Drinking and Snowmobiling Don't Mix

By Lynn Keillor

Trina Ness is drunk. Her speech is slurred, she can't walk straight, and she keeps falling asleep at the table. She's been drinking double shots of hard liquor, and she's about to go outside and drive a snowmobile.

The bartender, however, works for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. A Minnesota State Patrol officer monitors her liquor intake, and workers for the Minnesota Highway Safety Center guide her to her machine.

Ness, of Litchfield, Minn., is taking part in a study of alcohol's affect on snowmobiling. It's one of the first tests of its kind, and the results of the study will be used for safety training.

The tests are a joint project of the Minnesota Department of Transportation and Arctic Cat Inc. In addition to the alcohol study, tests were also performed to analyze traction products and stopping distances.

"There's never been studies done to this level," said Bill Ruhr of the Minnesota Highway Safety Center in St. Cloud, Minn. "Snowmobiling is kind of a touchy area. It's always been seen as a mom-and-pop recreation thing. But now that it's so popular and the trails are so populated, now we have a problem. We're all aware of it and the way to solve it is through education and training."

The results of the alcohol testing are not shocking. After blowing a 16 on the breathalyzer, Ness hits the closed course with a vengeance. She's well above the 0.10 legal limit, and it shows. The normally conservative driver nearly sends herself over the windshield, lifts the skis in an unsafe manner and inadvertently hits the kill switch several times on the 1.4-mile loop. Then, she makes a shortcut to the finish and nearly plows into spectators. A half-hour later, she doesn't even recall riding the course.

The professional Arctic Cat drivers each tipped their machines after reaching a blood/alcohol level of 0.16 and 0.17. One even knocked the key into the "off" position while running the course and spent a large amount of time trying to figure out the problem.

NO SURPRISE

That's exactly what the test promoters were hoping to show.

"There was not one surprise," Ruhr said. "It was darn near identical to what we've seen in cars. What we normally see is the attitude of the operator change. Once they get intoxicated, they really start to get aggressive. You really start seeing the 'no fear' attitude come out."

Four riders — two consumers and two Arctic Cat field testers — rode the course at four different blood-alcohol levels: sober, 0.05, 0.10 and 0.15. Drivers had to negotiate sharp turns, small moguls, 12 stop signs and keep within a tight line of cones.

To make matters worse, warm weather turned a good portion of the track into slop and standing water covered certain areas. The course was to cross a solid sheet of ice, but the weather made it impossible.

Drivers were also tested for reaction times using a special contraption mounted to the dash of a snowmobile. Test administrators kept detailed notes of the entire proceedings and will soon release the results.

"I can tell you exactly what will happen," predicted Davin Veselka, a field test rider for Arctic Cat who remained sober throughout the entire experiment. "The men will get faster and more aggressive while the woman will become more cautious."

That wasn't too far off. The men's times stayed consistent or got faster. Ness' time fluctuated, but on the final inebriated run, she was significantly slower.

The words "liquid courage" came alive. Even after only downing a couple of drinks, the competition-talk between the professional test drivers increased. They compared times at the end of each round, and challenged each other to quicken the pace.

"When we first went out, especially with the pro riders, they were precise and intricate on the machines — like a warm knife through butter," Ruhr said. "Once they started drinking, however, they pinned the throttles and shot out onto the course."

Ruhr hopes this is the first of many snowmobile-related tests at the special purpose-built testing facility. He said he will seek grants to fund additional testing and research. Heather Hauschild, spokeswoman for Arctic Cat said that the manufacturer would continue to support the effort.

The results of the traction testing, which measured stopping distances on stock, studded and paddle tracks, will be released in March.

Ruhr also hopes to rerun the ice-stopping portion of the traction tests, if not this winter, then next season. ■