MANY EXPERIENCED RIDERS want to improve their skill level and confidence, even if they never plan to compete against anyone other than themselves. For this type of rider, having a world-class motorcycle coach carefully review one’s current riding skills and then design a set of exercises to move you up to the next level is a real treat.

Gary LaPlante is just such a coach. I met him on a tour through the Arizona Mountains. It was ideal: Long hours in the saddle with a half-dozen highly skilled riders, followed by great meals and riding stories.

It was over too soon. Besides learning more about riding, what I got from that trip was that I really wanted more training from Gary LaPlante, six-time Arizona State Trials Champion and four-time motorcycle world speed record holder. Gary has “a little motorcycle ranch” in Southern California, and I went out to see him there.

Structured Versus Custom Training

Gary LaPlante’s 300-acre Moto-Ventures Riding Ranch near Temecula, CA, has an approach that is the opposite of something like Keith Code’s Superbike School (see “Two Days and 5000 Corners,” MCN, September ‘02). Keith Code’s training provides individualized attention within a tightly structured curriculum. Classroom lecture is followed by time on the track to work on specific exercises emphasized in that particular classroom session. This approach works when it’s what you want. Participants “graduate” with an almost breathless new sense of control and confidence. However, little time is spent learning an individual rider’s competencies, and all the students do the same exercises together. You are expected to accurately assess your own abilities and keep up with the lessons.

MotoVentures is far at the other end of the spectrum. While LaPlante teaches a core set of exercises to all riders, instruction is adapted to each individual’s experience, skill level, interests and learning style. There is nothing remotely “cookie-cutter” about this riding ranch. Think of LaPlante as a motorcycle riding coach, with MotoVentures offering a customized riding experience for every participant. You get a full day of riding and a full day of instruction, designed around your individual capabilities and riding goals.

Accepting Facts

“I always begin with a discussion about how motorcycles work,” LaPlante begins. “It’s a very short discussion with some students, but I need real beginners to understand certain fundamentals about balance, acceleration, turning and braking. Everybody needs to accept the fact that practicing and perfecting key skills like leaning, sliding and front and rear braking will improve control, confidence, safety, and take your riding skills to the next level, whether on the street or in the dirt.”

As a rider with 30 years experience, I was raring to get out in the dirt and learn new tricks, but, it turns out, even I had at least one fact to accept: “Speed, while it is a stabilizer, is also a crutch or compensator for many people with underdeveloped skills or bad technique.” LaPlante gave a quick demonstration on a trials bike to emphasize his point. With jaw-dropping control and seeming effortlessness, he rode up onto a platform, walked the bike around and back down, rode it over stepstools, a picnic table and even up a tree—feet on the pegs at all times—all at a slower pace than I walk going uphill.

Mental Traction

We started off in the usual way. We suited up completely (full body armor, boots, gloves, full-face helmet), all the while listening and responding to LaPlante talking about the mental game of riding. “Good visual habits are an important part of safe, successful riding. You have to read the terrain and select a line to follow through it. Get good at spotting things like traction zones and no-traction zones, off-cambers, kickers, ruts, rocks, etc. Don’t let anything sneak up on you. Scan constantly way ahead as well as just in front for inch-perfect tire placement. Good riders do this on the fly as they approach, while new riders would be better off stopping before the hazard and making a plan before proceeding. This is where many mistakes are first made—failure to ID terrain and respond appropriately.”

“Master terrain reading and you’ll never be surprised or tripped-up because you failed to see something. Once you’ve read the terrain, you should pick a path through it (line selection) and stay on it. Pick the smoothest, highest-traction, safest route. Don’t sit down and don’t let the bike steer you off the line.”
Body Position and Weight Shifting

That last comment really hit home. Sitting on the bike (in the proper position, of course) seemed to me like the best place to exert maximum control. At Keith Code’s Superbike School, I learned a lot about getting in the right position. Standing up on a dirt bike’s pegs was something I typically did when things were going well and the terrain didn’t challenge me. Now, here was Gary saying that when the going gets tough, the tough get off their butts and up on to the pegs.

In the body-positioning lesson, instructors settled riders on their bikes in a stationary position. With instructors holding the bikes upright, we were taught the ideal seated and standing poses. We were each asked to take a mental picture of these positions, committing them to memory. Throughout the day, we were reminded to reflect back on these positions.

We learned two basic positions, whether standing or sitting on the bike: One is the “attack position” and the other is the “energy-conserving position.” In the attack position, we leaned forward on the bike, into the wind, against acceleration, and made the front tire stick to the ground.

Gary emphasizes that body weight is a big part of overall bike/rider total weight and, as such, shifting weight at the right time, or placing weight differently on the bike, has a dramatic effect on handling. When you watch good riders closely, you’ll see that they’re constantly moving around to help their bikes. When turning at slow-to-moderate speeds, on loose terrain or hard packed dirt, riders must counterbalance to keep the bike balanced.

Legs and Feet

LaPlante also teaches that active legs are the key to achieving greater results from dirt bike riding. Contrary to what one might suspect, standing up on the footpegs actually lowers your overall center of gravity. We tend to think that when we’re standing, our center of gravity is higher because our heads are higher, but it doesn’t work that way. With all your weight on the footpegs, your center of gravity is down there on the pegs, well below seat height.

Our legs contain the biggest muscles in our bodies and are under utilized by most riders. When standing, riders can use their legs to spring, absorb, shift, counterbalance, transfer weight to either wheel quickly or change lines. While street bike riders “glue” their knees to the tank, good dirt riders will ride a little bowlegged to allow the bike to easily move back and forth between their legs. One of the key lessons is that we can steer a bike with our legs and feet without working our arms. Gary suggests using foot-peg pressure to lean the bike for turning while standing (at speed over soft or rough terrain), without pressurizing the upper body. “You want to keep it free to work the controls—throttle, front brake and clutch. Keeping feet on the pegs uses less energy, improves bike handling, and makes the rider less open to foot injuries.”

Meanwhile, the smaller and comparatively weaker muscles of the hands and fingers should be kept loose and flexible. LaPlante encouraged us to use only two fingers on the clutch and front brake while riding so that two fingers and a thumb of each hand are constantly gripping the handlebars. This reduces the possibility of a bump jolting the rider’s hands off the handlebars.

Lessons on Turning

LaPlante’s lessons on turning include three methods for turning the bike: 1) Turning the handlebars; 2) leaning; and 3) sliding under brake or power. Using the handlebars is what we learned on our tricycles as children. “It’s hard to unlearn but the more you use the other two, the better you ride.” All experienced riders spend the majority of their time leaning into their turns and greater experience usually means a greater lean angle. Turning is also the most common way to cause a wipeout, so LaPlante dedicates a lot of time to practicing turning skills.

Everyone starts by learning a seated turn to get the feel of the attack position. This teaches the sensation of a tire really gripping the surface. At the school, beginning riders learn it one way while experienced riders practice really pushing the front tire (referred to as understeering in auto racing) for maximum corner carving.

The standing turn teaches counterbalancing. In this exercise we started in first gear, leaned the bike, and then shifted our hips and torso off-center in the opposite direction of the bike lean to maintain balance. Gary cautions against getting confused by countersteering and counter-balancing arguments. According to Gary, “Counter-steering doesn’t matter much in the dirt. It really doesn’t apply until you are going really fast. The secret is proper counter-balancing.”

Twisting is also not counterbalancing. When practicing our standing turns, our instructors had to constantly push us to flex enough to completely shift our hips over the bikes. Regardless of the rider’s level of ability, MotoVentures had each of us practice the standing turn until we no longer felt the need to put a foot down, even at very slow speeds—speeds so slow, in fact, that we often had to pull the clutch in to prevent stalling. This was a tough lesson and one of the most confidence inspiring skills I’ve learned in all my years of riding.

The trick LaPlante teaches is to always pay attention to proper body alignment—we need to be sure to square up our shoulders to the handlebars, making them parallel. This ensures correct weight placement and body positioning. The goal is confident counterbalancing so that we can make tight turns anywhere without losing control.

Slide turns come in two flavors, the braking slide and the power slide. LaPlante’s tips include using the braking slide to enter a turn. To practice, we approached in second or third gear, pulled in the clutch, locked up the rear brake, leaned the bike in the direction we wanted to go, then counterbalanced with everything we had. No releasing the brake until stopped. Here’s the catch: Too much lean angle and we spin out or crashed to the low side. However, if we didn’t lean enough, we risked “high-siding,” one of the worst kinds of crashes. Thank God for full body armor!

Then we learned to use the power slide, to exit turns. We practiced by slowly approaching a flat turn, following a decreasing-radius arc. At the apex, we leaned over and rolled on the throttle quickly to get the rear tire spinning. The critical point here is to carefully coordinate throttle control
weight placement and lean angle. I'd always had fun doing this but I loved learning how to do it right and on a variety of terrain.

The last turning exercise we practiced (maybe there were more, but it's impossible to learn everything at once; you just have to go back) was the slalom. This was fast-and-furious leaning. Not that we were going all that fast, just that we shifted our body weight left and right faster than I ever did before. The exercise took us around five cones set about 12 paces apart. Body alignment and approach were both important, but the critical element here was the exact right speed—too slow and we were weaving; too fast and we hit cones.

**Braking Lessons**

If you're a street rider, precision-braking skills can save your life, and the place to hone them is in the dirt, not on the street. At MotoVentures, we mastered stopping on a dime. It sounds simple but, in fact, everyone instinctively releases the brake and straightens up far too early.

To correct that, LaPlante had us practice three exercises: 1) stop on the mark using only the rear brake; 2) stop on the mark using only the front brake; and 3) stop on the mark as fast as possible using both brakes. We gradually worked up to applying maximum braking effort, with the goal being to find the threshold between effective braking and lock-up. The next goal is to exceed the threshold and learn how to manage lock-ups.

You know you're a braking demon when you can confidently and consistently brake at or near the threshold of braking in a variety of terrain without crashing. For me, learning good front brake control really helped me riding down steep hills, an area I'd always been a tad uneasy about. These exercises exposed the truth that the rear brake is fairly ineffective for stopping, but great for turning (as well as stopping wheelies from going too far). The front brake is still the best brake, and dirt bike riding is a great place to tune your braking skills.

**Hills Thrills**

Throughout the day, LaPlante constantly amazed me with his knowledge and abilities, but never more so than during the lessons on hills. A basic rule of climbing (that also applies to going over obstacles) is to not try to get traction where there is none. We learned to approach by standing up and accelerating before the hill—using momentum instead of throttle and traction—to get through a no-traction zone. Then, as soon as the rear tire clears the no- traction area, get back on the gas.

Sitting down while hill climbing often results in a phenomenon Gary calls "butt-steer," which is when the rear tire hits a bump or rock and the jolt is transferred through the butt and torso to one's arms. An unintentional jerk on the handlebars throws the rider off the selected line of travel and the result is a grinding halt nowhere near the top. Standing up cures this problem, allowing the legs to soak, spring, and absorb bumps so that the bike stays on line, which is necessary to reach the summit of a difficult hill.

Mastering turning on hills is a great confidence-booster. Gary had the more experienced riders practice the hill-turning exercise on steeper hills. Novices worked on flatter terrain. There's no shortage of hill variety at the MotoVentures ranch, believe me. No matter what your skill level, LaPlante will take you to a hill that challenges your abilities.

When a hill climb attempt is unsuccessful, a rider must be able to efficiently turn around, get to the bottom safely, and try again. To master this, LaPlante used a lesson that involved climbing a hill and stopping as though stuck. Once stopped, the trick was to keep the front brake on and stall the engine by letting the clutch out. At that point, both the front brake and the clutch hold the bike in place. To turn the bike around, we dismounted to the left, leaned the bike against our hips, turned the bars left, pulled in the clutch and relaxed the front brake. This causes the bike to roll backward and around about 90° from the original direction of travel. From this point, it was possible to easily regain control and move forward, instead of back.