

12/27/16: Snowmobiling: It is an adventure sport.

As I look out the window and see the snow melt today, I will take this time to reflect on our sport and how it has evolved. As the sport developed over time, it has moved from the gearheads that wanted to drive motorized vehicles through the woods or a means to travel on the frozen lake for ice fishing to a high tech, family friendly sport with an organized trail system, groomed trails, and modern machines that provide the ultimate comfort and ease of operation. This is become a double edged sword.

30 years ago, if you rode 50 miles around here, you knew it. You were sore, tired, and stunk of gas due to all the tinkering that had to be done along the way. There were no maps, signs, or groomers. It was an adventure that involved going on small trails, building small camp fires, and cooking hotdogs while figuring out where you are and where to go next (usually how to get home). Now, 140 mile trips when conditions permit are just another day. This involves gas stops, restaurants, and points of interests, all mapped out and signed for you. The work to make this happen for the average snowmobiler is massive, all done by volunteers. What many do not understand is that snowmobiling still is an adventure sport. Things still go wrong, signs might not be up, and maps may not be accurate. Most important, cell phones may not work and the batteries drain faster in cold weather. So many people rely on cell phones, too many in my opinion.

The support community for this sport has been bombarded by requests to make things easier for navigation. Many club officers are even berated for not having GPS coordinates, signs at every intersection, and direct trails to every gas station that exists near a trail, "just like up north". What they don't understand is that many businesses sponsor these signing efforts and the infrastructure is larger as a result of it being a major source of income for the area. The landowners do not complain about excess signage since most of them are timber companies who view the land as simply revenue. In Stoddard, the major landowners do not want excess signage. Many of those who "share our trails" despise snowmobiling. They love our groomed trails but hate those who make them happen. Their over the top eviro-mentalism will propel them into deface and destroy signs as a show of defiance to the evil snowmobiler who uses the trail system 5-8 weeks out of a 52 week year. The state applies great pressure to us to properly sign trails. If we do not go for a refresher course this next fall, then we will be denied grooming grants. The same people who complain that there are not enough signs will sue the state, or club if an injury is sustained due to them not being careful and driving their machine within the limits. The attorneys that represent cases on both sides state that signs need to be simplified, remade, and training needs to be done since the public views this as a road system rather than a simple trail to ride your snowmobile on. I feel it is up to the rider to be responsible for themselves and have compasses, GPS units, and survival gear on your person that is working with someone who knows how to use it. If you get yourself in trouble, then you must be able to get yourself out. It is that simple. Same goes for hiking, kayaking, wilderness camping, or any other deep woods activity.

I have come up with some simple things that every snowmobiler should have if they are going to a new trail system or going on an extended trip. These are not hard to carry and it is sound advice. **Remember, snowmobile clubs are not rescue trained or snowmobile recovery centers. There is no AAA. If your sled breaks, then it is up to you to get it out of the way and then tow it home to fix. IF you leave it in a trail, then you risk getting sued for leaving a hazard in the trail if someone hits it. They will win.**

1. Your gas tank is to be filled and oil topped off before every ride. Do not rely on getting fuel around here. The nearest gas stations are over 30 miles away. There are no options for late night gas.

2. Bring an extra 2.5 gallons of fuel if you can strap it to the back. There are lots of small, flat tanks made for this application. They fit on the back of the sled. Well worth the money.
3. Make sure you have a compass and GPS unit. They are fairly cheap (under \$200.00 for a real nice unit). Cheaper than a fancy new jacket or a big family meal at the restaurant. Make sure the batteries are fresh and it is stowed in the inner pockets of your jacket where it gets the most body heat.
4. Make sure you or someone in your riding group has the ability, tools, and parts to change a belt, spark plug, do a quick repair on suspension, or other small repair that will get you home if something goes wrong. Do not ride with a sled in bad repair, that is going to be a headache for everyone involved. Make sure your sled is in good condition before you embark on a long, all day (or night) trip.
5. when you see gas ahead, top off the tank if the station is open. Do not bypass easy gas stops. Better to come home with a gas tank that is over half full than coming running out on the trail and ruining the trip for everyone.
6. Keep waterproof fire starters, a lighter, waterproof matches, rope, a space blanket, a knife, or everything but the kitchen sink if you wear a knapsack or have the storage. There is no such thing as too much survival gear. When the sky is clear, temperatures plummet at night. If you have to spend the night out there, warmth is the number one thing you need.
7. Be prepared to handle medical emergencies by knowing how to make a leg splint, how to deal with bone and back injuries, cuts, and CPR. There are online classes and CPR training going on every week in this country close to you. Being prepared for what may be several hours before help arrives will make all the difference between success and tragedy.

I will be quite candid and tell you if you are not willing to take these steps, you might want to rethink the sport. Being out in the elements and riding a mechanical device through the woods is an adventure and requires some skills to make your day enjoyable. Help is not around every corner. It is up to you to take care of yourself and family. You need to be able to navigate, keep calm in situations, and have the ability to overcome problems without relying on outside assistance. I want everyone to enjoy their rides, however the responsibility of your well being depends on you.