

Trails To Tragedy

More than 17,000 snowmobilers were killed or injured in accidents last winter, and snowmobile safety experts agree that most of those tragedies could have been avoided. Their advice just might save a life, possibly even yours, this winter.

It's winter. The snow is piling up outside and the ice on the lakes is getting thick. You can stay warm, close the curtains and not think about it until it all goes away.

Or, if you're like an estimated 4 million people in this country, you see winter as a recreational opportunity to climb onto a snowmobile, journey to your favorite ice-fishing spot, tour a scenic trail, or take an exhilarating jaunt through snow you'd have to plod through on foot.

While the popularity of snowmobiles continues to grow, there are increased concerns about accident prevention. According to the federal Consumer Product Safety Commission, the most recent statistics available showed 17,423 injuries nationwide related to the use of snowmobiles in 1994.

In accidents that were reported, snowmobile experts found these recurring themes: unsafe speed, alcohol use, operators unfamiliar with the trail or terrain, operator inattention, operator inexperience, lack of supervision of children, and the special hazards of night riding.

"I would say that in 90 percent of accidents, it's the snowmobiler's fault," said Dick Hermance, head of Collision Research in Tillson, N.Y.,

Many snowmobile accidents occur when excessive speed is coupled with the operator's unfamiliarity with the terrain. Illustration by Jonathan Milo.

by Steven P. Barlow

and an expert in snowmobile accident reconstruction in both the United States and Canada.

While Hermance has researched cases that involved product defects, poor trail design and adverse weather conditions, the overwhelming majority of accidents, he said, involve human error and are therefore preventable.

SPEED AND ALCOHOL

On March 11, 1994, at about 10 p.m., 35-year-old David Leonard, his wife and a friend were riding separate snowmobiles on Oneida Lake in central New York when 28-

year-old Gerald Champagne, on a snowmobile traveling toward them, suddenly veered into their paths. Champagne and Leonard collided and were both killed on impact.

Both men had been intoxicated, and the speed of their sleds was estimated at 80 mph.

Gary Homuth, recreation vehicle safety officer with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, sees speed and alcohol as the common thread in snowmobile accidents in his state, as well.

"Whether a snowmobiler drives across a lake into open water or exits a trail on a curve and hits a tree," Homuth said, "in the majority of accidents, if the snowmobilers had

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