

# Passing The Test

About one month ago on a warm, sloppy day, some folks gathered in St. Cloud, Minnesota, to see what they and their snowmobiles could do.

First, they took speeding starts on a straightaway and grabbed a handful of brake to see how far they would skid. Then they all headed inside a nondescript trailer and started boozing it up. After getting significantly soused, they hopped on their machines and made laps around a course.

And they did it all while State Patrol officers and Department of Natural Resources employees looked on and nodded in approval. In fact, the otherwise-adversaries encouraged the behavior.

Does this sound like a dream? Or maybe a nightmare?

Well, it was neither. It was the first in what *Snow Week* hopes will be a long-running series of serious testing on the effects of traction products and also on how alcohol affects snowmobiling. The tests were conducted at the Minnesota Highway Safety Center in St. Cloud with help from Minnesota DNR and Arctic Cat. Cat sent three of their professional fieldtest riders to perform the tests.

While the results of both tests were neither shocking nor revolutionary, they are a good start in technically examining our sport.

The morning of testing was devoted to measuring stopping distances of studded, stock and paddle tracks. Test drivers made runs at 30, 45 and 75 MPH on a snowpacked surface. The studded track had definite stopping advantages that increased as speeds increased. At the fastest speeds the stopping differential was about 45 feet between the stock and studded track. The paddle track performed poorly all around.

The traction folks say that those type of results are not out of line from their own tests and observations. More studies will have to be performed, however, on ice surfaces,

inclines and declines.

Unfortunately, the warmth of the sun made the ice stopping portion of the St. Cloud testing into a water skipping contest, so the overall results are incomplete.

Nothing particularly unexpected came from the drunk driving tests, either. Trained observers said that the reactions of the drunk snowmobile riders were really no different than their car-driving counterparts.

To the casual observer, though, what happened was downright scary. Even after just a couple of drinks, there was an obvious change in the way the riders ran the 1.4-mile course.

Riders became more aggressive and willing to take chances, and this was just when the breathalyzer measured intoxication at about .05. By the time they blew .15, well above the .10 legal intoxication limit, both of the professional riders taking part in the intoxication study rolled their machines. They hit the kill switch multiple times and accelerated like they were blasting off to the moon. One of the two consumer riders even got lost on the course and nearly ran over spectators; the other one barfed after the last run.

The real and most alarming difference, though, came down to reaction times. The average human reaction time is .75 seconds. From a sober state to just .05 blood-alcohol level, the reaction time of one rider went from .47 to .63 seconds. It may only look like tenths of a second, but that means a great deal of distance before the rider comes to a stop.

This kind of research goes a long way to show that the only alcohol tolerance is no tolerance when it comes to operating snowmobiles. Even a little alcohol makes a big difference in the split-second decision making required when on the trail.

The test riders were the biggest testament to this and were perhaps the most convinced of their own recklessness. When their blood alco-

hol level was at .10, the legal limit, both Cat fieldtest drivers commented that they didn't feel comfortable getting on the machines.

The man in charge of the exercises, Bill Ruhr, conducts these kinds of tests for automobiles at the Minnesota Highway Safety Center. Not only were his tests thorough and well-executed, but he's excited about the tests that took place and is eager to continue with more study.

Part of the recent problems with unwanted or negative legislation against our sport comes from a lack of study on our part. Sure, every yahoo with traction products knows that they make a gigantic difference in stopping, especially on ice, but we need hard, solid data that proves it.

Just last year, the Snowmobile Education Safety Research Association, supported by all major traction manufacturers, did their own studies on traction products. While their data is worthwhile, it only helps the cause to have additional, corroborating figures.

We're happy to see other groups taking an interest in studying snowmobiles and how they perform. We're glad that Arctic Cat has contributed time and machinery to make the tests possible. We're excited that training materials are being created with important and meaningful data.

We can only hope that this kind of research continues and expands.



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