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NTSB Looking Into Motorcycle Crashes

By LESLIE MILLER
The Associated Press
Wednesday, September 13, 2006; 7:03 AM

WASHINGTON -- Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger's near-fatal crash on a motorcycle this year reflected a troubling trend: More bikers are getting killed on the road.

Roethlisberger's June 12 accident was one of three within two days that the National Transportation Safety Board looked into. The accidents, which killed seven people, were the first the safety board ever investigated.

"This trend is very troubling," said NTSB member Debbie Hersman, who chaired a two-day forum on motorcycle safety that began Tuesday. "The number of fatalities is outpacing the increase in ridership."

Late-blooming motorheads are part of the problem. The average rider is older now, and the average age of riders killed is also on the rise.

In the last 10 years, there has been a 230 percent increase in fatalities among motorcycle riders who've reached their 40th birthday, according to Umesh Shankar of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Fatalities are also on the rise for seniors on hogs, according to Shankar.

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Pittsburgh Steelers sidelined starting quarterback Ben Roethlisberger hugs Miami Dolphins receiver Chris Chambers (84) after the Steelers beat the Dolphins, 28-17, in the opening game of the NFL football season at Heinz Field in Pittsburgh, Thursday Sept. 7, 2006. (AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar) (Gene J. Puskar - AP)

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As riders get older, motorcycles get bigger. The number of 50-plus riders killed in a crash involving a bike with a 1,001-1,500 cc engine rose 540 percent in the past decade, Shankar said.

Alcohol continues to kill motorcycle riders. Of those who died in a solo crash in 2004, 41 percent had a blood alcohol concentration above the legal limit of .08, Hersman said.

Ted Miller, a safety economist with the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, blames the rise in motorcycle deaths on plummeting helmet use.

At one time almost every state required all motorcycle riders to wear helmets, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Now, only 20 states and the District of Columbia require riders to wear protective helmets, according to the institute, which is funded by the insurance industry.

Pennsylvania repealed its mandatory law in 2003, which is why Roethlisberger, 24, wasn't wearing a helmet when he crashed on Second Avenue in Pittsburgh.

James "Doc" Reichenbach, a bearded and tattooed biker who lives in Silver Springs, Fla., said better statistics are needed to show whether or not helmets protect riders.

He said helmet laws infringe on his rights. "I did three tours in Vietnam," he said. "I have a right to decide for myself whether I wear one or not."

Motorcyclists are often the victims of drivers who don't see them. Roethlisberger came close to death in such an accident. He rammed into a 1996 Chrysler New Yorker that failed to yield when making a left turn.

Research is needed into ways to improve the visibility of motorcyclists, as well as the effectiveness of protective gear, the NTSB was told.

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