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ONLY IN SAN DIEGO

## Motorcycle risks may outweigh the reward

As gas prices soar, so does the allure of the motorcycle.

And why not?

Motorcycles save money at the pump. They're easy to park. On a motorcycle, you can use the carpool lanes. You can weave in and out of traffic. You can ride along the lane lines on snarled freeways. And when the rest of us stop at a red light, you can glide to the front, cutting ahead of everyone. . . . *Ha ha, suckers!*

But hold on, we're getting ahead of ourselves.

First you need to learn how to ride. Which brings us to **Joe Elliott**, who has taught beginners to ride for 16 years.

Elliott thinks of himself as a would-be motorcyclist's best friend.

That's because if you pay him \$108 in tuition, he'll try to talk you out of riding.

And he's not kidding.

I sat in on one of Elliott's classes at **San Diego Motorcycle Training** last weekend.

He'd added the session to meet the spike in demand, yet turned away a student because he didn't have enough motorcycles to go around.

"Everybody's trying to get in," he said.

It was the second session for these students, who'd had a taste of life on two wheels and were eager for more.

But Elliott had them sitting at picnic tables in the Kearny Mesa parking lot he leases. He wanted to review the first chapter in their booklet of basic motorcycle skills. It covers "risk management."

Elliott asked them, "What do you do if you want to be safe?"

His students answered in unison, "Not ride!"

Of course, no one gives up three hours on a Sunday evening to not ride. The students – six men and two women – had thought it through and were willing to exchange the security of an automobile for the freedom of the open road. Several admitted being enticed by the cost savings, while others were frankly searching for kicks.

Like Chauncey Harvey, 49, who already plunked down \$20,000 for a used Harley-Davidson.

"I'm a high-voltage lineman by trade," Harvey said. "Some people say thrill-seeker. I just say, willing to take chances."

Or Meryl Rammelkamp, 27, an event planner for a Gaslamp Quarter hotel. Rammelkamp relishes "that adrenaline rush" she gets on a motorcycle – and her top speed so far has been 15 miles an hour. "I can't wait until the next class, when we get to go into second and third gears," she told me.

Even Norm Olson, a 53-year-old biologist looking for a cheap way to commute from Mira Mesa to UCSD, is a different man once he tucks his gray ponytail into a helmet and twists the throttle.

"It's a kick in the pants," Olson said.

Elliott, in the meantime, applies a steady hand brake on such enthusiasm.

On this day, after his students practiced braking and weaving at low speeds on their lightweight, low-slung, low-horsepower Kawasakis, he congratulated them "on being very dangerous."

"He sounds like my parents," Rammelkamp said later.

And his company slogan might have been written by his insurance carrier: "We do not promote motorcycling, we promote making informed choices!"

Pro-choice on motorcycle riding? What is he, a candidate for Congress?

After class, Elliott explained that too many people take up motorcycling to beat high gas prices. Yet the savings are never as big as they imagine, while the risks are greater than they know.

"These gas prices are going to help the injuries go up for sure," he said.

Elliott said he meets a lot of people who think they'll get 80 miles to a gallon – a figure more properly associated with scooters – when many of the more powerful motorcycles get about 40 miles to the gallon, and some less. (Note to bikers: Your mileage may vary.)

"There are cars out there that get 40 miles a gallon," Elliott said. "And they have air conditioning."

The people with the greatest potential for savings, he added, have the longest commutes.

"Yet the longer your commute is, the harder it is to do it every day on a motorcycle," he said. "You shouldn't ride if you're distracted, and every day is not a good day to ride. Riding is hard. It's hot and it's loud, and you can't show up to work fatigued."

"The other thing out there is: How much gas would a spine injury be worth? Gas has to be pretty expensive for that."

Elliott, it turns out, also works as an expert witness in motorcycle lawsuits. He's done some spine-injury cases, so he's seen the numbers crunched.

"If you ride, you have to accept the risk," he said. "It has to be an activity you really want to do. You can't get angry, even if you get run over."

He gives the example of someone who gets rear-ended at a stoplight. If he's in a car, he'll soon be inspecting the bumper and wondering how long repairs will take. If he's on a motorcycle, he soon might be on a helicopter ride.

Elliott, 46, estimates he's taught nearly 30,000 San Diegans to ride. He said he's never known of a student of his who was killed on the road, but in talking with him, he seemed to regard it as inevitable.

San Diego Motorcycle Training claims to be the oldest continuously operated motorcycle training school in the nation.

Yet, Elliott says, "If riding dried up completely tomorrow, that would be fine with us. We'd turn the lights out."

As we parted, he reminded me of his motto: It's OK not to ride.

"And I don't mean anybody in particular," he shouted across the parking lot. "I mean everybody."

So there you have it. Maybe he just saved someone \$108.

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