A Tale of Dirt and Dedication: An Ethnography of Motocross Culture

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Overview

• Introduction to Motocross
• My focus for the research
• Discussion of risk
• Methods & Settings
• Personal experience
• Thunder Valley National as an example
• Community of risk – “The Moto Family”
• Reasons to ride
• How to handle risk involved
• Women’s roles
• Conclusion
Introduction to Motocross

- High-risk sport performed on a dirtbike, involving riding multiple laps racing against other riders, on a dirt track that contains technical obstacles such as jumps, rhythm sections, and whoops
- Here’s an example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aw1pVJsnKs
Focus

- The motivators for riders in a high-risk sport
- Why they take that risk
- What does taking the risk provide for them
- Observations of the track
- Observations of Race Day
- Some personal participation
- What is it like to be a woman rider in a male dominated sport
Risk

• Sensation seeking
  – But is there more to it than that?
• Emotional balancing
• Helps to deal with interactions between people
• Relieves stress, helps to handle the aspects of life that a person can’t control as much
Feelings Brought from Riding

Wil Hahn
@WilHahn19

It's crazy how much peace my dirtbike brings back into my life..... No wonder I've been such a prick lately...

6/6/13, 2:10 PM

37 RETWEETS 29 FAVORITES

Tyler Fipps™ @Tfipps5

"@WilHahn19: It's crazy how much peace my dirtbike brings back into"

HUNTER S. THOMPSON

"LOVE IS THE FEELING YOU GET WHEN YOU LIKE SOMETHING AS MUCH AS YOUR MOTORCYCLE."

Photo by sokalski317 · Instagram
instagram.com/p/aOFyGLGru0/

38 Likes

sokalski317

Yes. #perfect #love #motolife
Methods

• Observing both a professional & amateur race
• Participant observation
• Online medium – Social Networking
  – Twitter
  – Facebook
• Key informant as entry point
  – Led to snowball method
Tools Used

• Indirect/direct observation
• Questionnaires
• Open-ended interviews
• Visual anthropology
Settings

- Thunder Valley National – Lakewood, CO
- Amateur race – Mitchell, NE
- Participant observation – Laramie, WY
Personal Experience

- Have my own dirtbike: Honda XR200R
- Have been riding for about 2 years
- Grown up with a father that rides
  - Now have close friends that ride
Thunder Valley

- Pro Motocross race in Lakewood, CO
- Round 2 of the 2013 Nationals
- Spent 10 hours there
  - Time in the pits, watching the motos (races), and walking around the vendors
Some Pictures from Thunder Valley
Thunder Valley
Thunder Valley
Community of Risk
“The Moto Family”

• Those that participate feel a sense of belonging
• The community that forms looks out for each other
• Once a part, always a part

• Strong desire to spend all of their free time riding/racing
• This also takes over their thoughts when they aren’t participating
• Never feel more alive than when they are in a situation where they could die
Riders Know the Risks They Take

1. **Moto_Addict**
   
   #ThingsIWillTeachMyChild Don't be afraid to do what you love. Motocross is dangerous but the love for the sport will overcome any fear.

   6/6/13, 9:58 AM

   23 RETWEETS 6 FAVORITES

2. **MotoNation™**
   
   We know the risk we take while strapping on our helmet.. But it's the love and passion that keeps bringing us back #motolife

   6/3/13, 5:30 PM
Moto = Life
Motocross is... Well no word can really describe it @TheMotoLife_ @Twatedmoto

I hate when people say there has to be more than one thing you live for!
Moto is my life, love, and passion and that’s the way I want it
Reasons to Ride

• Enjoy the rewards that they get out of it
  – Fun spent with people who also love the sport
  – Relaxation & time away from “real life”
  – Feeling of success when they accomplish their goals

• Stress relief & keeping their emotions level

• Rush from riding
“Riding quads is my release and outlet from anything stressful, and I do it because it’s what makes me happy. I have the most fun when I am riding or racing, plus it is a constructive activity in which I can set goals and work towards them. The success after all of the hard work, time, and dedication is the best feeling in the world.” - Mary
Reasons in Riders’ Words

• “It’s hard to explain to people who don’t ride, why we ride. Simply put, for myself, getting on a dirtbike was life altering, a love at first fistful of throttle kind of thing. I fell in love with the sport. I don’t really need to be motivated to ride; riding motivates me to do other things so that I can get back on the bike sooner. Riding makes me whole, it’s a passion, and without it my life would not be the same.” - Elizabeth
How to Handle the Risk

• Wear protective equipment
• Don’t push beyond the limits of their ability
• Practicing before competing
• Training their bodies physically
• Mentally are aware of the risk involved
Riders & Risk

• “I understand the risk involved, and do the best I can to protect myself by practicing and wearing the best gear possible. I’m not going to quit doing what I love simply because I can get hurt. Anything could happen to anyone at any time, that’s just part of life, not a reason or excuse to not live each day to the fullest.”
- Mary
“The same way I handle the risk of driving a car. I wear protective gear like I would wear a seat belt, and avoid doing unnecessarily dangerous things...Motocross is a dangerous sport. I could easily die, but I never feel more alive than I do when I’m on my bike. It is just part of my way of life.” – Elizabeth

“When someone close to me is injured or killed, it makes me think about what we sacrifice and risk as motocross athletes, but in the bottom of my heart I love racing and the risk is part of the reward.” - Mary
Women in Motocross

• Have a women’s class, but it’s underrepresented & receives a much shorter season, even professionally
• Allowed to race with the men, but rarely make it to the main motos
• Struggle to get the sponsors and recognition needed to be as successful as the men
Men’s Thoughts on Women in MX

• “I think it is awesome as long as they know what they’re doing and they don’t get anyone hurt.” – Jason

• “I don’t have any problem with it, but they need to follow the same rules as the rest.” – David
Women in a Male Dominated Sport

• “It’s definitely challenging at times. I don’t like feeling like we aren’t taken seriously in the sport. The main problem is that we aren’t treated equally. And that frustrates me. We don’t get the same kind of opportunities as male racers and it makes it harder for women to succeed and become well known in the sport.” – Elizabeth

• “We can be just as fast and successful as the men in the sport. When you put the helmet on and line up at the gate, you become a racer, not just a girl.” - Mary
Conclusion

• The high level of risk does not provide a problem for those participating
• Know risk exists & take precautions to minimize it
• Motocross & it’s risks provide more rewards than negatives
• Both women & men would like more equal representation & opportunity for the genders
Questions?