



Nothing Small About XL

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Much has been written about the bond that Harley® ownership creates. People love to talk about how it breaks down barriers, providing common ground for those even from wildly different backgrounds. It's one of the greatest and most amazing things about Harley-Davidson: how these two-wheeled vehicles manage to foster shared understanding in a world that often seems to be running short of it. It also helps fulfill one of the strongest human desires: the need to feel accepted.

Well, most of the time.

I didn't have much money when I bought my first motorcycle, and I didn't want to fool around with other brands. In the Classifieds, I found a 1985 XLX-61 – a minimalist Sportster® with one of the last of the pre-Evolution® ironhead engines and black pipes, which were fairly rare at the time – a unique and tough little brute that felt just right for a new rider. The first time I rode it through the farmlands of Wisconsin and found myself returning waves from dozens of oncoming riders, I was on top of the world. Not only was the ride a complete gas, but I felt accepted by countless strangers.

Fast forward a few years, and our house is being re-shingled. The head of the work crew is a bear of a man, and after he sees me on my motorcycle we strike up a conversation. He rides an Ultra Classic® Electra Glide®. He also has a 16-year-old daughter and says he'd be embarrassed if he saw her riding what I had. Let's just say he was lucky to be twice my size and armed with a pneumatic nail gun, or I might have told him a thing or two.

More recently, before my wife decided that an Electra Glide would provide a better passenger experience, a friend of mine – also an Ultra rider – would periodically take little shots at me. "When are you going to buy a *real* Harley?" he'd ask. Or if he heard someone ask me if I had a Harley, he'd jump in to say, "Sort of..." This wise guy was lucky to be an Emergency Medical Technician. I think it's wrong to harm the healers.

In truth, I had no desire to be confrontational with either person. As fellow Harley owners – really, as fellow motorcyclists – they deserve my acceptance and respect, even if they weren't particularly generous with their own. But I realized they couldn't be the only ones with a snobbish attitude toward the smaller members of the V-twin family. If you're one of them,

here are a few things worth considering about Sportsters and the people who ride them.

The Sportster is 100 percent Harley-Davidson. Next year the Sportster will be 50 years old. The only other model name that comes even close is Electra Glide, which made its debut in 1965. Furthermore, it was the wedding of the FL chassis and XL front end that produced the 1971 FX Super Glide®, thereby launching the factory custom concept and paving the way for some of today's most popular models. If this isn't convincing enough, perhaps it's time to visit the good people in Milwaukee and Kansas City who together build Sportsters. Tell them they're not making real Harleys. Steel-toed footwear is recommended.

Bigger is not always better. While it's true some people who buy Sportsters eventually become Big Twin owners, many wouldn't trade their Sporty for anything. They're apt to tell you, if you gave them a chance, that Sportsters offer agile handling with a nimble feel that makes them just plain fun to ride. Furthermore, the XL engine was the heart of the first XR 750, a model that since has evolved and become the

most successful racing motorcycle ever. Think this might be a point of pride for William Harley and the Davidson brothers, who forged the company's reputation in no small part through racing? Whose side are you on, anyway?

Sportster riders are your brothers and sisters. There are so many things you can agree on: Two wheels are better than four any day, no other motorcycle engine sounds or feels better than a Harley-Davidson® V-twin, even a bad day of riding beats a good day at work. And I'll bet Sportster owners won't have a single bad thing to say about your Big Twin, so why not show the same courtesy? You never know who might be there to lend a hand when you need one most.

I'm not saying that people aren't entitled to their opinions; it's just that sometimes they're better off kept to oneself. No one group of riders has a greater claim to Harley-Davidson legitimacy than any other. Feel secure in who you are and let other people do the same, or else be prepared to explain yourself to the company founders when you ride through the pearly gates.

Larry Macke is a full H.O.G.® member and long-time Harley-Davidson enthusiast.

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