

Bruce on Bikers' Rights

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OPEN LETTER TO HENRY PIERSON CURTIS AND THE EDITORS OF THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

*“Biker deaths debunk myths”? Wrong. Try: Truth debunks Henry Pierson Curtis
and Orlando Sentinel editors as responsible journalists!*

30 April 2007

To (Mis)Reporter Henry Pierson Curtis and the Editors of the Orlando Sentinel:

I am an American citizen, a resident of the state of Florida, a taxpayer, a voter, and a motorcyclist. On my ride home to Miami yesterday morning, after spending over 900 of my hard-earned after-tax dollars with numerous merchants and service providers in and around Central Florida's **Leesburg BikeFest**, I exited the Turnpike in Orlando to fill my tank and empty my bladder. As I waited to hand yet another of my nearly-depleted twenties to an employee of one of the businesses whose advertising pays the salaries of “professional” journalists such as yourselves, this front-page headline leaped out at me from a chest-high stack of your Sunday edition:

BIKER DEATHS DEBUNK MYTHS Record shows riders at fault 70% of the time

http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/orl-motorcycles2907apr29_0,1740924.story?coll=orl-home-headlines

To say the least, the sensationalism of this headline gave me pause, and I bought a copy of your paper. So congratulations! If your primary objective is revenue—and the sacred trust of the public in their free press to tell the truth is for you a distant memory—then as Dubya would say, “Mission Accomplished!”

Unfortunately for the Orlando Sentinel—and its readers and advertisers—your strategy is penny-wise but pound-foolish. You see, as your own paper told you here...

http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/lake/orl-llivestory2907apr29_0,5033918.story?coll=orl-news-headlines-lake

...there were an estimated 200,000 other motorcyclists pumping about as much money into the Central Florida economy these past few days as I did. And if they read your article carefully, I am sure they will find it to be nothing more than a bunch of numerical nonsense, hack and half-truths, and be as insulted by it as I am. Which means, Henry Pierson Curtis, that you may have just bitten 180 million dollars (\$900 x 200,000 visiting motorcyclists) in recurring economic benefit right out of the hands that feed you.

And for WHAT? You publish this article front-page on the very weekend of the Leesburg BikeFest, just so you can sell a few more buck-fifty papers? Meanwhile, the advertisers that fund your paycheck—and pay for the paper, ink and goodwill you waste—stand to lose MILLIONS.

AND YOU CALL MOTORCYCLISTS “RECKLESS”?

I will concede, Henry, that you at least made an attempt at making your disjointed diatribe seem fair and balanced by requesting commentary from a representative of a Florida-based motorcyclists’ rights organization. Unfortunately, however, the individual you selected speaks for less than 2% of Florida’s motorcyclists, and was not prepared to challenge your specious assertions and spurious statistics. Allow me to respond on behalf of some of the remaining 98% who are. I will go point by point:

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“Biker deaths debunk myths”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

Read the rest of what I present here, and you will see that the only myth debunked by this article is any notion that Henry Pierson Curtis or the Editors of the Orlando Sentinel are responsible journalists.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“Records show riders at fault 70% of the time.”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

What “records”? What “riders”? What “time”? There is NOTHING in your article that clearly defines these three parameters. And without those definitions, your “70%” headline statistic is a sham.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“8 of the 15 Volusia County fatalities in 2006 occurred in March during Bike Week.... Of those 8, 1 was 23 years old. The rest were 44 to 65.”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

Do you want to discuss motorcycle fatalities for Daytona Bike Week—for which the Florida Highway Patrol (FHP) defines a multi-county area—or for Volusia County annually individually? Mixing the two makes the numbers you report here mean nothing. And in case you missed it Henry, there were only 7 Daytona Bike Week Deaths this year—down 67% from the 21 of 2006—and many attribute a substantial portion of the improvement to the successful Motorcycle Awareness Campaign of the Bike Week Safety Task Force (aimed at automobile drivers, not motorcyclists) reported in your own paper here:

http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/volusia/orl-vbikeweek2507feb25_0_7989938.story?coll=orl-news-headlines-volusia

And also Henry, automobile drivers—not motorcyclists—were the leading cause of motorcycle fatalities during Daytona Bike Week 2006. You forgot to mention that, didn’t you?

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“76% of Orange County fatalities in 2006 involved sport bikes.... Only 1 in 10 of the riders who died was older than 45.”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

Even if these numbers are absolutely accurate, Henry, they are equally worthless. What percentage of the registered motorcycles in Orange County in 2006 were sport bikes? Without disclosing that, your “76%” means nothing. How many riders were there, and how many of those were older than 45? Without disclosing that, your “1 in 10” means nothing.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“In Orange County, most who died were on sport bikes, uninsured, younger than 45 and the only vehicle involved.”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

What number and percentage of the registered motorcycles in the base population were sport bikes? And how does the age and insurance status of the riders who died compare to those who did not? How many accidents were there involving multiple as well as single vehicles, and what were the injuries and fatalities associated with each? Without this information as context, Henry, your claim has no meaning.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“In Volusia County, according to FHP figures, most who died were on cruisers, uninsured, older than 45 and collided with another vehicle.”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

Most who died WHEN, Henry? And how does the motorcycle type, insurance status and age of those who died compare to that of the general population? And who was at fault in these collisions? Again, without this information as context, your claim has no meaning.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“The lore suggests most of those who die in motorcycle crashes are young riders with a need for outrageous speed on high-performance sport bikes.... But preliminary figures of motorcycling deaths in Florida's largest urban areas last year show that sport bikers account for a little more than half of the fatalities. The other half come from the growing number of aging ‘renaissance riders’ who take to the road on their cruisers, often without proper training.”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

I don't know what “lore” you refer to Henry, but I do know that “a little more than half” qualifies as “most”. Also, where is your support for use of the word “often” before “proper training”?

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“And contrary to the notion that careless automobile drivers cause most accidents involving motorcycles, last year's deadly crashes were caused by the bikers themselves more than two-thirds of the time.”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

That “notion” is a long-standing proven nationwide statistic, Henry. And the fact that you can fabricate contradictory data by combining statistics from ONLY accidents investigated by the FHP in ONLY the Florida counties you selected for ONLY the timeframe you selected means NOTHING.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“The state Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles will release comprehensive statewide data in June, but the Sentinel was able to review the data from Central Florida, Fort Lauderdale, Jacksonville, Miami, Palm Beach and Tampa. An analysis of the 119 fatal crashes investigated by FHP in those areas shows: 64 of the dead were sport-bike riders; 55 rode some other form of motorcycle. Eight in 10 riders who died did not have insurance. 70 percent were at fault.”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

70 percent of WHOM, Henry? The eight in 10 with no insurance, the 64 who rode sports bikers, the 55 who did not, or the 119 who were killed overall? Don't bother clarification, because what you have will in any case be an arbitrary statistic you fabricated by combining statistics from ONLY accidents investigated by the FHP in ONLY the Florida counties you selected for ONLY the timeframe you selected, and that therefore means NOTHING

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“41 percent were not wearing helmets; Florida has no mandatory helmet law for riders older than 21.”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

Again you provide a statistic with no clear context, Henry. But if you are saying that 41% of the motorcyclists who died sometime and somewhere were not wearing helmets, then please recognize you are ALSO saying that 59% of those killed were wearing helmets and DIED ANYWAY.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“A quarter of them did not have a license to drive a motorcycle in Florida. At least one in five was drunk or under the influence of drugs, according to autopsy reports after the crashes.... The crash data have prompted at least one Florida lawmaker to raise questions about how the state regulates its deadliest form of transportation. Florida and Washington remain the only states in which motorcyclists can legally ride without insurance. Safety advocates say the exemption supports motorcycle sales by freeing riders from paying \$1,000 a year or more for coverage.”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

If a motorcycle rider dies strictly because he or she was impaired or otherwise unqualified to ride, that's a shame, but it's also Natural Selection. On the other hand, Henry, if you plan on convincing me that the amount of insurance a rider carries has anything to do with the probability that he or she will be involved in a fatal accident, you have a lot of explaining to do.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

"Sen. Lee Constantine, R-Altamonte Springs, who sits on the Senate Transportation Committee, unsuccessfully proposed a bill this year that would require have required motorcyclists who ride without helmets to carry at least \$50,000 in health-insurance coverage. He said the state needs to work with insurers to keep policies from being prohibitively expensive for motorcyclists."

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

Henry, Henry, Henry. Even using your distorted database, many of the riders who were killed had insurance and DIED ANYWAY, and most of them were wearing helmets and DIED ANYWAY. Your implication that the act of buying insurance or wearing a helmet might prevent a crash is ridiculous.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

"It's clear motorcycles are more risky, and if you get hurt it's going to cost more, and a large part will be paid by the public," Constantine said. "I think I'm looking out for their best interests as well as the state of Florida."

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

What's pretty clear here is that this quote is completely out of context and therefore irrelevant. If a rider dies in an accident, the cost "paid by the public" is merely that of tagging and bagging the body.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

"The 119 deaths investigated by the Florida Highway Patrol in those urban areas do not include fatal crashes investigated by local police departments and sheriff's offices. They represent a tiny proportion of the state's nearly 600,000 riders. Motorcycling deaths have increased steadily in Florida since 2000, when the mandatory helmet law was repealed for riders older than 21. Overall, motorcyclists are 34 times more likely to die and eight times more likely to be injured in crashes than passenger-car occupants, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration."

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

If you think getting on a motorcycle in America is a risky, Henry, try going in for healthcare. Perhaps you are unaware that OUR HIGHWAYS ARE SAFER THAN OUR HOSPITALS. According to NHTSA, 43,443 people were killed on our highways in 2005. For that same year, the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths estimates that more than twice that number died as a result of needless hospital infections brought on by the carelessness and negligence of physicians and other care providers. And as for helmets saving lives, let me put that assertion in perspective for you:

At least seven of the motorcyclists killed during Daytona Bike Week 2006 were wearing helmets and DIED ANYWAY. Almost half (49.3%) of the motorcyclists killed in Florida during 2005 were wearing helmets and DIED ANYWAY. And even NHTSA concedes that in the entire year of 2005, across the entire United States, mandating that all motorcycle riders wear helmets might have saved only **728 lives**, whereas the Committee to Reduce Infection Deaths projects that mandating doctors wash their hands between patients could have saved up to **103,000 lives**.

Bike Week Source: <http://www.ldrlongdistancerider.com/DaytonaDeaths2006.xls>

NHTSA Source: <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/810620.PDF>

CRID Source: <http://www.hospitalinfection.org/ridbooklet.pdf>

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“The increasing number of biker deaths did not surprise Doc Reichenbach, president of the Florida chapter of American Bikers Aiming Toward Education, or ABATE. He said riding today is much different and more dangerous than 20 to 30 years ago. There’s more traffic, more construction, more distraction and threats of every kind.... ‘New riders have no clue,’ Reichenbach said of challenges as basic as confronting grooved pavement or cars drifting across lanes. ‘Educating all the public is the thing -- not just us, but car drivers, truck drivers and any other vehicles on the road. We’re doing everything we can, and we’re still dying.’”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

Mr. Reichenbach’s statement that “new riders have no clue” is a regrettable choice of words and suggests he may not recall the knowledge base and riding skills required to obtain a motorcycle endorsement in Florida. The State of Florida assures that new motorcycle riders at least know what they need to know, and it is up to the individual to act on that knowledge. Also, “we’re doing everything we can” belies the fact that Mr. Reichenbach attempted to countermand efforts by Florida motorcyclists’ rights activists earlier this year seeking legislation to totally ban cell phone conversations (on both hand-held and hands-free devices) while driving ... which would eliminate a major driver distraction ... and thereby make Florida’s highways safer not only for motorcyclists but for all who share the road.

If you really care about reducing the number of motorcyclists getting killed on Florida roads, Henry, I recommend you wheel your guns around and point them at the people who refuse to **hang up and drive**: As a distance rider, I frequently cover 1,000 miles or more in a day. And every time I do, I can count on my life being threatened by at least three irresponsible motorists swerving into my lane or otherwise violating my right-of-way. And when I subsequently come alongside the driver’s window to gesture my anger, I usually find them engrossed in a cell call and oblivious to their infraction.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“Biker tastes vary by age... Although sport bikes make up about a quarter of motorcycles sales nationwide, they accounted for 54 percent of the Florida deaths the Sentinel examined. Capable of reaching speeds of almost 200 mph, they are wildly popular with young riders but leave many motorists shaking their heads in dismay when they pass in a dangerous blur on highways. Characteristics of Florida motorcyclists vary widely by age. Riders in Reichenbach’s over-40 age bracket overwhelmingly choose cruisers -- comfortable road bikes in the 1,000 cc engine range, such as Harley-Davidson, BMW and many other brands. Those types of bikes account for half of all U.S. sales, according to the Motorcycle Industry Council. Less likely to race recklessly in traffic, these renaissance riders -- baby

boomers who take up motorcycling or begin riding again after decades away from it -- still accounted for nearly half of the 119 fatalities the Sentinel looked at."

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

I have previously explained that the database from which you draw your "54 percent", "119 fatalities" and other statistics is suspect. And in this particular context, they provide little relevance anyway.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

"Motorcycling groups and police say as more older riders take to the road, the number of fatalities in that age group will inevitably increase."

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

It is no great revelation that as any group of people get older, Henry, their mortality rate increases.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

"Consider Volusia County, where eight of the 15 motorcycle fatalities last year happened during Bike Week in March, when a half-million bikers visit Daytona Beach. Of those deaths, one rider was 23 years old; the rest were 44 to 65."

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

Once again, Henry, do you want to discuss motorcycle fatalities for Daytona Bike Week—for which the Florida Highway Patrol (FHP) defines a multi-county area—or for Volusia County annually individually? Mixing the two makes the numbers you report here mean nothing ... except for one: If "a half-million bikers" enter the state each year for Daytona Bike Week, that almost doubles the number of motorcycles on Florida roads while they are here. And any accidents they are involved in leave us with inflated injury and fatality statistics long after the out-of-state riders go home.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

"'Training and experience on a motorcycle is what saves you,' said FHP Sgt. Robert Blackwell, who supervises fatal-crash investigations in Central Florida. Stephen Crisson, one of the 119 Central Florida riders who died, was riding too fast on East Colonial Drive last September when traffic stopped in front of him. The 48-year-old braked and tried to swerve but struck the rear of a pickup, records show. He did not have a license to drive, or insurance for, his 2005 Harley-Davidson Fat Boy, records show."

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

Even if I accept the accuracy of this report, by your own admission it relates to 1 out of 119 riders, and says nothing about the general motorcycling population.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

Motorcycles 'more risky'... The high incidence of at-fault deaths for young and older riders alike means inadequate training and experience are most likely to blame, according to the national Motorcycle Safety Foundation.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

The mission of the Motorcycle Safety Foundation is to sell rider education and training, Henry. One would expect them to say what they need to say to sell training ... just like you and your editors are apparently willing to print anything that will sell newspapers.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“The belief that most bikers die in collisions with automobiles in which drivers are at fault is based on a 25-year-old study, the most recent nationwide examination of motorcycle crashes, said Ray Ochs, MSF head of training... ‘We have seen the number of single-vehicle crashes go up,’ Ochs said. ‘There are so many variables. . . . We don’t know how many people crash who are riding a bike too large for them,’ for example.”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

The study Mr. Ochs refers to may be 25 years old, but there has been no similar study in the interim that refutes its conclusions. And yes, I have seen isolated statistics suggesting that the number of single-vehicle crashes has increased in certain venues. But in those same contexts, e.g. the 21 deaths during Daytona Bike Week 2006, right-of-way and other driving violations by negligent, distracted and impaired motorists remained the leading cause of motorcycle fatalities.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“MSF, an industry-funded group, instructs new riders and offers classes for experienced riders on how to read traffic, how aging affects reaction time and the dangers posed by fatigue, drugs and alcohol. Unlike some European countries, the U.S. does not require graduated licensing mandating that riders prove their proficiency on motorcycles with smaller engines before moving up to larger, faster models such as sport bikes. Of the fatal crashes examined by the Sentinel, only five of the 64 sport bikers had insurance. And all but 10 of those crashes involved careless or reckless operation at up to three times the posted speed limits, according to the FHP reports.”

“‘It’s a dilemma for us. The riders come in and demand the product,’ said Winn Peebles, a lobbyist in Tallahassee for the Florida Motorcycle Dealers Association and a former dealer. Consider the death of Thomas Perry on his 23rd birthday last year. ‘The cause of this crash is strictly due to driver error,’ FHP Cpl. Shaun Lattinville wrote after the Nov. 16 crash. The Lake County resident struck a mail box at 130 mph when he lost control of his 2006 Kawasaki Ninja ZX-6 in Lady Lake. Crash investigators noted the 45 mph zone was straight and dry on a clear afternoon.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

Once again, Henry, buying insurance does not prevent motorcycle crashes any more than wearing a helmet does. And if a motorcycle rider dies strictly because he or she was impaired or otherwise unqualified to ride, that’s a shame, but it’s also Natural Selection.

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM:

“Laws can go only so far... Some strides have already been made to strengthen Florida's motorcycle laws. New legislation requiring red license plates for riders 21 and younger took effect Jan. 1 to make it easier for police to spot riders who must wear helmets. Starting July 1, 2008, anyone applying for a motorcycle endorsement to legally ride in Florida must first pass a rider-safety course. Motorcycle dealers also will not be allowed to issue temporary tags to new owners who do not hold a valid drivers license and motorcycle endorsement. For years, dealers sold motorcycles to unlicensed riders, saying they did not have a legal -- or ethical -- obligation to stop the sales. Still, once the bikes are off the lot, common sense is one thing instructors can't teach, said Ochs of MSF. ‘A lot of people don't respect a motorcycle. It's still a toy to them,’ Ochs said. ‘If someone has that attitude, it's part of living in a free country and being able to make wrong decisions.’”

Henry Pierson Curtis and the Orlando Sentinel Editors CLAIM DEBUNKED:

Yes, Henry, “laws can only go so far”. An argument could be made that some of the laws you mention here go too far, but we can save that discussion for another day. To summarize, let me simply point out that in a free society, we must all be held accountable for our actions. **And that includes incompetent and/or ill-intentioned journalists—like Henry Pierson Curtis and the Editors of the Orlando Sentinel—who spin half-truths and spew sensationalism just to turn a buck.**

Speaking strictly for myself and no other individuals or organizations,

Bruce Arnold

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