



Lea Young and Carolyn Schwulst

Forget the back of the motorcycle—more women are taking the driver's seat

by [Irene Messina](#)

Riding around town in my sensible sedan, I'm bound to see them on picture-perfect days when the temps are bearable. Leather-clad with boots to match, they sit on sleek and shiny machines that make just the right rumble.

Motorcyclists—they just look *cool*.

Even cooler are the female bikers; they exude confidence and an air of freedom. Traditionally, though, the joy of traveling under the big sky with the wind in their hair has largely been limited to women riding on the back with male biker friends.

Well, the gears have shifted. Instead of being relegated to the back of the bike, more women are taking the handlebars, revving the engine and riding off themselves—no man required.

According to online magazine Women Riders Now (www.womenridersnow.com), the number of female riders is growing. They report that the Motorcycle Industry Council's Statistical Annual shows that since 2003, the number of female riders has increased 24 percent. And female bike-owners now make up more than 12 percent of the motorcycle-riding population: That's 5.7 million ladies on wheels.

The local chapter of Women on Wheels, a national organization whose goal is to unite all women motorcycle enthusiasts, is growing as well. With only a handful of members a year ago, this WOW chapter now has more than 30 people registered at their Meet Up site (www.meetup.com/Tucson-RoadRunners), with 17 as paid members. Ages range from 20s to 60s.

Chapter director Lea Young is happy to see the change in attitudes. "We as women grew up—in my era—as not being able to do things except be secretaries, nurses and that type of thing. So to see women reach out and want to do this, it's phenomenal."

Young, who owns a Kawasaki Vulcan Voyager 1700, says she has been "riding something with two wheels for 44 years. I started on a mini dirt bike, then (moved) to a street bike, then to a large street bike. I've done a lot of racing. You couldn't get me off of one."

Chapter secretary Carolyn Schwulst, owner of a Kawasaki Vulcan 900, was licensed in May 2008. "I had a boyfriend in college who rode a motorcycle. I rode on the back. I thought, 'This is so cool,' except for the fact that every time he shifted gears, my head hit his helmet."

Some 30 years later, Schwulst thought learning to ride was "awesome, awesome, awesome. It was the most wonderful experience to be able to control a motorcycle."

This control comes with a variety of reactions. "The most common statement (from women) is, 'Gee, I wish I could ride a motorcycle.' Or, 'I always wanted to ride a motorcycle,'" says Schwulst.

Male responses have been a bit different. "I've heard, 'Can a little girl like you handle a bike like that?'" recalls Schwulst.

"I've had a guy tell me, 'Who sold you *that* bike?' I said, 'I wanted that bike; it was *my* decision,'" says Young.

Neither woman have had good luck with dealerships. "We went to five (Phoenix) dealerships in the last three years. Either we were ignored completely or not approached until 15 minutes later. If approached, they didn't take us seriously," says Young. On the plus side, they've had good luck at Tucson's RideNow Powersports and have been meeting a greater number of supportive male riders.

Support is paramount in Tucson Road Runners. "Before each ride, we look at the level of riders we have and go over safety. If a rider doesn't feel comfortable, one member will stay back with that rider," explains Schwulst.

Adds Young, "Mentoring is really a highlight of our chapter. We want you to come in; we want you to be safe; and we want to teach you what we know."

Both women stress safety and recommend taking the Motorcycle Safety Foundation Basic RiderCourse. They wear riding gear, drive at most 5 mph over the speed limit and use a buddy system. With more than five riders, the group is split up so cars can pass. Rides range from a couple of hours to overnight trips, with at least two rides scheduled per month.

Young and Schwulst encourage women to give riding a try. "If you think you'd like to ... you can," says Young.

"It's amazing what it brings out in you—a sense of fun, responsibility and independence," adds Schwulst.

The ladies look forward to a time when a female rider is nothing unusual, and when columns like this are obsolete. We're not there yet, but on the open road, there's room for everyone.

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