

KEITH CODE'S WHEELIE SCHOOL



by Steve Larsen

Code's "active" wheelie bar is designed to prevent flipovers as you learn.

WITHIN 45 MINUTES of the 8:00 a.m. class start, all five Wheelie School students had made it up and down the track, front wheel lifted. Although in most cases this "lift" was only inches from the asphalt, nevertheless, it was not what we were expecting. "I thought we'd spend half of the day doing classroom stuff and then practicing in the afternoon," said Dean Liu, a software engineer who admitted never having his front wheel in the air—at least not on purpose. Before 4:30 p.m. that day, Dean had traversed the 1000 feet between the cones with the Triumph Speed Triple's front wheel waving in the air.

What is it about wheelies? The five of us had all ridden for years, and were comfortable on bikes. We were safety conscious David Hough disciples, but felt something was missing. "It was the Lone Ranger doing a 'wheelie' with his horse Silver at the beginning and end of each show that got me," said San Franciscan Walter Bernhardt, the tallest one among us, at well over six feet. For me, it was seeing young sportbike riders, no doubt one of them wanting to date my daughter, doing wheelies on the street. I have been loftily unimpressed for years, of course, and of the firm belief that this behavior was not only immature, but dangerous. Yet, at another level, I wanted the satisfaction of knowing I could do it, too.

This article will not cover the moral aspects of whether doing wheelies is a good idea or not. Instead, it focuses on how being able to wheelie a motorcycle, and the process for learning it, provides a rider with greater control and confidence. Simon Williams,

who attended the Wheelie School last year, said in an online article about his experience, "Wheelies are like sex—they have their time and place. The main street on a Saturday afternoon may not be the best time or place for either, but on those deserted country backroads, well, you get the idea." Simon really nailed it for me when he added, "...like most men, as I get older I want to be able to keep it up longer."

And so it was that five strangers, Dean Liu, Jim Ackerman, Walter Bernhardt, Rene Brunet and I, Steve Larsen, joined instructors Jason Paden and AJ Krause of Keith Code's Wheelie School on a parking lot in the middle of a California Fairground to wrestle with our fears of having our front wheel come up off the ground. Is it possible to learn this skill in one day? Is it safe? Will it be fun?

At \$495 for a day's instruction, it's not cheap. School manager Whitney Fair says student ages range from 22 to 70, but the average is about 40 years old. "Not everyone can afford the time, the travel and the expense. The guys and girls we get aren't the ones you see risking their expensive plastic out on the street. I don't think most of our students even try a wheelie on the street once they leave the school; they just want to know they can do it, and do it successfully." In our small group, it seemed we all just wanted to learn to wheelie without getting hurt.

Besides excellent instructors, what most makes the class work is Keith Code's latest invention—the wheelie bike. Given Code's other motorcycle training inventions, such

as the No B.S. Bike, the Brake Rig and the Lean/Slide Machine (see Two Days and 5000 Corners: Learning to Ride—When You Already Know How, MCN, September '02), it came as no surprise that Code had created a special bike to aid one in learning how to do wheelies. The bike is a standard, totally stock Triumph Speed Triple with an anti-flip device, or "wheelie bar," attached to the bike's swingarm. The wheelie bar keeps the bike from flipping over backwards in two ways. First, as the front wheel gets higher, the wheelie bar turns a plastic disk containing a switch that cuts out one of the Triumph's coils. This eliminates the spark to one of the three sparkplugs and substantially reduces power. Second, the bar applies the rear brake as certain heights are met.

With the wheelie bar's added control, students can push the bike pretty hard without fear of flipping over. In theory, it should not be possible to flip the bike. "It's never flipped in any of my classes, and I've taught hundreds of students. And as far as I know, it's never flipped in any of the other classes either, and we've trained thousands of riders," said Jason.

The wheelie bar has five settings. We started on setting 1 and, throughout the day, progressed until we reached number 5. On setting 1, the rear brake and ignition cut off much earlier than they do at the higher settings. The larger numbers provide more freedom to get the front wheel higher in the air. As we got more confident and demonstrated to Jason and AJ that we were in control, they increased the setting. The goal of the course was to have us find the balance point, or "sweet spot," where we could keep the front wheel in the air while still maintaining control.

As we drank the provided coffee and munched on pastries or fruit, Jason spent about 30 or 40 minutes on what it takes to wheelie this particular bike:

- ✓ CLUTCH OUT.
- ✓ MOTORCYCLE POINTED STRAIGHT.
- ✓ SPEED AT 21 MPH (NO MORE, NO LESS).
- ✓ LEGS TIGHT TO THE TANK AND UPPER BODY LOOSE.
- ✓ ONCE THE FRONT WHEEL COMES UP, REDUCE THE THROTTLE TO SUSTAIN THE WHEELIE.
- ✓ DON'T "CHOP" THE THROTTLE OR LET OFF TOO FAST (WE SOON LEARNED WHY).
- ✓ ONCE UP, DON'T LEAN FORWARD TOWARD THE TANK, STAY BACK TO MAINTAIN THE GREATEST BALANCE.
- ✓ USE SUBTLE THROTTLE ADJUSTMENTS.



Instructor Jason Paden explains the fine points of wheelie control to his student—riding alternates with instruction.

According to Jason, his objective is to get us comfortable in a position that our minds tell us is totally wrong. In this way, the course closely resembles Code's other classes—keep it uncomplicated, cover the basics, then get on the bike and practice.

We suited up (full leathers are recommended and everyone here had padded up appropriately), and each began with the wheelie bar on setting 1. The course was simple: Just two sets of cones marked the beginning, two more marked the end point 1000 feet down the asphalt, and single turn-around cones were set about a hundred feet beyond the beginning and end points.

Each student spent seven minutes (five on most days, when the class is full) making passes up and down the course, with Jason and/or AJ providing instruction. And this is how the rest of the day progressed. We went in order with no pauses. Seven minutes for each student, then the next. What that meant for us on our day was seven minutes on with a 28-minute break to think about what we did right or wrong and prepare for our next turn on the bike. During the 28 minutes of waiting, one of the instructors was always available to talk us through any issues or questions. We also spent a good deal of time watching and critiquing the student riding the bike, and encouraged the better runs with whistles and applause. To keep the instructor/student ratio low, Jason said they never exceed eight students per instructor.

Food was brought in at noon, but we kept going. Those of us not riding ate while other students rode. Other amenities were good, with abundant water and lemonade. We were encouraged to drink frequently throughout the day. Salt and potassium pills also were provided, for any of us worried about dehydration.

Early in the day, Jason was looking to ensure that we were all capable of handling the bike and had the skills to proceed with

the day. He looked at how we all went about getting the wheel off the ground on the first setting. "Level 1 is pretty forgiving and guys can get away with a lot of bad habits which I quickly try to remedy. Most riders take about two sessions to calm down and start getting an idea of what it takes."

By noon we were all on to setting 2 and 3, with Jason coaching us on throttle management, stability on the motorcycle and proper approach speed. The key to getting it right was to be very stable on the motorcycle. This allows the rider to relax and do what needs to be done with the throttle. Also critical is getting the speed set at precisely 21 mph and bringing the front wheel up at a rate which is not startling. This leads to getting the best feel for the balance point. The most helpful coaching for me was to keep my visual attention out, using a reference point in the distance for orientation. This helped my balance and began to bring some consistency and predictability to my final results.

Jason has observed that students make the most progress when they stay relaxed on the bike, don't wear themselves out early in the day before seeing some success, and aren't too hard on themselves. "It also helps if they listen to my observations and try to do what I'm explaining."

Settings 4 and 5 come when Jason sees consistent progress. "If a rider is still yanking on the handlebars at level 3 in an attempt to get the wheel off the ground, I won't let them move up until they can do it with just the throttle and show good control." Like many aspects of riding a motorcycle with control and confidence, it ultimately comes down to highly precise throttle control. We learned that the hard way, by following our natural inclination to quickly reduce the throttle as the front wheel came up, resulting in the front wheel returning to the ground abruptly. This shocks your arms and causes a rapid slide into the gas tank. As a fellow student sang in a high voice as he got off the bike, "Gee, I sure know that I'm a boy."

As we approached 4:30 p.m., Jim Ackerman, a furniture executive from Denver, Colorado, who's been riding for over 30 years, and Dean Liu, our software engineer from the Bay Area, had made the most progress and were routinely riding the 1000 feet between the cones with the front wheel in the air. Walter, Rene and I all wheelied the bike at will, but weren't quite able to keep the front wheel in the air for the full distance between the cones. However, none of us felt like a failure. We'd all progressed a great deal and certainly understood the physics and feel of a wheelie. All of us had huge smiles as we climbed into our cars.

A few days after the class, I spoke with

Walter Bernhardt via e-mail and he told me that he feels that he'd have made faster progress if an instructor had been at each end of the course, rather than just the one. "It is a crime to make even one pass in vain—when talented help is there. One-on-one instruction is the greatest value here. If I'd had just about 30% more time, I think I could have gone from just 'getting it' to being really proficient."

Only you can answer if this class is for you. If you are a fairly proficient rider now, in control in nearly all situations and comfortable on a 120-hp sportbike, you will almost certainly learn to wheelie in this class. Is it safe? As they say on the On One Wheel website: "Is it safe? Don't be silly, we are talking about motorcycles in extreme situations, of course it isn't 'safe.'" However, the custom wheelie bike, combined with excellent instructors, substantially reduces the risks involved in learning this fun and addicting skill. 🍀

IF YOU GO

Who: The school is geared to riders at all levels, but experienced riders will make greater progress.

Where: Three locations currently: Arlington, Texas (between Dallas and Fort Worth), Irwindale Speedway (Southern California), and Solano County Fairgrounds (north of San Francisco).

Cost: \$495 for a one-day school (Damage deposit of \$500).

Refund Policy: Tuition payment locks your spot, if you cancel or reschedule 14 days or more before your scheduled date, full refund. Cancel 0 to 13 days before scheduled date(s) and you lose your entire school fee.

Time: One day class. Arrive at 8:00 a.m. sharp. Day ends around 5:00 p.m.

What to bring: Unlike other Code schools, gear is not available for rent. Full leathers are recommended. Aerostich suits are okay, or chaps with leather jacket. No jeans. Full-face helmet, Snell or DOT approved; over-ankle boots; full coverage gloves.

Bike: Jason tells me the school has found that the Triumph Speed Triple is ideal for this. It has a 120hp, second-generation three-cylinder engine, with exceptionally strong mid-range performance. The mid-range power means pulling the front wheel on the Speed Triple requires no use of the clutch.

Hints: Be prepared for a physical workout. Drive a car to the event, not your bike. You will be very tired when you finish, and will be glad to be in a car.

Contact: Whitney Fair at (323) 224-2739

For more information: Excellent FAQ and details at <http://www.ononewheel.com/>