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THE WINDSOR STAR

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AUTOMOTIVE, Page: B1 / FRONT

Motorcycle mania

Non-traditional bikers are altering the market

David Booth, Canwest News Service

My son -- the heir to all I hold dear, the light of my life, and the one set to become the first shyster in the Booth family -- is a sloth. He has not a single iota of my personality -- some would say thankfully. Where I am energetic, he is laid-back. Where I am a hermit, he is gregarious. And where I devote my life to the endorphins that are the rewards for a sporting life, he is the quintessential Xbox-on-the-couch-until-the-wee-hours-of-the-morning vampire whose idea of exercise is coming upstairs to "borrow" money.

It's not as though I didn't encourage him. I bought -- at some considerable expense, as every Canadian parent knows -- brand new hockey equipment only to see it end up in Play It Again Sports' window. I tossed baseballs at the poor child until his mom threatened divorce. I even proffered bribes, offering up a reward of 25¢ for every basket he sunk in a recreational basketball league. All to no avail.

I could have handled this disappointment if only the basement troll had shown even the remotest bit of interest in motorcycling, my most treasured of hobbies.

But, no, not even numerous forays on dirt bikes, the always-enticing "Hey, son, do you want to come get all greasy and oily in the garage helping your dad fix the Yamaha" and the flotilla of new and shiny road rockets that pass through the garage seemed to even remotely interest him.

Motorcycles were a "dad" thing and, as every father knows, our progeny never ever thinks what dad does is cool. Indeed -- and this is meant without a single a grain of rancour toward the 15 per cent of new motorcyclists who are female -- the motorcycle industry may have started marketing to the fairer sex only in panic as the result of the latest generation of its traditional audience, young males, completely ignoring its entreaties.

That may all be changing.

I attended the New York motorcycle show last week and two things were surprising. The first is that the show itself was hardly bigger than our own Toronto version. The second is that, unlike our annual exposition at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre, New York's wasn't entirely populated by hoary old fat guys looking for Fat Boys (the motorcycle, folks, the motorcycle). Instead, the floor was populated with youngsters of all ages salivating at the sight of new Harleys or Hondas with the same intensity I used to reserve for BSAs and Laverdas.

There were differences, though. For instance, one noteworthy thing was that these young at heart and light of wallet weren't fawning over the traditional higher-end bikes us Boomers covet. Nor were they lusting after the 600-cubic-centimetre sport bikes that are traditionally their entrance into the motorcycling world. They even seemed to ignore the legions of slammed Hayabusa customs that usually capture their interest.

Instead, it seemed as though it was a whole slew of retro-bikes that collected the largest audiences. So, instead of gazing lustily at custom CBRs at the Cycle World booth, it was a cheap and cheerful BMW flat-twin all gussied up as an early board racer (I know it sounds weird, but it works) that gathered the crowds. Over at the

Progressive Insurance display (yes, some insurance companies actually want more motorcycling customers), the huddled masses largely ignored the mega-buck Harley customs while swarming over a well done 2008 Triumph Thruxton morphed into a '60s cafe racer. At the Allstate Insurance booth, it was raffling off a David Perewitz custom that was a mishmash of '40s Bob Job and modern metallurgy.

Indeed, this mashing of various cultural mosaics seems to be the coming trend. So, while the Harley pre-show party for its new Forty Eight (honouring The Motor Company's first use of the immortal "peanut" gas tank) was playing Back In Black, the predominantly young crowd was hardly recognizable as traditional bikers. Nonetheless, the anorexic young guy wearing Britney Spears' spandex leggings and Bon Jovi hairdo really does ride a Sportster. And the kid with the mohawk who looked like a gothed-out Angus Young in a gloriously studded tartan kilt was lusting after the new slammed Harley like it ... oops, I can't go there.

Indeed, if the American Motorcycle Industry Council's latest survey is to be believed, the youngsters that we believed had abandoned motorcycling may be coming back. According to the 2008 census, Boomers now only outnumber Gen Y bikers by two to one compared with the four-to-one ratio of 2003. Throw in such facts as the average American biker is some 20 per cent more affluent than the average Joe and that the number of female bikers has doubled since 1998 and there just may be a ray of hope that motorcycling will not die of terminal indifference.

At least not in New York.

ILLUS: Colour Photo: Emmanuel Dunand, Getty Images / Not only were typical biker dudes present at the 2010 Cycle World International Motorcycle Show in New York, there were hoardes of young people attending as well. Colour Photo: Emmanuel Dunand, Getty Images / A woman tries a Honda motorcycle at the New York show. Female bikers have doubled since 1998.