Who decides to become a motorcycle police officer? What skills are required? How are they taught and tested? To find out, I attended the Arizona Highway Patrol's motor officer training school. Phase I is a seven-day track experience at Phoenix International Raceway (PIR). Phase II consists of four days of structured street riding and hot-pursuit tests, and Phase III is four weeks on the job. Sergeant Larry Kenyon is the lead instructor, assisted by seven experienced motorcycle officers/instructors. Training begins at 6 a.m. on Thursday, not in a classroom, but at the edge of a vast expanse of asphalt parking lot at PIR in the shadow of the grandstand.

As the sun throws slits of light onto the blacktop, traffic cones outlining various exercises glow like bright-orange light bulbs. Instructors lead prospective motor officers to a row of Kawasaki KZ1000 police training motorcycles. These road-weary workhorses retired from active use are missing fairings, saddlebags, radios, lights and sirens.

All prospective Arizona Department of Public Safety (DPS) motor officers have been Highway Patrol officers for at least two years, have a clean record and a referral from their departments. “We want someone with a strong desire to ride a motorcycle and be part of an elite squad. We like to see prior motorcycle-riding experience. Good dirt riders seem to do best in the class,” Kenyon explains.
PHASE I — THE TRACK

Instructor Troy Titzer explains the controls and the idiosyncrasies of these scratch-n-dent specials. Although 20-year-old technology, KZ1000s have good cornering clearance and a short wheelbase allowing excellent maneuverability. "Kawasaki's ending production of this bike after 2005 has forced us to change," Kenyon explains. "ABS is a mandatory requirement for all new police bikes and it will save officers' lives."

Early exercises require successfully mastering the "gray zone." The gray zone involves precise throttle, brake and clutch inputs combined with turning the handlebars and leaning the bike. In these first few days most exercises start with students crashing or riding out of the cones. "Why the low-speed maneuvers?" I ask Kenyon. "Low speed is where you learn to control and master the motorcycle. Less skill is required to ride fast and speed often masks poor technique. Placing students in tight spaces forces them to learn the right way to do things. There are not multiple ways to get through these exercises; there is only one."

WASH OUTS

Picking his bike up for the umpteenth time, one student injures an ankle. He's out. Day two passes without incident but day three results in another withdrawal from the class. "Sergeant, I thought about it and it isn't for me. I'm not getting it. If I keep going, I'll get hurt," he tells Kenyon. These will not be the only two to wash out in Phase I. Instructor Titzer explains, "Not everyone is cut out for this, but if a student is unable to deal with either the physical or mental requirements, we get them out right away to avoid endangering themselves or other students."

Each exercise develops skills used in the next exercise. Difficult and stress-inducing exercises are followed by those involving competition and fun, such as a relay race or dirt ride in the sand hills surrounding PIR. The pace is fast and intense, with no time to sit around, rest or talk.

TOUGH CRITERIA

Becoming a motor officer requires demonstrating competency in three areas: mastery of the motorcycle, controlled aggression and good judgment. Early on students are pushed hard to master their motorcycles. In the process, two more students are excused from the class. One released student, although unhappy, accepts the decision. Another is upset. Kenyon says, "He thought he was doing fine and wasn't, which is a good sign we made the right decision to let him go."

As the days and weeks progress, a fierce dedication to turning out competent motor officers emerges from each instructor. They throw themselves into helping and coaching every student. Encouraging and cajoling, mixing humor and feigning exasperation, they constantly work to get maximum effort from every trainee.

CONTROLLED AGGRESSION

Midway through the second week students are introduced to accelerated U-turns. Two cones are set 200 feet apart. On either side of each cone is a line of four cones. Four students follow an instructor as he rounds one cone and then, using maximum acceleration, heads toward the cone at the other end. Applying maximum braking, the instructor does a 180-degree turn around the center cone, and accelerates again toward the cone at the other end. Back and forth, instructors gradually pull ahead of the students. Before four laps are com-
completed; instructors are riding up the back of the last student rider.

Instructor Titzer tells me, "Aggression is part of this job. When stopped at the side of the road and someone comes by me at 85 mph, how much faster do you think I need to go to catch them? Once they decide to pull over, how fast must I stop?"

"Accelerated U-turns expose the aggressiveness of the students to us," instructor John Allison tells me. "It's easy to spot who's 'driving Miss Daisy.' They're not accelerating hard enough, they upshift too soon, brake too soon and don't get aggressive in the corners. But ride too hard and you knock down cones at best and crash at the worst."

PROFICIENCY AND QUALIFICATION TESTING

The last day of Phase I training consists of a short practice and then the test—a half-mile course interrupted by the various exercises the students have been practicing. Timing begins: a) do a 140-degree pullout; b) ride through the four-quadrant intersection; c) aggressively accelerate across the parking lot, then quickly decelerate into two sets of cone weaves; d) execute the brake and escape; e) more cone weaves down the straight to the other end of the course for more exercises, including a complex cone setup known as the In and Out House. A high-speed section follows with a long, sweeping turn and finishes in a snowman of three circles, 19, 18 and 17 feet respectively. Timing ends when a rider exits the final circle.

Nothing is driven home harder than proficient hard braking.

Student Officer Sgt. Paul Ruch pushes the limits during his timed qualification run.

Students receive instructions for final qualification testing.

Exercises on full-dress police bikes feel very different from the ones on the trainers.
Students must complete the course in less than 6½ minutes. Five seconds are added for every tipped cone or foot down. No more than five faults are allowed before a run is scratched. Dropping the bike or riding out of an exercise disqualifies a run. Students are allowed six runs. All eight remaining students pass.

PHASE II — STREET TRAINING

On Monday full-dress police bikes are issued to all students. As new prospective members of the squad, students receive hand-me-down KZ1000s from more experienced officers. Three hours spent cleaning and detailing is followed by showers, lunch and a change into uniforms. Then instructors Tom Simon and Mitch Lanoue lecture on street riding.

Simon explains that a police motorcycle is a very busy place. A mass of details require constant attention. Skills learned the previous week must now become automatic. With dispatcher instructions, watching for violators and avoiding hazards, motor officers have no time to think about correct throttle application, clutching or braking.

The lecture focuses on safety and riding techniques with several unique twists. Bulletproof vests make good body armor. Helmets are cooler than going bareheaded, even in Phoenix heat. Lane selection, surface appraisal and how and why officers ride side by side is explained, including procedures for turning, passing, lane splitting and reacting to hazards.

The afternoon consists of riding last week’s cone exercises, but on full-dress bikes, with a fairing blocking your view and saddlebags sideswiping cones. Over the next few days, students ride the streets in pods consisting of two students in front with an instructor following, observing and coaching. Trainees are cautioned to ride expecting the unexpected to happen with the least possible warning.

Unlike civilian staggered-formation riding, most motor officers ride side by side. Often considered unsafe for civilians, police practice is for each motor officer to focus attention on one side of the road, providing four eyes scanning ahead vs. two. Officers have a system for communicating hazards or violators on their respective sides and predetermined actions based on what they see. Simon explains, "It's a very active way of riding and takes a great deal of attention and discipline. On my day off when riding my own bike, even when riding with another officer, we'll ride staggered. It's easier and safer. Riding deuces wears you out."

On Thursday it's into the mountains to Tortilla Flat. The road to this popular tourist stop includes 35 miles of twisties, where students ride in pairs with an instructor following, observing and critiquing corner entry speeds and lines through the curves. From Tortilla Flat, it's back down the mountain to Florence Junction, then east to Globe, Arizona. Once darkness has arrived, students ride down the mountain curves, learning the limitations of the Kawasaki’s low-beam headlights.

HOT PURSUIT

Friday at Firebird Raceway students practice live pursuit as their final act of qualifying and moving on to Phase III. Instructor Mitch Lanoue drives a white unmarked car attempting to evade and/or outrun motor officers around a ¼-mile course. Students take turns chasing the “suspect,” two instructors trailing, watching to ensure no cones are knocked down and proper procedures are followed. All eight students pass.
PHASE III — FIELD TRAINING

After passing the first two phases of training, students are well on their way to becoming full motor officers but they aren't finished. "We teach them how to ride, first at the track, then on the street, but that doesn't mean they can do the job," explains Kenyon. "The third phase of the training, done in the field, teaches them how to be motor officers."

Those reaching this point are assigned a Field Motor Training Officer (FMTO). They ride together for four weeks. The first week is riding side by side, a minimum of 1,000 miles with focus on saddle time, no enforcement. Week two moves to lane splitting, riding sidewalks, crossing overpasses and reverse lane splitting—riding into oncoming traffic—only when traffic is stopped, of course.

Enforcement begins in week three, with traffic stops, radar work, looking for vehicles and responding to dispatches. Week four is a five-day final exam. Trainees do everything on their own with the FMTO observing. At the end of the week, the FMTO, in consultation with Sgt. Kenyon, makes the decision whether the officer graduates or goes back to cars. "Do trainees ever fail this far along?" I ask Kenyon. "Not frequently, but it does happen. It happened twice last year," he says. "Motors must think differently, see traffic differently, react differently. Grasping this is not something everyone can do."

Clearly it takes a strong desire, persistence and commitment to complete motor-officer training. What do these instructors want you to know? "Know how to control your motorcycles at all times. It's not about how fast, but how proficient and safely you ride." So the next time you see a highway patrol motor officer (preferably not with lights flashing in your rearview mirror), watch the officer's technique and use it as a reminder to take the next step in improving your own riding skills.