NO. 38: MINI-BIKES

Mini-bike drivers face a dangerous dilemma. In many states, these two-wheeled, gasoline-driven vehicles cannot be driven legally on streets or highways; in some locales, they are not allowed on sidewalks. Acceptable riding locations, such as yards or open fields, offer uneven or bumpy terrain that can cause a mini-bike to bounce or throw its rider. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that more than 31,000 persons each year require treatment in hospital emergency rooms for injuries related to mini-bikes.

The Commission offers the following advice on how to avoid the four most common causes of mini-bike injuries -- mechanical and structural problems, poor riding conditions, contact with vehicle parts, and rider misuse.

Mechanical and Structural Problems

DICK TRIED TO STOP HIS MINI-BIKE WHEN ANOTHER BOY RODE TOWARDS HIM, BUT HIS HANDBRAKES FAILED TO WORK. THEY COLLIDED, AND DICK FELL, HITTING HIS HEAD AND PINNING HIS RIGHT ARM AND LEG UNDER THE BIKE. HE SUFFERED A SLIGHT CEREBRAL HEMORRHAGE AND A SPRAINED RIGHT ARM.

This accident illustrates a typical case of brake failure. Other mechanical and structural problems include throttles that stick, instability, chain breakage, poorly located exhaust pipes, and loose, missing or broken parts.

To avert accidents due to mechanical and structural problems:

-- Look for a mini-bike with large wheels. Typically, mini-bikes with small wheels are more unstable.

-- Check for durable, sturdy construction.

-- Look for exhaust pipes that point rearward, away from the legs of drivers. If directed toward the side or upward, could burn the driver's leg or damage the bike.

-- Brakes should be easy to use and readily accessible.

-- Handbrakes alone are not adequate for children. Buy a bike with footbrakes, or hand and foot brake combinations.

-- The rider should be able to conveniently reach all controls without exerting himself.

-- After buying a bike, don’t modify its design.
Periodic maintenance is essential:

- Lubricate and clean moving parts.
- Tighten (but don’t over-tighten) parts, such as levers, handlebar clamps, nuts and bolts.
- Have a qualified mechanic adjust brakes, wheel bearings, gas throttle, chain tensions, and other components.
- Replace lost or broken parts, particularly chain links and guards.
- Check fuel hoses (if any) for leaks.

NEVER RIDE A MINI-BIKE THAT IS IN NEED OF REPAIR!

Poor Riding Conditions

NINE-YEAR-OLD RALPH AND HIS YOUNGER SISTER WERE RIDING DOUBLE ON A MINI-BIKE. THE BIKE WAS TRAVELING FAST WHEN THEY RAN OVER LOOSE GRAVEL THAT CAUSED THE BIKE TO GO OUT OF CONTROL. THEY BOTH FELL OFF. RALPH SUFFERED A CONCUSSION WHILE HIS SISTER RECEIVED CONTUSIONS AND ABRASIONS TO HER HEAD AND HANDS.

Riding over uneven terrain, or hitting a bump, hole or other ground hazard can cause a driver to be thrown from the mini-bike and suffer serious injury. Wet grass and pavement and loose gravel also can cause a mini-bike to skid out of control.

- Before buying a mini-bike for children, parents should consider where the bike can be ridden legally. If no off-the-street locations with smooth terrain are available, don’t buy the bike.

- Know your bike’s capabilities and limitations and get the “feel” of it.

- Know your terrain before riding.

- Don’t ride in the rain.

- Avoid riding on wet pavement, gravel or grass, especially going up or down a grade.

- Beware of fence wire or cables that may not be visible when stretched in open fields or backyards. They can strangle a driver or overturn a mini-bike.

Contact with Parts

MICKEY WAS RIDING HIS MINI-BIKE WHEN HIS LEFT PANTS LEG CAUGHT IN THE CHAIN DRIVE AND SPROCKET MECHANISM. HE SUFFERED PUNCTURE WOUNDS ON HIS LEG.

Chain sprocket mechanisms can catch clothing, toes, and fingers and cause painful injuries, even amputations. Mini-bike drivers also can be lacerated on sharp edges and loose or protruding parts, such as on kickstands or pedals.

- Check the bike for sharp edges by carefully running your hand along fenders and other metal parts. Don’t buy a new bike with sharp edges. On an older mini-bike, cover sharp edges with heavy, waterproof tape.

- Buy a mini-bike with chainguards, and don’t remove them.
Rider Misuse

ON A DARE, JEFF TRIED TO JUMP OVER A PLANK ON A CEMENT BLOCK. AS HE LEFT THE JUMP, HE LOST CONTROL OF THE BIKE AND WAS KNOCKED UNCONSCIOUS WHEN HE HIT THE GROUND. HE WAS HOSPITALIZED FOR 11 DAYS WITH A FRACTURED RIB, RUPTURED SPLEEN, AND INTERNAL HEMORRHAGING.

Children may be tempted to try maneuvers beyond their skill, such as “wheelies” with the front wheel in the air or jumps that professional motorcyclists might perform. Riding double is also hazardous behavior that can throw a mini-bike off balance.

- Parents should warn children of the dangers of stunting and riding double and supervise them when possible. They should insist on safe practices.

- Don’t ride in the dark. You can’t see bumps, holes and other obstacles; even a light on the mini-bike is not sufficient.

- Certain problems in accelerating are due to inexperience with the mini-bike. Some riders have mistaken the gas throttle with the handbrake; others have grabbed the throttle to maintain balance. In both kinds of accidents, the bike has speeded up and thrown the driver off.

- Before riding a new mini-bike, drivers should read the instruction manual carefully to learn the location of controls and take any safety precautions that may be necessary. Since children may not read instructions, parents must take extra care to teach children proper use of the mini-bike.

- Before allowing friends to ride for the first time, make sure they know where the braking and accelerating controls are.

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Additional hints for using a mini-bike with safety:

- Be careful when filling the gas tank. Either fill it before riding or turn off the motor and wait until it cools. Don’t fill the tank near a utility room (a pilot light from a water heater can cause an explosion of gas vapors) or near any other ignition source.

- When riding, wear protective clothing, such as long pants, sturdy, closed shoes, and heavy-duty helmet which is marked Department of Transportation (DOT)-approved.


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BIBLIOGRAPHY


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