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Police Motorcycle Tra
As a freelance motojournalist, Steve Larsen is always looking for unique stories. At a neighborhood block party he met two Phoenix motor officers. One thing led to another and before he knew it, he was enrolled in the three-week Phoenix Police Department's Motor Officer training, followed soon after by the Arizona Department of Public Safety (DPS) Highway Patrol Motor Officer training. His experience with the Phoenix police is chronicled in a threepart story in Motorcycle Consumer News (May, June and July Issues) and his Highway Patrol experience in the August 2005 issue of Rider Magazine. We sat down with Larsen and asked him to tell Wing World more about his experiences.

**Wing World:** Where was the training held and how long was it?

**Larsen:** The Phoenix police training lasts three weeks at the Phoenix Police Training Site, an extensive facility used for training officers on all police vehicles, then moves to the street. This 17-acre facility features a half-mile test track, an 80-by-1200 foot asphalt pad, a steep incline area and other dirt and hilly challenge areas. It's located between two cattle feed lots and the city's waste treatment facility and often smells like it.

The Arizona Highway Patrol uses the Phoenix International Raceway track and the parking lots that surround it for the first seven days of training. They then move to
street exercises and finally to the Firebird Raceway racetrack for pursuit training. It is three weeks of training followed by a four-week final exam of sorts.

W/W: Who attends this training?
Larsen: Well, typically not writers, but these agencies’ public affairs departments made an exception for me. All Arizona Department of Public Safety (DPS) prospective motor officers need to have been Highway Patrol officers for at least two years, have a clean record and a referral from his/her department. According to Sergeant Larry Kenyon who supervises the program, they want someone with a strong desire to ride a motorcycle and be part of an elite squad. For the Phoenix police department, those applying must first have been a police officer for at least three years, have a clean record and pass a written test. Each applicant then takes an oral interview and test. A subset of this group is invited to attend the training.

W/W: Do prospective motor officers have to be experienced motorcyclists?
Larsen: In the Phoenix police group, of six students, two had never ridden a motorcycle before. Three had some limited experience (mostly off road as kids) and one had nearly ten years of experience and owned his own motorcycle. As it turns out, prior riding experience could be good or bad. Experience wasn’t the best predictor of success in the class; it was more about having the right attitude, listening well and trying to do what the instructors tell you. On the DPS side, Sgt. Larry Kenyon likes to see some prior motorcycle riding experience and thinks that good dirt riders seem to do best in the class.

W/W: What sorts of bikes are used for training?
Larsen: Both groups trained on Kawasaki KZ1000 police motorcycles. They were not, however; the nice, shiny, well-equipped bikes you see on the street. No, trainees get police bikes retired from street use, after tens of thousands of miles of abuse. The fairing, saddlebags, sirens and lights are removed. And these bikes get beaten up even more in the class. The Phoenix guys finally put their mechanics through the same training the officers go through, so they could understand why the bikes returned to the garage each night so beaten up. Although 20-year old technology, KZ1000s have good clearance and a short wheel base allowing excellent maneuverability. All things change, though, and Kawasaki has ended production of this bike and they’re no longer available. From what I hear, the highway patrol will move to the BMW police bikes and the Phoenix police are still evaluating police models from BMW, Harley and Honda.
**W/W:** Did you ever take your Gold Wing to any of the trainings?

**Larsen:** I have a yellow GL1800 and I rode it to and from the track each day. But mostly I used a police trainer for the different exercises. On several occasions I tried some of the exercises with the Gold Wing and several of the instructors and students took the Wing for a spin. I rode the Gold Wing during all of the street exercises, except when one of the officers piloted the bike while I sat backwards on the rear seat taking pictures.

**W/W:** So, how did the Gold Wing perform in the class?

**Larsen:** As a member of the Arizona Precision Motorcycle Drill Team (www.azdrillteam.org) I've had some experience in managing a Gold Wing at slow speeds. However, many of the exercises are very, very tight and you can only get through them with a Kawasaki 1000 or a bike with a shorter wheelbase. Even the KZ1000's are not stock; they shave the stops to help make extra sharp turns. I think the most fun was chasing the officers around the test track.
with the Wing (and vice versa). The Gold Wing’s awesome torque put in a respectable performance coming out of corners and on the straight sections, but its lack of clearance in the corners proved difficult. (Ed note: see this month’s cover photo.)

W/W: Did the Gold Wing ever surprise you?

Larsen: Well, at one point we rode through the irrigation canals in Phoenix. Naturally, I needed to go along to take pictures. That meant I had to ride the Gold Wing. It was like taking a Gold Wing trail riding. I took it down spillways, through deep sand, up sharp banks and between obstacles so close together I’m still wondering how it got through. Due to my picture taking, I was usually the last to emerge from a particular location. Several times after powering out of a spot I’d find a group of police officers stopped, looking back, and waiting for me. Later I learned they’d been making bets on whether I’d be able to climb out or not.

W/W: What kinds of things are these officers being trained to do?

Larsen: A lot more than I’d originally thought. Riding as a police motor officer is very different from the commuting or pleasure riding most of us do. We focus on getting from point A to point B. A motor officer, on the other hand, is continually being directed by a dispatcher to respond to a variety of incidents, to direct traffic around a fire, investigate kids illegally riding motorcycles in the irrigation canals, robberies, domestic disturbances and fights. When the dispatcher isn’t assigning something, motor officers have a prioritized list of other activities, such as patrolling particular neighborhoods or performing radar checks where there is a history of traffic accidents, fatalities or speeders. Down-time on a shift is non-existent. It is mentally demanding and, of course, they do it all while riding a motorcycle safely in traffic.

W/W: Were their significant differences in the two classes?

Larsen: The two classes were alike and yet had major differences. The DPS Highway Patrol course spends only seven days on the track before having an elimination test and moving recruits to the street. The police department goes two full weeks at the track, then goes to the street. The DPS has several exercises that are run at much higher speeds than the police exercises, such as pursuit practice. The police have several low speed maneuvers that are far more demanding than anything the Highway Patrol requires.

In the end, the differences in the classes reflect preparing officers for what lies in store for them on the street, doing their jobs. And those jobs have some real differences.
What sorts of exercises make up the training?

Larsen: One simple exercise is the 360-degree circle. It begins with cones placed in an 18-foot diameter circle. Students enter the circle and ride the bike around the interior parameter. As the students progress, the cones are moved in to 17 feet and finally to 16 feet. Just when the single circle begins to feel comfortable in both directions, they move into a double circle, figure 8 exercise. The double circle combines two 360-degree circles with cones. The emphasis was on coordinating head and eye position, always looking where we wanted to go. During exercises, instructors call out critiques and encouragement. The exercises are in a “stair step process,” where everything builds from one step to the next. You can’t miss a step, and mastery of the early maneuvers makes the more difficult exercises more manageable.

Which exercise gave you difficulty?

Larsen: The most difficult one for me was the 180 degree J-Turn. I just scattered the cones the first few times I tried it. Since motor officers must be able to turn in extremely tight spaces, such as a single traffic lane or a median, and the average lane on a city street is between 12 feet and 14 feet wide, we did this exercise over and over. Cones are set up in the shape of “J” outlining a three-foot path with about 14 feet across the far edges of the cones. You begin stopped at the short side of the “J” then ride into the exercise and make a 180-degree turn and straighten out to avoid making a 360-degree turn and wiping out the cones. No other exercise provided more opportunities for instructors to reposition cones and students to pick up dropped bikes.

Okay, what’s the trick?

Larsen: As it turns out, the key to mastering this exercise is a teardrop maneuver. A teardrop is accomplished by first turning the motorcycle in the opposite direction of the way you wish to go. This changes the path of the rear wheel. Because the motorcycle is an articulated vehicle, hinged so to speak, this move allows maximum use of the available space by minimizing the trail over the rear wheel. As soon as you enter one side of the 180-degree U-turn, you stay to the very center and then slightly turn the bike in the opposite direction you want to go (the teardrop), before lowering your shoulder and bringing the bike around the other direction through the turn. One’s natural inclination is to begin on the far edge to give yourself the most room, but this won’t work.

Were there dropped bikes?

Larsen: Are you kidding? As it turned out,
we ended up dumping the bikes at least 20-30 times each day, so knowing how to do it without getting hurt was important. One of the very first exercises was a mandatory fall.

W/W: Is it difficult to drop the bike on purpose?
Larsen: Yes. It's actually harder to let a bike fall, when you know that is what it's going to do, than you might think. You're told to ride in a tight circle slower and slower until the bike topples. You keep both feet on the pegs or footboards, hands on handlebars, lean away from the direction of the fall, keep your elbows in, let the bike drop and roll away. Then you collect yourself, get back to the bike, turn off the ignition and right the bike. And, of course, if you're not falling on purpose, you feel embarrassed and look around to see how many people are watching you pick up the bike.

W/W: Any especially scary parts in the training?
Larsen: Near the end of the incline exercises there's a real attention getter. Each student rides to the very top of an incline. You then lower your front wheel over the edge of the blacktop and rest it on a dirt edge. You are now looking nearly straight down a twenty foot drop, covered with dirt, ruts and gravel at the bottom. You would be foolish to try to walk down it. With the bike poised in this position, the instructors explain you are to ride the bike down the backside of this hill. It sounds silly to think about it now, but lead instructor Dan Nochta told me he's had students make it all the way through the class and tell him, at the top of this hill, "Sergeant, I'm not sure I want to be a motor officer this bad." The record for pausing at the top before going down is close to 30 minutes. Unfortunately, this exercise was mandatory and after some agonizingly long pauses, every student in our group went down the hill without incident. This exercise and "The Slab" were the scariest in my book.

W/W: What's "The Slab"?
Larsen: This one took place after the track stuff was over and we were riding in the street. The Slab is an old fashioned loading dock near some railroad tracks. It's basically a large slab of concrete with a ramp on one end and a drop-off on the other, about 60 feet long and 20 feet wide, with a three-to-six-foot drop around three sides. It seems easy; just ride up the side with the ramp all the way to the top, u-turn on top of the slab, and ride back down. No putting your feet down and duck walking the bike, of course. Easy, right? Unlike the track (where a misjudgment in turning radius results in riding over some cones), here the result would be a nasty fall from the top of the slab to the ground. It is amazing how much smaller this area feels than the same distance at the
track. At the track, having to turn in 20 feet was no problem. In fact, most circles were set at 18 and 17 feet. Somehow it’s different on top of The Slab, and it’s very scary! Nocita told me he’s had people fall off because they get fixated on the edge and sure enough, over they go! It makes quite a mess of the fairing, to say the least.

**W/W:** How dangerous is a motor officer’s job?

**Larsen:** Motor officers have the highest fatality rate of any specialty detail within the police force, although patrol units have more accidents. This is why training is so important and so tough. In the Phoenix police class, 20 percent dropped out, were excused or failed the final track test. The DPS class started with twelve and just eight made it to graduation. While instructors do whatever they can to help students successfully make it through the course, if they do not feel someone is 100 percent qualified, they will insist on keeping them off the squad. Instructors told me they’d rather have a candidate hate them for years and have them alive than pass someone marginally and have them get themselves or someone else killed.

**W/W:** What sorts of things would you never find in civilian motorcycle training that they train motor officers to do?

**Larsen:** First of all, civilian motorcycle classes would never push anyone nearly this hard. This is more like military boot camp.

While some training techniques are the same, motor officers have other unique twists besides the intensity. For instance, officers are most vulnerable when getting on/off their bikes, so special mounting and dismounting techniques are taught. Phoenix police mount from the left, like most street riders. DPS motor officers, who mostly work on busy highways, mount from the right. All officers keep their gun hand free in the process.

You learn that bulletproof vests make good body armor and helmets keep you cooler than going bare-headed, so helmets are not often removed even in Arizona heat.

Police lane selection, surface appraisal and side-by-side riding practices are often different than civilian riding methodologies, too.

**W/W:** About motor officers riding side by side. Wouldn’t a staggered formation be more responsible?

**Larsen:** I thought the same thing at first. What I learned, however, is that motor officers are not riding side-by-side like you or I would. Officers are trained to focus their attention on one side of the road, providing four eyes scanning ahead versus two. They have a system for communicating hazards or violators on their respective sides and pre-determined actions based on what they see. It’s a very active way of riding and takes a great deal of attention and discipline and a good while to learn. One officer told me that when he rides on his day off he never rides in deuces, only staggered, even with another officer, because “riding deuces” wears you out.

**W/W:** What kinds of personal motorcycles do these officers ride? Any Gold Wing riders?

**Larsen:** Sergeant Larry Kenyon, lead instructor for the Highway Patrol officers rides a Gold Wing. And it’s a yellow one. The manager of the Phoenix police track facility rides a new black Gold Wing. Tom Simon, one of the DPS instructors rides a Valkyrie. Although I found a smattering of other riders within the instructor and student group, it was no surprise that most said they did not do a lot of riding when not on duty. After riding eight hours a day all week, going for a ride on your day off isn’t the first choice in fun activities.

**W/W:** You’ve written articles describing your experiences riding and training with Keith Code, Gary LaPlante, Lee Parks and other top riders and racers.
How do motor officers stack up against these professionals from a riding proficiency standpoint?

Larsen: I’m convinced that motor officers, as a group, are the best, most proficient riders on the road. Not to take anything away from track racers, but they have far less to worry about: everyone is going in the same direction, the pavement is free of debris and the other riders on the track, while not totally predictable, have a level of riding proficiency and awareness you can count on. Motor officers, like most of us who ride the streets on a regular basis, face inattentive drivers who can’t see us, road hazards and unpredictable weather. While riding the same streets we do, motor officers carry out their jobs – patrolling our streets, listening and responding to requests over their radios and reporting on accidents. And just think about the practice time they get! They’d better be good!

W/W: Does anything else compare with this training?

Larsen: I asked students this question, too. None was able to compare it to anything else. Instructor Jim Morrison said the combined physical and mental demands are unlike anything else he can imagine. Even with close screening of candidates, nearly 25 percent of the students wash out. The instructors have no way to predict who will make it through. The numbers for men and women are the same and it doesn’t seem to matter if you’re older or young. It’s a tough, tough course.

W/W: So, did you graduate?

Larsen: Had I run the final qualification course right then, its not likely I’d have made it. While I had the opportunity to use a police trainer or the Gold Wing to try and work on nearly all of the exercises, it was important that my activities on the track or when riding with the group did not take too much instructor time or attention away from officers competing for a job. As a result, I did not practice the exercises to the point where I could have passed all of them in a timed run.

Could I have qualified? Given the expertise and effectiveness of the instructors and time to practice all of the exercises, yes, I feel I could have mastered the course, and Nocha thought so too. However, even without going through the final test, I learned to do things I never knew were possible on a motorcycle. I feel much wiser and enriched by the opportunity to spend time with these professionals.

W/W: With all this training, what did you learn that’s most applicable to Gold Wing riders? Like how to get out of a ticket, for instance?

Larsen: (Laughs) Well, as it relates to avoiding tickets, I learned motor officers mostly go where the cars tend to be, so if you’re going to speed, don’t do it in traffic—go off by yourself somewhere.

On a more serious note, Gold Wing riders (or any civilian riders for that matter) should recognize the importance of training and practice. After these recruits complete this class, like all motor officers, they must qualify again every year. For DPS officers, re-qualification comes every six months. And re-qualification means passing the same intense and difficult final exam again. How many civilian riders could even pass the rinky-dink motorcycle proficiency test the DMV gives if it was required every year?

The final takeaway is attitude. As good as these officers are at riding, they’re always looking for ways to learn and get better at what they do. I asked Jim Morrison, a longtime police instructor what he’d want civilian riders to know. He told me, “Know how to control your motorcycles at all times. It’s not about how fast you can ride, but about how proficiently and safely you ride.”

So next time you see a highway patrol or local police motor officer, watch the officer’s technique, and let it serve as a reminder to take the next step in improving your own riding skills.