

Snowmobilers drink, drive home point

Riders, DNR try to make video, demonstrate risks

By David Unze

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There were a few things out of whack Monday as the Department of Natural Resources and Arctic Cat teamed to try to produce a snowmobile safety video.

Warm weather had sleds gliding across areas of open water instead of snow, ruining any chances of shooting the video.

The drivers lined up for the demonstration, between barrelling around the course at the National Highway Safety Center, were sipping cocktails in a makeshift bar.

And a state trooper was smiling and watching it all.

The daylong gathering was part of an effort to educate snowmobilers in the dangers of drinking and snowmobiling. Four riders had an early happy hour — drinking from 2 to 5:30 p.m. — and showed what alcohol can do to a rider's abilities.

"You can put out all the information and brochures you want to and some people don't want to believe it," said Scott Pengelly, DNR information officer. "They all see the info on (drinking and riding) and they say 'We won't be another number.'"

Numbers from the 1997 snowmobile season put the problem in perspective. Sixty-three percent of all snowmobile fatalities involved alcohol. That's up from 58 percent in 1996 and 34 percent in 1995.

Mark Moore of St. Cloud was drinking and driving Monday at the course, which sits across U.S.



To make sure he was drunk, Mark Moore had to take a Breathalyzer test before being able to ride the course. Riders were tested sober, and then with blood-alcohol levels of .05, .10 and .15.

Highway 10 from the Minnesota Correctional Facility. Moore had three Bacardi and Cokes before testing at .05 for a blood-alcohol level.

He then made his second timed run on the 1.4-mile course. His reaction and perception times were measured, as were his driving skills around cones and at stop signs.

He was "a little tipsy" and actually ran faster than his one sober run. His reaction time, however, got worse. He ran a stop sign.

After five doubles, Moore tested at .10. He said he was "a little



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Before heading to the makeshift bar at the National Highway Safety Center for a few drinks, Mark Moore of St. Cloud had

to set his course time while sober. Moore improved his time after three drinks but ran a stop sign in the process.

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TIMES PHOTO BY PAUL MIDDLESTAEDT

After drinking a few cocktails, Trina Ness of National Highway Safety Center in St. Cloud. Litchfield took to the course Monday at the

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buzzed up" but lowered his time again. He missed three sets of cones and was driving much more aggressively.

"I think the guys are dangerous," Arctic Cat professional rider Devin Veselka said. "I think they think they're smarter than they are."

Veselka got the pleasure Tuesday of riding as a passenger on each of the four sleds after each drinker finished his/her course run. Veselka tested riders' reaction skills by flashing a signal for riders to stop. An electronic device measured the time it took the driver to begin brak-

ing.

"They didn't take as much care as before," Veselka said. "They didn't even know I was on the back."

The difficulty of drinking and snowmobiling was demonstrated by professional driver Chris Ueland, who flipped his sled after blowing a 0.17. He walked away uninjured.

"We drive every day," said Ueland, who usually rides as many as 8,000 to 10,000 miles a year. "This is what we do, and I don't feel comfortable doing this. There's no way I'd drive like this."

Trina Ness, who works for Gold Cross Ambulance, felt the same way. The other volunteer rider, Ness showed what alcohol can do to a driver's abilities.

Her reaction times increased with

each run, and by the time her blood-alcohol level hit 0.075, she had her sled on one ski. She even snuck a quick nap between cocktails.

"I didn't know where to go," said Ness when asked how her run went. "I had no clue. The sled was topsy-turvy. I would not want to drive that way."

That's exactly what DNR and Arctic Cat officials wanted to hear.

"We strongly want to get the message of zero tolerance out there," Heather Hauschild of Arctic Cat said. "You can't have even one drink and drive a snowmobile."

Arctic Cat and DNR officials said, weather permitting, they would reshoot the video at the earliest opportunity.