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Moped madness:

The European craze rides into America

By DIANE POLJACK

Twenty years ago the kids in my neighborhood had this great make-believe way of having fun. Most gradeschoolers with limited resources do. We'd open our piggy banks, pool their contents and buy a package of toy balloons. We'd each pick our favorite color, then blow up the balloons and fasten them to our bicycles' rear wheels.

While you rode, the spokes would brush the balloons and make a rapid putt-putt noise, like the block-away echo of a motorcycle engine. Or a car engine, if your imagination was vivid enough to paint doors and windows around you. You'd forget that your fat little legs were pedalling like there was no tomorrow. After all, you had wheels with a "motor."

Now kids from 15 to 80 ride bikes that aren't really bikes. These go putt-putt for real. The nonbikes have engines, but they're not motorcycles either because they don't go nearly as fast. They putt-putt at 30 miles an hour max. No balloons, except maybe at the grand opening of a moped dealership.

Of which there are about a dozen in the Miami area. And that number will probably increase with sales. That is, if the moped achieves widespread acceptance as a means of short-distance transportation in the United States, as it has in Europe over four decades.

"If you can ride a bike, you can ride a moped," the satisfied owner swears. So you go for a test ride to satisfy your growing curiosity.

You start pedaling this heavier-than-a-bike nonbike, turn the starter switch to "on," hold in the clutch, and in a minute you're motorized.

It's a kid's dream come true. You've got your feet on the pedals, but you're putt-putting at 10, 15, even 25 miles an hour without moving them at all. And you're on the street, not a big street, but a street nonetheless, with cars that are going not much faster than you.

And, if it's exercise you want, you can turn off the engine and pedal.

Most models of mopeds sold in the United States will go 30-32 miles per hour maximum. Speed limits vary according to different states' regulatory legislation.

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Bob and Diane Broadley opened Moped South, now at 10887 Caribbean Ave., in February and, they say, business has been good.

"People are finding a new way to get back and forth, for short-distance transportation," said Bob Broadley, whose customers are not just young people. He says the demand for mopeds is increasing among all age groups, and that he sells about 50 mopeds a month.

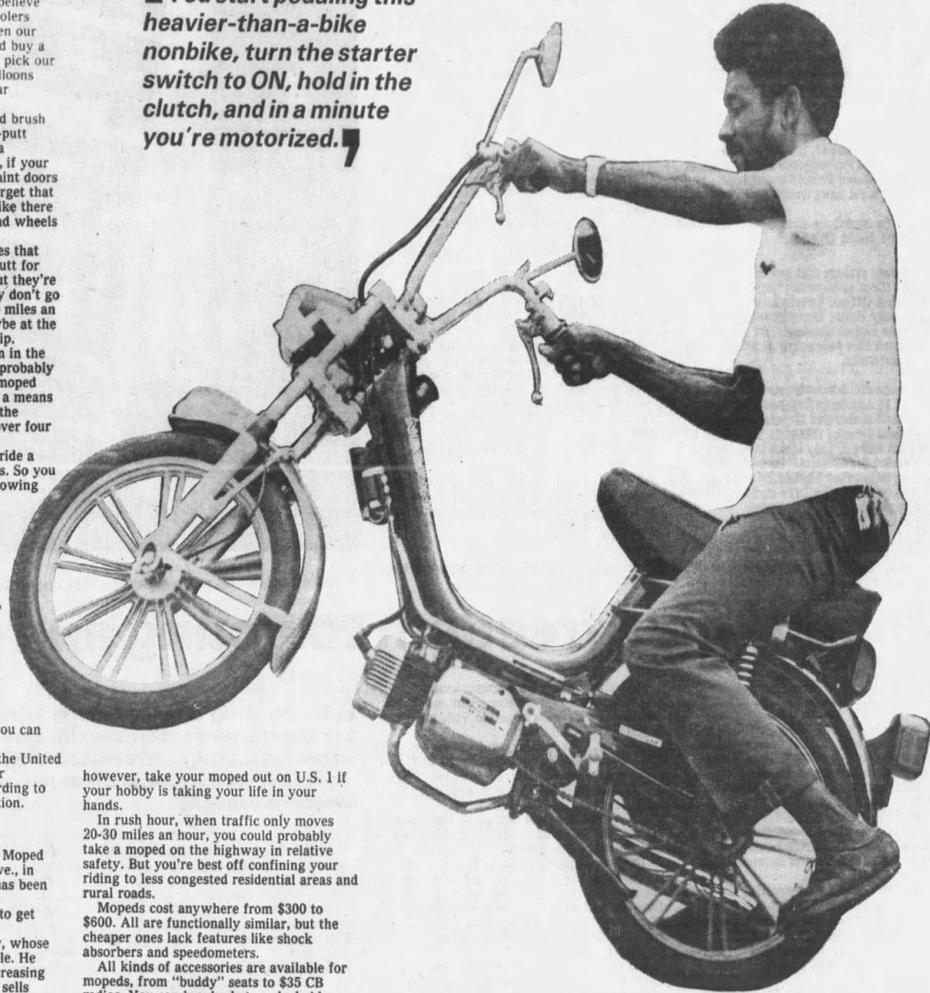
Of the couple of dozen brands of mopeds, only the Columbia is manufactured in the United States. Moped South carries the Italian-made Negrini, the Austrian Puch and its most recent addition, the Dutch Batavus.

Broadley cited economy and enjoyment as the main reasons for the moped's increasing popularity. Retirees, as well as students, are turning to mopeds. Gas mileage is about 150 miles a gallon. And you don't need a license, tags or insurance.

In many states, the legal minimum age for operating mopeds is less than that for automobiles. In Florida you must be 15.

The legal speed limit, which varies from state to state, is 25 miles an hour in Florida. It's illegal to ride a moped on limited access highways, meaning expressways. You can,

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however, take your moped out on U.S. 1 if your hobby is taking your life in your hands.

In rush hour, when traffic only moves 20-30 miles an hour, you could probably take a moped on the highway in relative safety. But you're best off confining your riding to less congested residential areas and rural roads.

Mopeds cost anywhere from \$300 to \$600. All are functionally similar, but the cheaper ones lack features like shock absorbers and speedometers.

All kinds of accessories are available for mopeds, from "buddy" seats to \$35 CB radios. You can buy baskets or lockable saddlebags that fit across the rear wheel, helmets, baby seats, water bottles, fancy banana seats, colored hand grips — and so on.

Moped South includes a helmet with every moped sold to an airman from Homestead Air Force Base, where helmets are required. Although optional in Florida, some helmets are purchased by other moped riders.

"They buy them after the first wreck," said Moped South mechanic Eric Judah.

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The bikes are relatively easy to work on. But Judah warned, "If you work on your bike yourself before your six-month warranty has expired, and then bring it in

for repair work, you break your warranty."

The most frequent reasons owners bring in their mopeds, he said, are for the 300-mile checkups Moped South includes in the price of every bike it sells, for tuneups and to remedy malfunctions caused by a dirty spark plug. And flat tires, often caused by use off the road.

"People try to motor-cross on them, and they're not made for it," Judah said, adding that one moped wound up in a canal because of such misuse.

And moped owners should keep in mind never to idle the machines more than necessary due to traffic stoppage. Mopeds have air-cooled engines, no fans, and overheat if you sit still with the engine

running for any length of time. "And that's a hundred dollars' damage," said Judah.

A common mistake is not using the right gas-oil mixture or simply not using enough oil. Manufacturers recommend the synthetic oil made specifically for mixture with gasoline in the two-stroke moped engine. To each tankful of gas you add two and a half ounces of synthetic oil, which costs \$2.69 a pint.

If you try to get away with using a cheaper oil, such as regular motor oil, remember the moped will require around twice the two and a half ounces prescribed

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for synthetic oil. If you don't mix a sufficient amount of oil with your gas, you'll probably burn up the pistons and face a \$90 repair bill.

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Phone calls to several safety departments of the city and county police produced the information that, yes, there have been moped accidents in the Miami area. How many, or whether there have been any fatalities in Dade County, no one could say, because under Florida law, mopeds are classified as motor-driven bicycles. Which means they are grouped with bicycles. Which means . . .

"If there is an accident involving a single vehicle with a moped, it's not even an accident," said Investigator Robert Case of the City of Miami Police Department. "About all we'd have would be an injury report."

"They (mopeds) are dangerous," he added, "there's no doubt about it."

"The state statute that governs them classifies them as bicycles," said Public Information Officer Lonnie Lawrence of the Dade County Police Department. He said that means moped accidents are treated pretty much like pedestrian accidents, as are bicycle accidents.

Lawrence did, however manage to find a record of 15 accidents involving motor scooters and motorized bicycles between January and June of this year. "It would be a different thing if they had a separate classification for mopeds," he said. "The only way to get that kind of information now is to go through all the accident reports and separate those with mopeds."

"The injury rate is higher for accidents involving mopeds because the driver has no protection," said Sgt. Lane Bradford of the City of Miami Police Department. Bradford,

who said he just bought a moped for his wife, felt that mopeds are dangerous because riders "use them in places where they shouldn't be, out on the highway or in heavy traffic, instead of in residential areas or on side roads, where they were intended to be used."

"Moped riders have to obey the traffic laws, just like bicycle riders," he said. He criticized the lack of driver licensing for mopeds, citing a case of an man who had been refused a driver's license because he was an epileptic, going out and buying a moped. "What happens if he has a seizure on the moped?" Bradford asked.

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And, yes, mopeds have been stolen. "Your bike is as safe as your lock is effective," said Moped South salesperson Donna Czernecki, herself a moped owner. She recommended use of a good cable or horseshoe lock, in addition to the built-in steering column lock.

Moped South sponsors a club for moped owners, one benefit of which is theft protection. The store records each serial number and gives a registration number to every bike sold, thus keeping a permanent file on each bike. "The police are pleased with the club," said Broadley, because it has brought some order to what is new and all but totally unregulated by the government. New owners are also urged to register their mopeds as bicycles with the county.

"We urge those in the area to report stolen bikes to us, give us the serial numbers and descriptions, and we'll watch for them," Broadley added.

• Diane Poljack is outdoors writer for The Miami News.



The Miami News - BOB NACK

You find more and more signs like this one around Dade County

Mopeds give freedom to young and old

PAUL TREUTHARDT
Associated Press

Mopeds, the curious Gallic hybrid of a bicycle with a baby motor, born in France during the austerity of the Marshall Plan era, have given independence to youth and mobility to workers in Europe since World War II.

By day, their buzz is familiar in European cities. In darkness, the sound drills through the countryside as kids ride home from a dance in the next village or farmers head out to the fields at dawn.

Now, Americans are discovering the virtues of the vehicle that sips only a gallon of gas every 100 miles or so and is easy not only on the pocketbook, but on the environment, the leg muscles and the nerves during rush-hour traffic jams.

But, says Jean Chasanel, secretary-general of Motobecane, France's largest producer, "There's a lot more talk about mopeds than there are mopeds on the roads in the United States."

U.S. sales last year were only about 50,000, but Chasanel is optimistic. "We expect total industry sales of 100,000 units there this year, that's in the 31 states which have passed laws favorable to the moped." The Department of Transportation is optimistic, too. It forecasts three million mopeds on U.S. roadways by 1980.

Some 30 manufacturers are vying for the U.S. market. The biggest are Motobecane, which pioneered the moped in 1949 and expects to supply one-fourth of those sold in America this year; Steyer Daimler Puch of Austria and Patavus of Holland. The lone U.S. manufacturer is Columbia, of Westfield, Mass.

Basically, a moped is a strengthened bicycle powered by a motor about one-fifth the size of a cylinder of an old Volkswagen. It usually is chain driven.

A recent New York court decision says it's a moped if it goes no faster than 17 miles per hour, a motorcycle if it goes faster. Europe is more lenient, allowing 25-30 m.p.h.

France has the most mopeds in use, some six million, followed by Italy's three million and Holland's two million.

The popularity of the moped stems from its economy and the lack of restrictions on the rider. Of moped laws passed in 31 states thus far, half require no vehicle registration. Many don't require a driver's license, and none requires crash helmets or liability insurance.

But as accident rates increase in Europe, crash helmets are expected to become compulsory soon in France and Germany. And already in the States there is sentiment to make the laws more stringent and uniform.

Moped sales rose markedly in Europe in 1973-74, but Chasanel strongly opposes the idea that the oil crisis was responsible.

"We always say we believe the increase was because of interest in the basic qualities of the vehicle itself."

"We were shown to be right when deliveries dropped back in 1975-76 at the height of the economic crisis, and also because laws making crash helmets compulsory started coming in."

In the United States, he says, it "is still too soon to say if mopeds have become fashionable. We need to see how sales develop. But President Carter's energy program might help."

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An aide pointed out that relaxed laws for mopeds only began appearing in the last couple of years, after lobbying by the Motorized Bicycle Association, strongly supported by the French industry.

Across Europe, the youth market dominates moped sales — for transport as well as sport.

But in London, more and more white collar workers are seen weaving through dense rush hour traffic on mopeds.

In many European countries the legal speed limit for mopeds is 30 kilometers (about 20 miles) per hour. Mopeds are supposed to be built not to exceed that speed, but it's a hamfisted youngster who can't make minor adjustments to leave the speed limit behind.

In the Netherlands, where flat terrain lends itself to mopeds, the little bikes are second only to the car as the most popular form of motor transport, and in Denmark, there were 459,400 mopeds at the end of 1975 for a population of a little over five million.

But Swedish authorities say the number of mopeds dropped from 750,000 in the early 1960s to around 400,000 now. They attribute it mainly to the fact that mopeds have developed from being bicycles with

auxiliary motors into baby motorbikes, and thus become more expensive.

Mopeds are popular in the poorer areas of southern Spain, particularly with construction and farm workers.

In Switzerland, the energy crisis brought a brief switch from larger to smaller cars, but no significant change in sales of the long-popular moped. If people are turning from cars to mopeds, it usually is because of traffic and parking problems, the Swiss say.

The outstanding problem of the moped however, is the vulnerability of the rider in accidents. The figures are higher in France, with twice as many mopeds as any other country. Last year in France, 1,232 people were killed on mopeds, compared with 503 on larger motorbikes.

The French Ministry of Transport is promoting special moped lanes, like bicycle paths, for urban travel.

In Britain, with more than 500,000 mopeds in use, there were 121 fatalities in 1976, low compared with France but still a rise of 36 per cent over 1975.

The British Ministry of Transport says moped riders are not entirely to blame. "Time and time again car drivers say: 'I'm sorry, but I just didn't see him,'" a Ministry spokesman said.