

Training from the Pros & Practice, Practice, Practice

Editor's Note: Eric Diehl is not directly employed by either MSF or the SCTCS program. This is a personal perspective from an experienced safety instructor.

Upstate SC and the surrounding region offer sublime motorcycling opportunities on a year-round basis, and that just makes the state's rather bleak safety record all the more disheartening. Suggested reasons for such statistics are the non-use of helmets or other safety gear, poor judgment on public roadways, rider impairment, and the forever-renewable learner's permit. Those tend to be controversial issues, but one argument that I've never heard pooh-poohed is the call for an increase in rider-training, especially in the early stages of skill development.

As of this writing, the upstate hosts a state-sponsored training program at the Spartanburg Community College/BMW Center. Also, Piedmont Tech in Greenwood and Greenville Tech are both starting programs. TriCounty Tech may be next. These courses are not performance oriented track-day fare, but fundamental skills and safety courses. Still, even experienced rid-



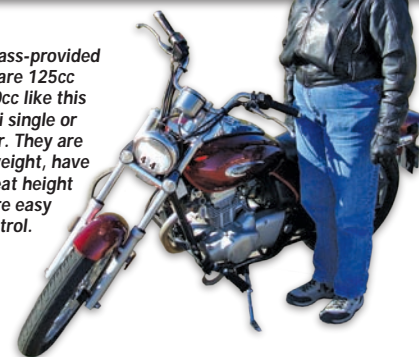
This intermediate class is comprised of riders with large displacement bikes. Note all riders have on heavily padded jackets and stout boots.

males to outnumber males in the classes, nor is it unusual for middle-aged or senior students to outnumber the youngsters. The more 'seasoned' students are sometimes true first-timers, while others are returning to the sport after an extended hiatus.

The state training program is closely modeled on the national MSF program, which is a series of classroom and motor-skills exercises that has evolved over the last few decades. The Beginner's Class (BC) is taught with the assumption that all the students are brand new to the sport and that they come to the class with no prior ability beyond being able to ride a bicycle. The course provides the motorcycles—small, lightweight, minimally-intimidating 125 and 250cc bikes, and loaner helmets are provided for those who don't already have one. The other required equipment is full fingered gloves, long pants, a long-sleeve shirt or jacket, eye protection, and over-the-ankle shoes. More serious gear is recommended for the real world, but for this class we're talking a contained course and minimal speeds. Gear for cold or wet weather is the student's responsibility. Be forewarned: if it rains, blame it on Mother Nature—'cause we're riding!

The BC begins with a Friday evening classroom discussion with related videos. I suspect that many students arrive with the basic desire to develop their fundamental motor skills. The class also addresses the need for proper protective gear (for both trauma and weather protection), the need

The class-provided bikes are 125cc or 250cc like this Suzuki single or similar. They are lightweight, have low seat height and are easy to control.



to learn enough about one's machinery to operate and maintain it properly, and the need to train oneself to anticipate and spot incidental 'factors'—so that developing problems might be assessed, reacted to, and ultimately averted. In other words, we should all have our heads screwed on straight before leaving the garage. I am convinced that I'm a better four-wheel 'cager' because of increased diligence developed while riding on two wheels.

For a BC, work on the riding range begins with basic control familiarization. The first exercise culminates with the starting of the motor. Woo Hoo! In the following exercises the students become familiar with the clutch, they paddle-walk the bike back and forth across the range, they put their feet up on the pegs and ride in a straight line, and they continue through a sequence of techniques focused on starting and stopping, braking, shifting and turning—completing each step before moving on to the next.



The big bikes go through the same tight course as the smaller bikes. Note the feet are on the pegs and the rider is looking through the turn.

The class is run by two RiderCoaches, fondly referred to (by me, anyway) as the 'Talking Head' and the 'Cone Monkey'. The first coach runs the classroom and preps and debriefs the students for each exercise, while the second coach preps the bikes, sets up the exercises, and rides a demo of each. The objective and procedure for each exercise are explained in detail beforehand. Then the demo coach rides the exercise while the talking coach describes what the students are seeing and what they should try to do. Both coaches are on the range (on foot) interacting with students, giving encouragement, gesturing and dodging motorized projectiles and sometimes getting rather red in the face.

The coaches focus on maintaining a safe environment and working to help each student maximize his/her learning experience. They obviously cannot guarantee a student's success, but they do whatever they can to identify and work through problem areas. Most students ultimately succeed to a greater or lesser degree, though a few decide that it's not for them and there are rare instances when a student is coached out for safety reasons.

Though all coaches follow the course outline, we each have our own personality and preferences that flavor the individual presentations. Salsa? Bratwurst? Sweet Tea? I believe one concern that all coaches have in common, however, is the extreme borderline student. Every coach is a motorcyclist at heart and wants to see each student persevere—to get over the hump and transition from a total mess to an astounding success. I have seen this happen, but I have also seen those who chose not to continue, and a few who simply could not make it. Many of the exercises are everybody-at-once, continuous-flow routines, and therein lies the potential for difficulty. How long should the full class be hindered while a single rider is catered to? But such difficulties are expected and can be worked around. So the critical question becomes—how long do we allow the desperately struggling student to continue, chancing that he/she might again crash, perhaps this time more than a minor tip-over? There is no one-size-fits-all answer for that, but compared to the real-world, the controlled environment of the range is a much safer place to discover whether motorcycling is for you.

At the end of the second day on the range the beginner's class ends with a Skills Test on the bike, followed by any remaining classroom work and a multiple-choice test. If the student participated in class and looked over the study questions, the written test is not difficult. Questions are then fielded and there's a discussion of benefits that derive from graduation, such as reduced insurance rates, reimbursement paid by some manufacturers, and poten-

tial local discounts. A course evaluation is handed in and the class is ended with a suggestion regarding what should come next... More practice!

The Intermediate level Class (IC) is a recommended follow-up, or it might be attended by semi-experienced riders who have not gone through the BC. The IC is similar to the BC except that there's only one day on the range, the basic entry-level material is dropped, and the students use their own bikes or scooters. The IC student must have at least a learner's permit as well as proper bike registration and insurance documents. A common reason to take the IC class is that it earns the successful student a license waiver, which can be taken to the DMV to be redeemed for a full motorcycle license. I understand that the DMV could still ask the applicant to take their skills test, but have never heard of that happening.

A third option is the Experienced Riders Course (EC), a single day course that entails minimal classroom activity. A participating rider must have previously completed one of the lower-level courses or already have a full motorcycle license. The EC is typically attended by experienced, fully-licensed motorcyclists who want to brush up on their skills and have some fun with like-minded enthusiasts (though a license waiver can also be earned in this class).

Keep in mind that a number of the exercises common to all the classes focus on skills that many 'experienced' riders do not adequately practice, or perhaps even attempt, such as swerving, aggressive braking, U-turns and tight weaves. If a rid-



er first learns the proper technique, such maneuvers are much easier to practice and master. The wise rider with a good strategy is paying attention and is practiced at executing a swerve when that wheelbarrow falls out of the pickup truck just ahead, and in an unexpected decreasing-radius curve she knows to not jam on the brakes while staring wide-eyed at the fast-approaching guard rail, but to instead look all the way through the curve and press into it (countersteer).

So, fellow cyclists—be advised. We are never finished learning and practicing!

Addendum: If you are an experienced motorcyclist and would like to apply for the RiderCoach training program, check out 'Instructor Info' at www.scridered.org.



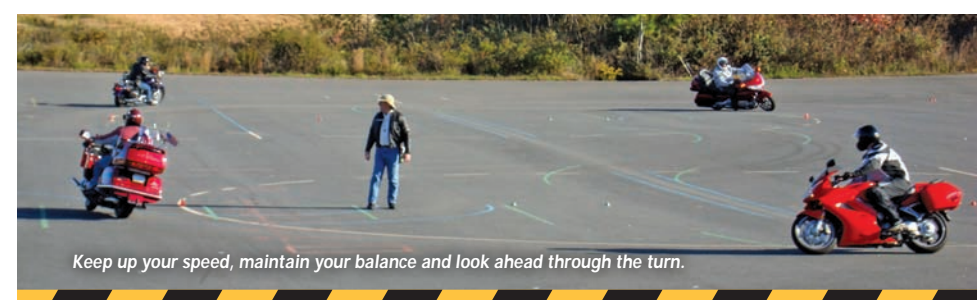
"Well Coach, how did I do?" Each rider gets personal instruction before, during and after each exercise.



This exercise is to stay within the corner box which proves to be difficult during everyone's first attempt.

ers typically complete the course with the feeling that their riding performance has improved as a result.

When I began coaching, my initial presumption was that the classes (maximum of 12 students) would be comprised primarily of young males—the way it was when I first started riding. But I've since found that it's not at all uncommon for fe-



Keep up your speed, maintain your balance and look ahead through the turn.