POLICE MOTOR OFFICERS are universally recognized as demonstrating the highest proficiency in motorcycle handling. Police departments typically require extensive training and frequent skill testing to ensure that all motor officers can exhibit a high degree of control, skill and confidence when riding. The Northwest Motorcycle School’s “Ride Like a Cop™” training class is designed to provide civilian riders with the same training experienced by motor officers. In the process, they acquire the same motorcycle control skills. NWMCS’s Ride Like a Cop course was developed by Zsolt Dornay, a retired motor officer with 11 years as a motor cop and nine years of training motor officers. Over the years, Dornay trained thousands of motor officers. In preparation for creating the Ride Like a Cop four-day class, he attended and evaluated motor officer training programs across the United States, including the highly-regarded Phoenix Motor Officer course on which MCN has reported (Motorcycle Consumer News, May, June and July, 2005).

Having also personally attended the Phoenix Police Motor Officer Course as well as the Arizona Highway Patrol motor officer school, my trip to Portland, Oregon, to attend NWMCS’s course gave me the opportunity to contrast this class with how actual professional motor officers are trained. How does it compare? Are the same skills taught in the same way? Will participants be able to ride as well as motor officers at the end of the class?

“It’s not about getting people to the point where they repeatedly execute a high-controlled slow ride through a set of complex cone layouts, although we do that,” says Ed Melroy, owner of Northwest Motorcycle School. “By the end of the course, we want students to be able to crank the bike lock to lock without falling, to navigate through tight, complex cone exercises, brake and swerve at speed, push the bike to its limits and all without thinking about it. By the last day—if they work at it—they’ll do things they could not even imagine doing on day one. And they’ll do it while thinking about their position on the course, where they want to go next and not how to get the bike to do what they want,” Melroy continues. “Once you transfer the majority of your attention away from the bike and focus on the road and traffic, your risk of accidents goes down. You become far safer. When an emergency situation occurs, you will execute the necessary maneuver to save your life.”

**It's the Real Deal**

The first point of similarity with police training is the type of bike used. Both of the police training courses I took used Kawasaki K-1000 police motorcycles as trainers. Although discontinued in 2005, today some K-1000’s are still in service and are almost always used for motor officer training purposes. With excellent balance, maneuverability, ruggedness and low-maintenance requirements, they’re the ideal training bike.

The next point of similarity is that the bikes are adjusted to each student on day one. First, handlebars are repositioned so they just clear the student’s knees with about an inch to spare when moved from lock-to-lock. This provides the most leverage without the bars being out of reach on a maximum turn. Next, the angle of the clutch lever and front brake lever are adjusted. Instructors have each rider extend their hands out in a line with their arms above the bars, then drop their arms down until their hands rest on the grips. The levers are then adjusted to align with an imaginary line running through the shoulder. Lastly, mirrors are adjusted so the rider is using the upper half of the mirror to view rear traffic. Ed explains, “Adjusting mirrors this way allows you to still see traffic behind when the front end dives under hard braking. All riders should adjust their mirrors this way.”

The exercises used by NWMCS on the parking lot course, which we review in more detail later, include the Keyhole, Eliminator, Circular Cone Weave, Sickle, 90° and 180° turns, Dogleg and Figure 8. They are precisely the ones used in actual police training. The cone setups and distances are identical. More importantly, the process for mastering each exercise is the same.

**Training Strategy**

First, an instructor shows students the exercise, explains why it’s important and how to do it correctly. The proper way to do it is demonstrated and then students run through it individually. The first few times are typically pretty rough, with missed cones and occasional dropped bikes, with
Above: Kawasaki K-1000 police bikes are ideal for training due to excellent balance, maneuverability, ruggedness and easy maintenance.

instructors calling out tips on how to get through the exercise in the easiest way. Eventually, most students have almost got it. At that point, some students keep working on the exercise until they master it. Others drift off to work individually on earlier exercises, then come back to it. This ability to work at an individual pace with extensive and repeated opportunities to practice an exercise until it is perfected authentically mirrors the process used in the professional courses I attended and is a significant difference from other training classes like the Motorcycle Safety Foundation courses.

The approach of beginning with a very rigid style and then lightening up allows students to progress at each one's own pace, while giving instructors opportunities to work individually with students. In addition, students have time to talk with each other and share what's working. This helpful camaraderie spills over into lunch and breaks, where stories are exchanged and students kid the instructors for doing things like inadvertently grabbing a hot plug wire. "After four or five days of this, people get to know each other," Ed tells me. "While we don't have any women in this particular class, it is fun when we do, as they typically do better than men. They have fewer bad habits, tend to listen better, and have less fear of leaning the motorcycle."

NWMCS alternates two higher speed exercises with the low-speed parking-lot drills, one on braking and the other on counter-steering. Braking drills are done twice a day. A new element is added in each session. "If more motorcycle riders knew and understood how quickly it is possible to bring a motorcycle to a stop and practiced it, there would be far fewer serious accidents," says Melroy. "We pull our braking exercises right from the police class. To pass the exercise you must ride through two marker cones at 40 mph, then brake and bring the bike to a stop in less than 62 feet."

The importance of being able to control the bike under emergency braking scenarios was a hallmark of both professional courses I took. In the highway patrol class, just like with NWMCS, it was practiced twice a day, every day of the class. Like the Pros, NWMCS uses a radar gun to ensure students are coming through the first set of cones at 40 mph before beginning to brake. Accelerating and holding your speed to 40 mph until you are just 62' from the rear end of a stopped school bus, (albeit an imaginary one) is a sphincter-tightening drill. We did it until we got it right.

The other high-speed exercise is countersteering. Students accelerate to 30 mph and push the handlebars one way and then the other to navigate between a set of six gates. Like the braking exercise, students learn more about the capabilities of the bike and that it is possible to swerve the bike quickly—and safely—at speed.

**Professional Vs. Public Programs**

In a class such as the MSF's Experienced Rider Course (ERC), students have nowhere near this much time to master an exercise and the speeds used for emergency braking and swerving exercises is far lower. This is not unexpected because MSF classes typically have 24 or more students while the NWMCS maximum is six. The MSF class matches six to eight students per instructor. The NWMCS student/instructor ratio is three students per instructor. Professional motor officer training programs like the Phoenix police department have a ratio of one instructor per two students.

Another contrast is time. An ERC class from the Motorcycle Safety Foundation is just eight hours, with only 40-50% of that being actual riding. NWMCS's class is 42 hours with 40 of that being on the range and 2 hours for orientation. Even though the ERC is promoted as being for experienced riders, you often find entry level riders in the group who have a limited ability to control the motorcycle. NWMCS is geared to experienced riders with a higher level of proficiency. The skill level in the class I attended was quite high. Two of the students had 25+ years' riding experience and more than ten years as MSF instructors.

At the other end of the scale, motor officer training schools are typically 80 hours,
although their class includes things like traffic stop procedures and high speed pursuit techniques that typical riders would not need to know. Also, police officers in motorcycle training are occasionally newbies, so they learn the best techniques right from the start and often make the best students.

**Primary Course Exercises: Friction Zone**

After brief administrative details, housekeeping and rules for the class, we begin by learning how to correctly raise a downed motorcycle. Moving into the course exercises, Melroy takes a building-block approach. Early exercises build skills that are used in later exercises and are finally linked together. The first riding exercise has instructors Melroy and Curt Erickson placing a 2x4 board about five feet long perpendicular to the bike. The goal is to increase the throttle and slowly let out the clutch just enough for the bike to raise up on the suspension, without mounting the 2x4, hold for three seconds using the gray zone (clutch friction point) and then release. The second stage is to bring the rear wheel against the board and repeat. This must be done in a controlled manner to keep from moving the 2x4 or climbing over it. “Figuring out the grey area or friction zone is key. It is necessary for nearly all of the slow speed exercises,” explains Erickson. “I’ve been training people for years and this exercise with the 2x4 is the fastest way for students to learn precisely where the grey zone is on the bike they are riding.”

**Parking & Inline Pullouts**

Coming out of a single-file column of follow-the-leader, the instructor pulls his bike up facing a curb about five feet away. He points to the bike behind him to park alongside, allowing six inches between the crash bars on the bike to his left. Pull-outs begin when the lead bike pulls forward far enough to clear the cycle next to him and then turn and ride in front of the lined-up bikes. As the exercise is repeated, the distance to the curb gets shorter and shorter, requiring a very tight turn. It also requires the cycle next to the one turning to turn the handlebar in the direction of the turn and slightly lean the motorcycle in the same direction to give the rider next to you room to clear your bike. The exercise is repeated in both directions, while the distance between the curb and our front wheels is continually reduced until we’re doing the exercise with just three feet between us and the curb.

**Follow-The-Leader**

This exercise is pretty straightforward, with bikes proceeding in a column, following the instructor, as various maneuvers are performed. It reminded me of the baby quail in my backyard, following their mother down steps, across rocks, through and under fences. However, it has important benefits. First, students become more comfortable riding in traffic, especially in tighter spots with limited space to maneuver. Second, it forces improvements in head and eye placement as you are forced to focus on riders one or two ahead of you in the line. That position is almost precisely where you should be looking to provide the right lead time to properly execute the various maneuvers. Third, students often find themselves easily executing maneuvers they had difficulty with on the cone course, because they’re not overthinking—just doing. As students become more comfortable, instructors tighten the formations and ride through places with even fewer options for maneuvering; simulating what it would be like to effectively move through traffic.

**Open Figure 8 / Closed Figure 8**

As it sounds, two tight 360° circles are linked. The first one is without cones, but the next is done inside cones set at an 18” diameter. Doing this exercise requires successfully leaning the bike over and looking where you want to go. Proper eye and head position are key. On the third day,

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*A RADAR gun is used to ensure students come through the cone gate at 40 mph before beginning to brake.*
the instructors move the cones in a foot all the way around. Students do not notice.

**Dogleg**

The dogleg consists of a set of cones set up in such a way that to properly execute the exercise, you need to ride between the line of cones, turn the bike sharply to the right and almost immediately push it to the left to go out the other side. This is a slow, upright exercise with no room to lean.

**Inline Cone Weave / Circular Cone Weave**

Eight cones are placed along a driveway area twenty feet wide by 88' long. The cones are 11' apart. We begin going through slowly and upright, learning to quickly transition an upright motorcycle from side to side. During the final test, the goal will be to ride through the cones as quickly as possible without knocking them down. The key is to look two cones ahead. The Circular Cone Weave exercise is created by placing seven tall cones equally around a 24' diameter. It has the same goal as the inline exercise but is much more difficult.

By the third day of the class, I'd mastered the Circular Cone Weave in a counterclockwise direction but found going clockwise very difficult. I could not consistently complete the exercise without stabbing a foot down once or twice. I asked Melroy about this and he explained, "Everyone has a preferred side. Things tend to be most difficult in the direction of your preferred hand. Since you are right handed, your brain is always protecting your right side. Your brain does not want your body leaning the bike down as far. It doesn't care quite as much about your left hand, so it will let you go down further on that side and the turns are easier."

Multiple bikes enter the Closed Figure 8 exercise as confidence and skills increase.

**Keyhole**

The keyhole is a set of cones that looks like it sounds—an entry lane into a tight circle. Students ride in, go around the circle to the right or left, then ride out. By the third day it is not uncommon for a student to follow another student into the keyhole, confident they'll not hit each other and will both be able to get out without hitting cones. If you'd told any student at the beginning of the class that he/she would ride around inside the keyhole with another bike, they'd have never believed you.

**The Eliminator**

This exercise proved to be appropriately named and was difficult for me early on. It also illustrates the value of a low instructor-student ratio and lots of individual attention. Coming out of a break, Melroy rode over to me and said he'd observed my trouble with The Eliminator. He was right. Most times I either knocked down cones or rode out of the exercise near the end because I found it impossible to make the last turn. "Do you want me to show you how to do it?" he asked. "It's not any lack of skill on your part, it's just knowing how to set up for it correctly. You are setting up way late." In less than 10 minutes I went from being convinced that this was one exercise I would never master to one in which I rode through repeatedly without a problem. Going from the belief "I will never be able to do that" to "Oh, that's not so hard" is one experienced many times by all of the students in the class.

**Sickle**

For the Sickle, the front tire is brought to a stop against two tall cones. To begin the exercise, you look left, put your feet on the pegs, let the bike begin to drop to the left and almost as soon as it begins to move, you ride forward a few feet and immediately turn back to the right, making sure your rear crash bars do not knock over the large cones. This properly sets you up for a tight sweep out of the cones.

**WSP (30' Circle)**

This exercise gets its initials from the Washington State Patrol (WSP), although it is sometimes called the KC Sickle as in Kansas City Sickle. It requires two circles to be made inside a cone of circles, and you must cross between two cones in the middle. Hearing this exercise explained and then watching it demonstrated did little to make any of us believe it would be possible. Yet, by the end of the day, we'd all done the exercise several times without a problem.

**Mastery**

All that was left for us was to begin stringing the exercises together for the final test. We would have to complete the
full obstacle course in less than 3 minutes and 40 seconds to pass, with 5 seconds added for putting a foot down, 3 seconds for knocking over a small cone and 5 seconds for a large one, 25 seconds for a blown pattern, and dropping the bike is considered a loss of run.

**How We Did**

I had to leave to catch a flight before the final event, but Melroy sent me the following email: “After the timed tests, we took a break, everyone rested, relaxed and then we played follow the leader. We played the parking slip game and everyone was right on the money. Michael was fourth in line, and so when I was coming out, he was going in, leaning in the opposite direction and our front tires passed within inches of each other and he was rock steady. We rode on the sidewalk around the Head-Start facility, making U turns in about 16' with fencings on one side and planters on the other, then looped back on the line of riders. We rode between the school buses with only 4' to spare between handlebar tips. But what was really impressive, we found a loading dock (sloping down below ground level), with 5'-high walls on each side so we were boxed in, 18' or less across. With the crash bars, we were within 6' of having sufficient room to make a U turn. I grazed the wall on the right with my crash bars (as far to the margin as possible on the beginning of right turns) then all made a U-turn, and all turned and followed me out...amazing. On the proficiency course we had five riders in the figure 8. It took a bit of fumbling to get going, but once everyone stabilized, we looked like a seasoned drill team. Likewise, we had five in the WSP...occasionally someone would get out of shape, exit, come around, time their re-entry and rejoin. We even ended up with all of us in the circular cone weave at once, five bikes, seven cones and everyone stable. It was a hoot!”

**Summary**

The Ride Like a Cop course from NWMCs, while four days instead of eight, is very close to the experience in the classes taken by motor officers. I found the exercises, cone placement and final test nearly identical to that conducted by the Phoenix Police Department. Like the police classes (which have a pass rate of 40-60%), not everyone gets through this class, either. Melroy summarizes how the class did: “The results were pretty much as expected. One student made all the benchmarks. Another, due to a fall, was a bit gun shy and not comfortable with the speed necessary for the braking and counter steering bench marks. Another surprised us by hitting 40 mph on the braking, but was unable to calm down enough to make the escape without either a foot or a cone down. Everyone completed the look-lock-lean (the two consecutive tight figure-eights in parking slips) and all completed the proficiency course within [the allotted] time. This was a really good class.”

I spoke with a student the week following the class. Gary Veatch told me that riding on the street after the class, his motorcycle stopped being demanding and unpredictable and now does what he wants it to do. “I don’t have to fuss with the bike,” Veatch tells me. “I am now able to focus on where I’m going and what is going on around me. I have knowledge and experience of the bike’s dynamics and it has noticeably improved my bike-handling skills. I better understand what the bike can and cannot do. The class gave a big boost to my confidence and bike-handling ability.”

Should you go? NWMC offers the Ride Like a Cop course in Seattle, Washington and Portland, Oregon. The cost in 2009 is $1095 and includes use of the school’s police motorcycles and all gas. You can save $300 by riding your own bike, but given the treatment of the bikes, I highly recommend you use the school’s bikes. The class is open to experienced civilian riders and law enforcement professionals. City and county governments not large enough for their own facilities use the NWMCs to train their officers. I highly recommend the class if you are an experienced rider who is seeking to take your skills to the next level.

**About the author:**

Steve Larsen has been contributing to MCN since 2002. Larsen has participated in Phoenix Police Motor Officer training, Arizona Highway Patrol motor officer training, Keith Code's Superbike schools (among others) and is a member of the Arizona Precision Motorcycle Drill Team. He maintains a comprehensive listing of motorcycle training schools at HYPERLINK http://stevelarsen.net/blog/page_id_44 http://stevelarsen.net/blog/page_id_44. His personal philosophy is, “Never stop learning! New riding skills can be learned and old ones refreshed at every training class. Enroll somewhere today.”

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33