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Dirt bike riding faces a very serious threat, and while you may not have seen it, you've definitely heard it.

**BY CHRIS JONNUM**

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**QUESTION:** What could possibly convince average citizens that happy families riding motorcycles represent a greater threat to their blissful existence than drug dealers and other criminals?

**ANSWER:** A loud exhaust pipe. At least that's what one could infer from what's been happening lately in Southern California's Riverside County. With motorcycle sales on the rise and the population growing, it was only a matter of time until the two trends collided to put the sound issue on the national radar. The crash site was a region that has long been the unofficial epicenter of motocross, where many top motocross racers make their homes and practice their livelihoods and where 47,000 OHVs are registered. Considering that experts agree that the sound issue is the number-one threat to our sport, the setting for the showdown is appropriate.
GROUND ZERO

In a recent three-episode expose, ABC’s Nightline addressed the growing problem of online sexual predators in Riverside County, a region that has so many illegal drug labs that its local newspaper has called it “the meth capital of the world.” And yet the scourge upon which county supervisors have been focusing their recent efforts is dirt bikes. As we went to press, about anyone who has had to endure a noisy neighbor can attest, sound is one issue that’s capable of inspiring strong emotions in even the most laissez-faire community member.

In fact, the sound issue isn’t just an industry-specific trend. The Chicago City Council recently adopted restrictions banning street musicians (including bucket-drummers, saxophonists, and bagpipers). According to USA Today, the new rules raise permit fees and “lower acceptable decibel levels everywhere else in the city and require entertainers exceeding 55 decibels—the level of loud talking—to pack up by 8 p.m. on weeknights.” Car alarms, dogs, and air conditioners are other common targets.

Ironically, part of the reason for the increased urgency on the sound issue in the dirt bike community is the rapidly expanding number of bikes powered by four-stroke engines. Supposedly more environmentally friendly because of their cleaner exhaust emissions, thumpers are also perceived as louder, since their exhaust notes carry farther than that of a two-stroke.

VOICES CARRY

The situation in Riverside County started when a vocal minority of citizens complained to county supervisors about what was, in some cases, inappropriate use of dirt bikes (often with race exhausts) on private land. Due in part to the strong emotions aroused by the issue and by the general public’s nearly unanimous dislike of excessively noisy motorcycles, what was essentially a dispute between neighbors turned into a county-wide fight over private-property rights.

a new noise law that would make it virtually impossible to ride off-highway motorcycles or ATVs on parcels of land smaller than 15 acres had been given preliminary approval, with a final vote scheduled for a meeting in late March. It’s tempting to jump up and down and decry the injustice of it all, but fair or not, this is the reality, and it’s far past time the motorcycling community takes the sound issue as seriously as do those on the other side.

Really, sound has always been an issue among dirt bikers (remember the “Team Stealth” and “Less Sound Equals More Ground” campaigns?), but with the recent Riverside County situation, it has taken on a new urgency. While some people complain about motorcycles creating dust or representing a threat to the environment, those folks tend to be extreme activists. As just

Jeremy McGrath knew his bikes were loud, so he went to sort things out with his neighbors. Now he’s going to need a loud voice to help keep most forms of OHV riding legal in Riverside County.
“It turned into a big deal,” AMA Vice President, Government Relations Ed Moreland says, “because one of those neighbors happened to work in a county building and was able to reach the supervisors and bring some grassroots support around what she wanted to do.”

To make their point, the unhappy citizens singled out county residents with celebrity MX status, including Jeremy McGrath—despite the fact that MC had actually taken the extraordinary measure of putting his practice track in a ravine, and of only riding on the central 18 acres of an 800-acre plot. At the same time, it’s clear to reasonable people that—property rights notwithstanding—landowners shouldn’t be completely unfettered in their use of private land; after all, sound waves don’t stop at property lines.

The Riverside conflict soon came to center on determining a reasonable sound level for activities on private property, and officials began working on that question. About a year ago, the AMA became involved. “We decided what we needed to do was educate the county commissioners who were charged with writing this new regulation,” Moreland says.

The AMA actually took the commissioners to McGrath’s property and had Jeremy ride around. They found that, at a prescribed distance of 50 feet from the track, ambient sound from things like passing cars was actually louder than McGrath’s Honda CRF450R with a stock exhaust. High-pitched sounds like birds chirping actually spiked the meter!

Although there’s nothing to prevent people from asking for the impossible (30 decibels, for example, which is quieter than a whisper), Moreland says that 65 decibels is the reasonable level of what’s acceptable at a distance of 50 feet. This is distinct from the AMA’s racing sound-test procedure, in which—for practical reason—a measurement is taken just a few inches from a standing motorcycle; sound levels are obviously much higher in such tests. It’s also worth mentioning that sound level rises exponentially as decibel numbers go up; for instance, 99 decibels is significantly quieter than 102 would be to your ear.

Initially, officials considered limiting hours and days of operation, even for small, quiet bikes like PW50s. The AMA asked them to strike the limits on which days were acceptable (they did) and asked
them to make hours of operation comparable with any other outdoor activity that would involve a sound source. One problem is that, with the way the county’s laws read, supervisors must consider anything that’s not specifically spelled out as legal to be de facto illegal, so rather than writing a general sound ordinance, they were looking at writing one specifically for motorcycles and ATVs.

If the commissioners had thought McGrath would be easy to caricature as an irresponsible “biker,” they were mistaken. When attending meetings, the seven-time supercross champion turned on the same charm that has made him so popular with race fans, surprising attendees with his responsible, polite professionalism. “He listened to their concerns and told them he was trying to be a good neighbor and was willing to work with them to come up with reasonable sound levels and hours of operation,” Moreland says. “That, along with his allowing them to go to his property to do sound-measurement exercises so that they could understand the issue, surprised the county commissioners.”

“I’ve come to believe that, hey, you need to be a good neighbor,” McGrath said recently on 2 Wheel Tuesday. “You need to respect your neighbor, do the right thing, talk about it, get it out in the open. When I have my friends over to my track to ride, I make them use standard exhausts now. I have respect for my neighbors, and I don’t want to be that guy everyone’s pointing their finger at.”

TEST CASE

Right about now, readers who aren’t residents of Riverside County are probably asking themselves why they should give a hoot about the travails of a rich, famous motocross star like Jeremy McGrath with all that land. It’s a valid question, but the answer is that the sound issue is threatening dirt bike recreation as we know it all over the country. In southern Washington, the beautiful Washougal Motocross Park is in danger of being shut down due to neighbors’ sound complaints, and track owner Ralph Huffman has been going back and forth with authorities. Although Washougal is exempt from sound regulations under its grandfathered permit, officials are trying to change that. While the track has been there for decades, the neighborhood is getting closer—right when the bikes are getting louder.
Huffman hasn’t yet instituted the AMA’s 99-decibel sound limit for amateur motocross racing (in AMA off-road racing, the limit is 96 decibels, and some predict it will eventually drop to 94), but he will probably do so soon. “I could probably get bikes to meet the 99, but I’ve got to be a little careful,” he explains. “I’m the only AMA track left in the area, so I’m competing against tracks that don’t have a lot of these restrictions.”

This highlights a vulnerable flank in the dirt bike community. Consistent testing would ensure a reasonable sound output at tracks and thus help keep legislators at bay, but motocrossers—who tend to be individualistic by nature—haven’t done a good enough job of policing themselves. If we don’t start soon, lawmakers will do it for us, as AMA Vice President, Sports Douglas Neubauer points out: “The biggest thing is everybody getting on the same page across the board. At the last AMA congress, there was a lot of talk about sound, and that inspired a lot of people to start doing something about it, including entire districts.”

Still, promoters and track owners haven’t been moving quickly enough in adopting testing procedures, and riders have been reluctant to use quiet exhaust systems. While much of the industry is on board with the issue, there are still some parties—including at least one major aftermarket exhaust maker and another motocross magazine—who refuse to accept the reality that loud motorcycles are threatening our sport. “There’s a very loud minority of motorcyclists who don’t realize the peril in which they put the rest of the community through irresponsible acts,” Moreland says.

**GETTING ON TRACK**

As the Washougal example shows, the sound issue doesn’t just affect those who want to ride on public lands or their own private property. Motocross tracks are also under fire, a trend that will only accelerate as expanding populations get closer to what were once rural racing facilities. As a result, although not all promoters enforce AMA Sports’ 99-decibel limit, the situation is improving.

“I would say that within the last year, definitely, more and more people have become aware of it and more and more people have started to do the testing,” Neubauer says.

Although professional racing makes up only a small fraction of this country’s motocross competition, it’s still an important component in this issue, in part because fewer areas for riding will result in fewer youngsters developing the skills necessary to become pros. “What if James Stewart or Ricky Carmichael could have learned to ride as kids because their neighbors were complaining about the noise they were making?” Moreland asks. “You wouldn’t have those guys as champions right now.”

Perhaps more importantly, pro racing is important because of the example it sets. Joe Lunchbox bases his purchase choices for items like graphics and gear on what heroes like Chad Reed or Ivan Tedesco are using, and the same holds true when it’s time to buy an exhaust system. If pro riders start using quieter pipes, it won’t be long before that’s what the public is buying.

Currently, AMA Pro Racing’s sound limit is 102 decibels (standing test), but they only began doing pre-race sound testing in 2004; post-race testing was implemented even more recently. Although violators weren’t being punished as we went to press, an escalating financial penalty is planned for instigation. In 2010, the limit will be lowered to 99 decibels (just as in amateur racing), and it’s possible that the rpm level at which the sound is measured could go up in the future. Again, considering the exponential scale of decibel measurement, three is a significant drop.

“The exhaust-pipe manufacturers are really doing a good job as working with us,” AMA Pro Racing’s Steve Whitelock says, “and they’re trying to build products that’s going to be good for everybody and still make good power.”

It’s worth mentioning that stock exhausts already meet the 99-decibel limit and are actually quite good, but the public always want the lighter weight and increased power that comes...
with aftermarket systems, even if the distribution of that power is sometimes better suited for riders of much higher skill levels. Aftermarket exhaust makers are often portrayed as the bad guys on this issue, but the truth is that they face a huge challenge as they weigh and prioritize data gathered at the sound meter, the dyno, and the track. Finding the right balance is difficult, and the dirt bike exhaust business is still somewhat of a black art; what works on paper doesn’t necessarily translate to the real world.

“You think about five years ago, you ran a piece of tubing out to the side panel and you bolted on a muffler, and you were in the pipe business,” laughs George Luttig, Director of Research and Development for FMF, a company that has been at the forefront on the sound issue. “Now, it’s taken the cowboy out of the deal, to where you have to really have a carefully developed and engineered product that will meet sound restrictions and perform well and not fall apart in two days.”

According to Luttig, there’s a very good chance that once the 99-decibel sound limit is strictly enforced at the pro level, most aftermarket companies won’t even offer products that don’t meet that limit. “I think if we can get the pros to be 99, the amateurs will soon all be 99, even without testing at the amateur races,” Luttig says. “I’ve always been of the belief that if you have Chad, Ricky, and Bubba running around with 10-inch mufflers, that’s all the public’s going to want to buy. That’s pretty easy to prove. If we can have a sound-test program at the professional racing level, it makes it much easier for the aftermarket systems to look more like what the guys are running, and vice versa. That is going to make the kid riding in a field in Chino, within earshot of some motorcycle-hating voters, buy a longer muffler.”

On a side note, it’s likely that lowering the professional sound limit should have other positive effects, as well. If you’ve ever attended an AMA supercross race, you know that loud bikes in stadiums make hearing the race announcers next to impossible. Offers Whitelock, “If there are 6-year-old kids with their hands over their ears, that’s not what we want, because we need them to enjoy the race.”

**What Next?**

Regardless of the Riverside County outcome, it’s clearly time for motorcyclists to be proactive on the sound issue. “We’ve got to do this for ourselves before the government or law enforcement does it for us,” Moreland says. “Because we’re not going to like what they do.”

Starting in May, the AMA will be mounting a country-wide education campaign in the hopes that motorcyclists will realize that what they do today impacts whether or not they and their children will be able to ride tomorrow. Jeremy McGrath will play a major part in this campaign.

“It’s a problem and we know that it is, but we’re trying
to get in front of it before the government shoves it down our throat,” Whitelock says. “Why not be proactive rather than reactive?”

What can the various members of the motorcycling community do? Local tracks (both AMA and non-AMA) should implement the 99-decibel sound limit, and promoters of off-road races should enforce a 96-decibel limit. (For information on sound-testing equipment and procedure, contact DPS Technical at chemhelp.com or call 909-981-5228.)

“Our masses need to wake up and start doing the sound testing,” Neubauer says. “Enforce the rules we already have and stop blaming others.”

At the pro level, AMA Pro Racing is on the right track by switching to the 99-decibel limit next season. Depending on how effective fines are, they should be prepared to add a points penalty if necessary—an excessively loud pipe will do much more damage to the sport than excess fuel lead.

As for the general enthusiast, the best thing you can do is use a quiet exhaust pipe, and when within earshot of people who may not share your affection for the sound of your dirt bike, run at a lower rpm. In addition, build a good rapport with your neighbors by talking to them about your hobby and involving them in it. Being a good neighbor goes a long way.

Which brings us back to the neighbor this all started with: Jeremy McGrath. It began as his issue, but now it’s our issue. Fortunately, if there is a dirt bike rider able to lead us all in this situation, it’s the charismatic and ever-grounded McGrath. And if that’s not enough, fellow seven-time champion Rick Johnson, whose whole family lives and rides in Riverside County, is on his flank.

“This property issue is turning into something way bigger than just Jeremy McGrath not being able to ride at his own track,” Jeremy offers. “It can have long-term effects on the entire motorcycling community. In the beginning it was just me trying to get permission to ride on my own track; I wanted to have respect for the neighbors because they were having a problem with it. But now Riverside County is talking about shutting down almost all OHV riding in the county, and if we don’t handle this the right way, then it’s going to have a big effect on motocross and motorcycle riding throughout the whole country. Everybody is waiting to see what happens with California, and then it’s going to be the trickle-down effect.

“It’s kind of like what happened with personal watercraft a few years ago,” McGrath warns. “As soon as they got them off one lake, a bunch of other lakes booted them off, too. With what’s happening now, it’s important to me, my family, my kids and my kids’ kids. This is about the future of motocross.” But it’s happening right now. X