 — almost 25 percent — were riding supersports.

“Supersport motorcycles are essentially street-legal racing machines and, like fast cars, are more attractive to some riders than to others,” said Kristin Nevels, a spokeswoman for IIHS.

The IIHS report cited speed as a factor in about 57 percent of crashes involving supersport motorcycles.

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What separates supersport bikes from other motorcycles is both their sleek, futuristic styling and breathtaking speed.

IIHS notes in its literature about these motorcycles that they “are built on racing platforms but modified for the highway and sold to consumers. A combination of lightweight and high-horsepower engines means many of these motorcycles can quickly reach speeds of more than 160 miles per hour.”

IIHS compared two different bikes and found that one of the more popular supersport bikes, a 2012 model Kawasaki Ninja ZX-10R, produces 163 horsepower from a 998 cubic centimeter engine and weighs 437 pounds. It produces more power per pound than a typical NASCAR engine.

In contrast, a 2012 Harley-Davidson Ultra Classic Electra Glide, a common touring bike, produces 66 horsepower from a 1,690 cubic centimeter engine and weighs 889 pounds.

“It's a product (supersport motorcycle) by its very nature that is inherently dangerous,” said Steven Gursten, a motorcycle accident attorney in Michigan. “And because of their ages, they (young motorcycle riders) don't know the risk of these motorcycles.”

Gursten said he has watched with concern as supersport bikes increased in popularity over the last 10 years, particularly among young men who are apt to test the limits of the bike's capability.

Gursten, who has won judgments for many victims of motorcycle accidents, classifies these bikes as “attractive nuisances.”

"I started seeing ... young riders in their 20s and 30s, riding these supersports and getting into these catastrophic injury accidents," Gursten said.

Robert Seidler, a filmmaker and long-time motorcycle rider who helped develop a curriculum for a motorcycle safety class at the University of Florida, believes the attraction to supersport motorcycles is a simple fascination with speed.

"I think it's just the immortality aspect and the issue of the purest, lightest, most effective use of horsepower, period. And they're sexy, and women love young men on motorcycles," Seidler said.

They're also fairly inexpensive, especially compared to high-performance cars.

Pre-owned Kawasaki, Suzuki, Yamaha or Honda sport motorcycles can be purchased for about \$3,000, and some top out at speeds close to 190 mph, according to listings from Marion County motorcycle dealerships.

The Italian motorcycle manufacturer Ducati, which produces what some consider higher-end sports motorcycles, also sells brand-new supersport motorcycles for as low as \$9,200 and more than \$30,000, according to local Ducati dealer Sebastian Didato.

And because they're light, supersport bikes are good on gas. Hickman said he can easily go about 40 to 50 miles on a gallon of gas.

Then there is this: In Florida, motorcycle owners do not have the same financial burden of purchasing auto insurance that other motorists do. The law does not require them to carry auto insurance, although they must carry \$10,000 in medical coverage if they ride without a helmet and are over 21 years of age. Anyone under 21 must wear a helmet while riding a motorcycle.

But some motorcyclists believe that most people misconstrue what it means to own a supersport motorcycle and that not everyone who owns one is a thrill-seeker who speeds for an adrenaline rush.

"People already classify our kind of bikes as we're the crazy guys," said Jason Strachan, a motorcycle enthusiast and safety advocate.

There's an entire subculture of riders who love the look and feel of a sports motorcycle but don't feel the need to speed. Strachan also drives a supersport motorcycle, a customized 1999 Yamaha R6, but rarely ever goes fast for fun. He simply enjoys riding.

"My bike is a sport bike. I don't drive it like a crazy, fast driver. I like driving just to enjoy the day," Strachan said.

Yet national statistics argue that many supersport riders don't share Strachan's restraint when they board these powerful vehicles.

Marion County has seen a sizable number of horrific crashes involving speeding supersport jockeys.

On Nov. 5, a 24-year-old man was accused of leading law enforcement on a high-speed chase. Riding a 1996 Yamaha, the man was allegedly speeding and eventually struck some small trees and fell. The rider survived and was arrested. Others have not been as lucky in avoiding injuries.

Also last year, a 26-year-old biker was killed after he crashed his 2006 Yamaha into the back of an SUV on U.S. 441. The rider was thrown from the bike and his body became lodged into the SUV. Authorities believe speed was a factor.

The list goes on:

Robert Kelly of Silver Springs, 22 at the time, was critically injured after his 2002 Suzuki plowed into the back of a Dodge Caravan in September 2010 on Interstate 75. Speed was allegedly a factor in the crash.

A 19-year-old Ocala motorcyclist was killed after his 2008 Suzuki crashed into a Nissan Altima in April 2010. Witnesses said the rider, Geoffrey Griffin, had been traveling more than 80 mph, weaving through traffic and doing wheelies before the crash occurred.

In 2007, a 27-year-old motorcyclist died when his 1994 Suzuki collided with a Chevrolet minivan. The crash sent the rider, Kenneth Martin III, of Ocala, flying through the van's side window. Witnesses at the scene said he had been speeding.