

Empire Snowmobile

January 2004

TRACKS

A New York State Snowmobile Association Magazine

Adirondack Snowmobile Plan

NYSSA *will not* approve



What Happened?

Accident Reconstruction
Solves Mysteries on Trails

Calendar of Events • Clothing is More Than Fashion



What Happened?

Accident Reconstruction Solves Mysteries on Trails

The super-slow motion videotape on television lasts a few minutes, but in reality, the crash takes seconds. The car, in the crash test setting, goes from its traveling speed to a dead stop after it hits a wall. Inside, the body slams into the steering wheel and then lurches back into the seat, glass is flying and steel twisting into a crumpled mess with the crash dummy inside.

The lucky thing for most motorists during a real life crash is that the safety features built into today's automobile help them survive the impact. But, what about a snowmobile rider?

Two snowmobiles are traveling along a groomed trail in the Upstate New York wilderness. They collide, and in 50 milliseconds the sled absorbing the impact goes from traveling at speed to stopped. The

driver is catapulted over the front end of the sled in the direction the sled was traveling. The distance the rider travels is based on speed, weight, and unfortunately obstructions.

Since snowmobiling is typically enjoyed in rural settings, a tree, rock, powerline tower, gate, groomer, or another sled could be in the way of the flying snowmobiler before the body ultimately comes to rest on the frozen ground.

For the snowmobiler there are no driver-side airbags, no passenger side airbags, no reinforced steel to assist in side impacts and definitely no seatbelts for snowmobiler's safety.

"A snowmobile accidents happens in less than the blink of an eye, approximately half the time an auto accident takes," says Dick Hermance, an accident reconstruction specialist and owner of Collision Research, Ltd. "If people saw the aftermath of a snowmobile accident on television, or in the newspaper, as regularly as they see auto accidents, the attitudes of sledders towards speed and safety would change instantly."

With more people hitting the trails these days, there are more opportunities for accidents. Over the past eight years, Hermance has seen an increase in the number of snowmobile accidents.

"New sledders see snowmobiling as an enjoyable means of wintertime recreation," says Hermance. "Often, they don't under-

stand the rate of speed the sleds can achieve or the danger that comes with it. This is evidenced by the number of accidents after the first snowfall each season."

Responding to the increase in participation and accidents in the sport, snowmobile manufacturers have made some strides to increase safety features on their products.

"The biggest safety feature on snowmobiles these days is the hydraulic brake. They work a lot better than the old cable braking systems," says Hermance. "The cable stretches with use and may ultimately break. With the hydraulic system, there is less chance of a failure and a better chance of getting the sled stopped quickly, ultimately avoiding an accident.

"In addition to the sled's features, there are articles of clothing that provide protection to the rider. If you ride around water, flotation suits are available. But, the casual rider will more than likely never wear the flotation or armored suit, available to racers."

Even if riders don't wear anything more than a helmet for protection, they need to know of some accident "hot spots" on the trail. Accidents are more prevalent at intersections with side trails, on busy trails, and trails with limited or incomplete signage.

Hermance has investigated more than 2,500 motor vehicle and snowmobile accidents. He is a 22-year veteran of the Town of Rosedale police department, most of which were spent as an accident investigator.



He was one of the first people ever to be certified as an expert in traffic accident reconstruction by The National Commission for Traffic Accident Reconstruction. Hermance is presently on the New York State Governor's Snowmobile Advisory Council on the safety committee. His book, "Snowmobile Accident Reconstruction: A Technical & Legal Guide" is the quintessential text for this topic.

When Hermance and his team arrive at the accident scene they are initially looking for physical evidence that will start them on their journey to determining its cause. "Reconstructing the accident is made even harder because of changing weather conditions," says Hermance. "There are two different scenarios that I get put into. One is the accident happened 24 hours prior to our arrival and the trail is pretty much how it was, and the sled is in a garage nearby. Then, there's the other end of the spectrum where I get a call about an accident that happened a year or two earlier and I have to recreate it from information given to me by attorneys, doctors, or police officers."

One organization that greatly helps Hermance put the puzzle pieces together is the snowmobile law enforcement officers.

"The New York State Snowmobile Law Enforcement fleet was a huge coup for state. Vic Wood deserves all the credit for putting this program together," says Hermance.

New York State is the benchmark for snowmobile law enforcement in the country because it was the first to have a law enforcement program specifically focused on snowmobilers and snowmobiling safety. 🏂

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