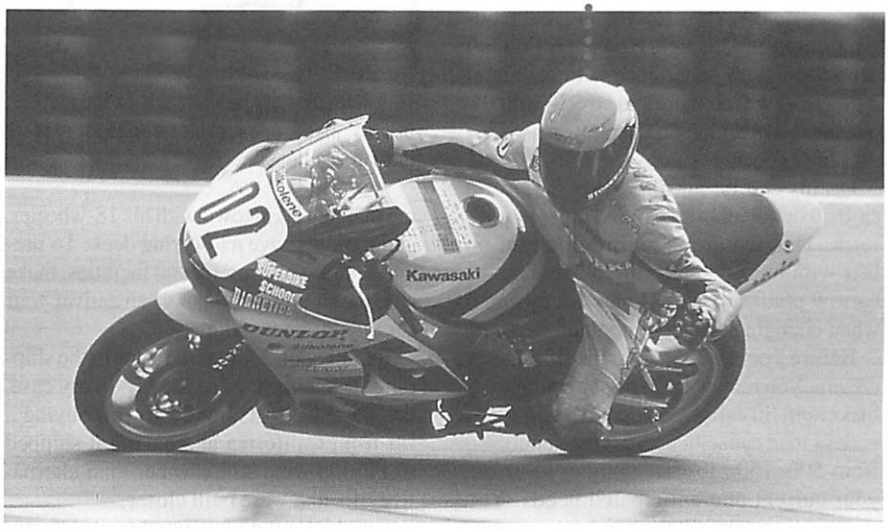
2 DAYS & 5000 CORNERS

Learning To Ride—When You Already Know How

by Steve Larsen



WHILE MOTORCYCLE RIDING schools are a great way for beginners to get their tires dirty, formal training is also a good way for experienced riders to eliminate bad habits and polish rusty skills. Not to mention, self-taught riders comprise one of the highest risk categories for fatal motorcycle accidents.

So, even seasoned riders may find that there's always something new to learn. However, though all serious riders can benefit from a refresher course or more advanced training, motorcycle riding schools can cost a pretty penny.

Economical Alternatives

Before shelling out the bucks for a costly riding course, consider a few inexpensive alternatives. For starters, locally-taught classes associated with the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (www.msf-usa.org) offer riders affordable refresher training.

One of the best values among these is the Experienced Rider Course (ERC). While the initial cost is around $50–$75, riders can often claim a discount (typically 10%) from their annual motorcycle insurance premium upon completion. Additionally, most motorcycle owners' groups offer a discount or a cash reimbursement for attending (see sidebar).

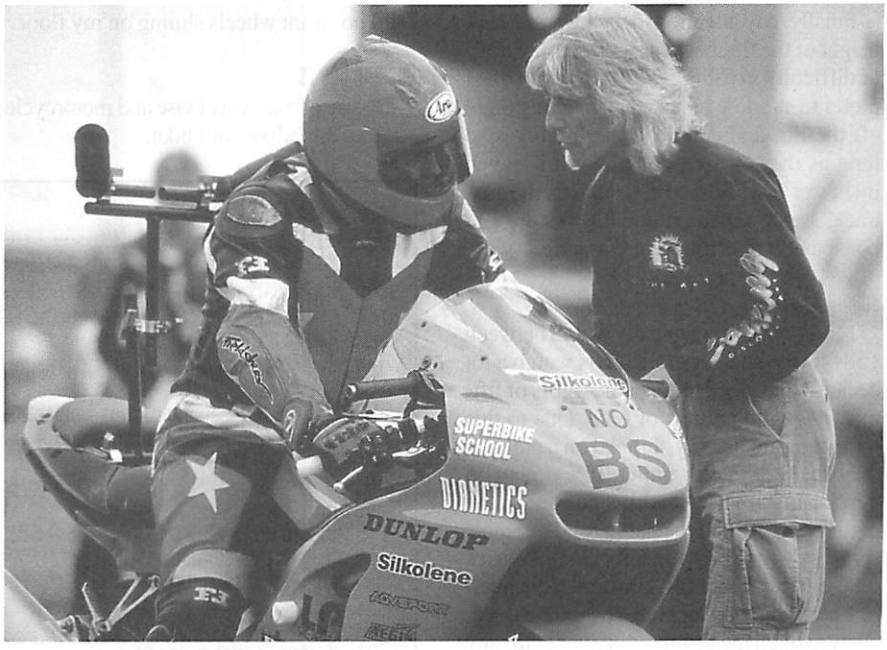
The course has an excellent curriculum and the instructors possess both a passion for and a deep understanding of motorcycle riding. The classroom session covers topics like managing risk, increasing visibility, optimizing lane position and the mental and physical aspects of safe riding. Out in the parking lot, students work through a series of relatively low-speed exercises, including managing traction, controlling rear-wheel skids, panic stops, cornering and swerving. While riders leave with a better understanding of the handling and behavior of their bikes, the key emphasis of the course is safety and knowing what to expect out of the bike.

The Learning Curve

But what do these courses offer to riders that just want to improve their skills? While experience can teach us many valuable lessons, there are many questions that may still remain in the back of a seasoned rider's mind: What is the optimum time to turn in to any corner? How can I fuel my need for speed while maintaining my personal safety? How can I keep the bike stable, even when pushing it hard? Exactly what are my bike's limits?

Practicing on the street has limited value—and it's dangerous. Track time is also good, but without coaching and solid advice, bad habits will just get worse. At this point the determined rider looks to other alternatives.

This is where companies like Reg Pridmore's CLASS Motorcycle Schools, Jason



Like most riding school owners, Code believes in a one-on-one, hands-on approach to teaching.Here, he instructs a student using the "No B.S." bike, designed to illustrate the effects, or lack thereof, of body steering inputs.

One of Keith's other specialty bikes, the "Lean Machine,"allows students to explore the limits of cornering traction without paying the usual price in bruises and broken body parts.

Pridmore's STAR Motorcycle School, Freddie Spencer's High Performance Riding School, and Keith Code's California Superbike School come into play. These and others are businesses willing to show you how to ride—for a few bucks.

As a recently "over 50" kind of guy, I've been riding on and off for the last 30 years, owning dirt bikes, street bikes and Harleys. Until recently, I've had no interest in sportbikes (how could you ride something in that position for more than 15 minutes?). I changed my tune after riding a Ducati 900 Monster in Italy on a Lotus Tours trip last year (MCN, December 2001), where I had several opportunities to switch off with guys riding more aggressive sportbikes. Now, I'll ride anything with a motor.

To fine tune my skills, I researched half a dozen riding schools before registering at Keith Code's California Superbike School.

On a Sunday afternoon in April, my flight arrived in Los Angeles, and I drove an hour and a half into the desert to Rosamond, California. Other than the Willow Springs Racing complex in one direction and Edwards Air Force Base in the other, I found Rosamond had little to offer. While it may be a great place to live (after all, it does have a small airport, a school district with five campuses and over 2000 students), you'd better really like dry and windy. It lacks a shopping mall and, although no concern of mine, several non-riding spouses and girlfriends found this a real drawback. Good restaurants and a place to get a decent cup of coffee were also difficult to locate.

However, the Devonshire Inn, where nearly all of the Keith Code students stay, is up to the task. It's exceptionally easy to find, and reasonably priced at about $100 for the two nights. It had few amenities, but most students had little interest in anything other than sleep after a day at the school.

Preliminary registration information, mailed to our homes, instructed us to arrive at the Streets of Willow Springs track for registration at 7:00 a.m. Although appearing to be relaxed and easy-going, the California Superbike School is a highly organized and detail-oriented group. The class is capped at 25 students, and our group was over 20.

We moved from registration to gear pickup, finding our bikes and onto the track with no problems. Part of the reason things work so well is that while everyone in the school's operation has his or her own set of responsibilities, they are also aware of the value of teamwork.

For example, Judy kept us (and Keith) on schedule and provided lunches and breakfasts every day. She also knows what everyone else is supposed to be doing. Flea checks out equipment and runs the video taping system. Will looks after and maintains the bikes, ensuring they are gassed up, tires inspected and inflation checked. It was comforting seeing him do full inspections on each bike at the beginning of each day, and periodic checks several times during the day. Finally, Brenda heads the track control team, which includes a host of corner workers and the timers, and our starter, who asked us every single time before we went on the track, what we were going to accomplish and which exercise we were working on.

After registration, Keith spent about 45 minutes delivering his welcome pep-talk. I was nervous because I had tried to read his book, *A Twist of the Wrist*, but spread it over too many weeks and couldn't remember a thing. It's a good thing there wasn't a quiz.

Keith relaxed me immediately by taking things down to fundamentals: "Motorcycles only do two things—they change direction and change speed. All the rider decides is where and how much. A rider's job is to stabilize the motorcycle. That's it. Period. For instance, in a corner, rolling on the

Riding School Cost Comparison

California Superbike School
2-Day Camp $1950
1-Day track school $395
Bike Rental Incl. with 2-Day school, or $200
Equip. Rental Incl. with 2-Day school, or $50
Misc.: Meals included in 2-Day school

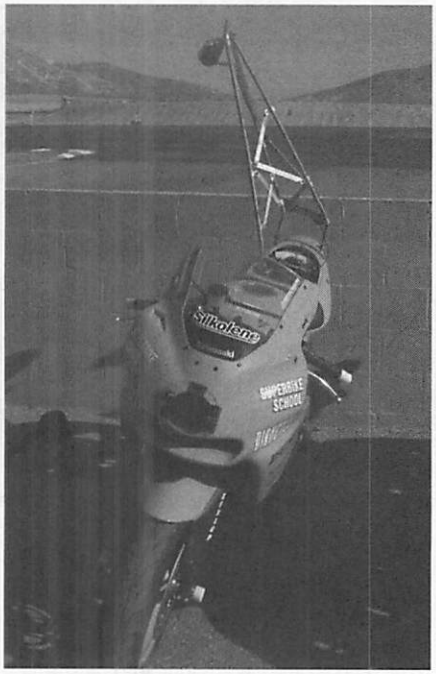
STAR Motorcycle School (Jason Pridmore)
2-Day Camp $695*
1-Day Track School $365
Bike Rental $350 for 1 day/ $650 for 2 days
Equipment Rental N/A—Bring full leathers or equivalent, gloves, boots, full- face helmet
Misc.: Bring a lunch

CLASS (Reg Pridmore)
2-Day Camp $2995**
1-Day track school $345–$360 per day
Bike Rental—Bring your own bike
Incl. with 2-day school
Equipment Rental Incl.
Misc.: Meals included

Freddie Spencer's Riding School
2-Day Camp $1995
(3-Day schools also available)
1-Day track school, N/A
Bike Rental Included
Equipment Rental $200
Misc.: Meals included

**Most tracks, some less.*

*** Executive Premium Program: Includes bike rental, two nights' accommodation° at first-class hotel, all transportation, evening dining, catered lunches and riding apparel.*



This eye-in-the-sky "camera bike" will leave no question about what you did right, and wrong. And you get to take the tapes home with you, either to show off to your friends, or to bury in your backyard.

There are plenty of well-maintained track bikes available for the students to learn on.

throttle the right amount stabilizes the motorcycle. Not on/off, not too much, not too little. Sense the 'stable part' and you have the bike figured out."

Making Friends With Corners

The first exercise on the track was "Throttle Control." Keith talked about distractions that can interfere with cornering: lean angle, traction, speed, line, road surface and other situations. Riders need to stabilize the motorcycle, regardless of these distractions.

On the first run we had to ride the track in fourth gear without using the brakes, practicing getting on the throttle early in the corner to stabilize the bike, then maintaining a smooth, consistent and steady throttle roll-on throughout the corner. At first, it was hard to judge how much speed to enter the corner with, given that we weren't allowed to use the brakes, but after a few laps, we were doing pretty well.

The second lecture was about turn points and lines through the corner. It was highly likely that we were all turning into corners too soon. So to prove it, we headed out to the track for another exercise: "Turn Points." On the track, large yellow Xs were painted at the entry point for each turn. This exercise was essentially the same as the first: Go around the track using only fourth gear and no brakes, but this time turn at the yellow Xs. Much to my surprise, I discovered that waiting until much later makes a lot of difference. Also, the Xs were much further into the corner than I thought they would be.

Each student was then assigned to an instructor. Instructors typically had two or three students to watch during any track session, and followed each individual's progress around the track very closely. Frequently, they would pull ahead of you and point to the tail of their bike, indicating they wanted you to follow them, then gave the pre-arranged signal for a particular riding exercise.

Following an instructor was very helpful, and I found it surprisingly easy to emulate my instructor's moves. Even early on, it seemed like the students were getting comfortable with the track, the bikes, the speed and the fact that things worked pretty much the way Keith and the instructors said they would work.

Back in the classroom, we built on the first two sessions and then headed back to the track for an exercise focused on turning quickly. We practiced leaning the bike rapidly at the X: "Do it fast, slap it down immediately at the turn point." Again, this worked far better than I initially had thought it would.

The next exercise concentrated on rider input, which essentially meant leaving the bike alone. "Once the bike is in the turn, you should not be holding tightly to the bars," Keith explained. "Let the bike carve the turn. Efforts to control and steer the bike through the turn make it worse and your arms get tired."

As a dirt rider, this made sense to me, as "herding" a bike when riding through sand or rough terrain is quite natural—but through a corner? We tried the exercise, and what a revelation! Once the bike is in the turn, you can loosen your hold on the bars—in fact, you could almost take your hands off the bars. (Taking your hands off was not recommended, but my instructor appreciated that I'd gotten the concept.)

The last exercise of the morning focused on another aspect of cornering—where to look. A lecture from Cobie Fair, the chief riding instructor, introduced the topic, and then we were back on the track to practice the "Two Step Exercise." This consisted of looking ahead to see our turn entry point (first step) then looking to the turn apex and through the turn to your exit point, seeing the arc you planned to travel (second step). This was a terrific exercise, and one that began to allow our speeds to climb and our lap times to drop. We finished the morning session and Judy had a terrific lunch of cold cuts, potato salad, vegetables and all sorts of breads for us to eat. After a dessert of cookies and fruit and a quick rest, it was back to work.

The afternoon sessions were different in that we interspersed track time with the school's "specialty" bikes. My favorite was the "Lean Machine," which was used to correct your body position on the bike and to verify visual skills. They also had a bike that allowed students to test the maximum limits of the front brake. With this device, even if you locked up the front wheel, you wouldn't tip over. It gave you the opportunity to feel what a front wheel lockup/skid feels like and how and when to release it—in a totally safe environment.

Back at the hotel, it was a hot shower

and a sense of total exhaustion. After a quick and pretty decent dinner at the Golden Cantina Restaurant on Knox Avenue and 40th Street, it was back to bed for an early lights out. My dreams were filled with riding through turns all night long, and my lines were nearly all perfect.

The following morning began with a classroom lecture from Keith on visual reference points. What are they? How do you use them? How do you create one? The goal in the afternoon was to "make friends with corners," and to learn to really *see*. We began by riding the track entirely on the far left edge, followed by going around again on the far right edge, and finally down the middle. This gave us a much better sense of the space available on the track.

Our next lecture and drill was all about finding reference points when you don't see any. The trick here is to find the road's vanishing point, note its movement in your field of vision, and use that as a reference for where you are in the turn. This required a good amount of practice, but it began to work for me toward the end. The vanishing point drill was helped along by the next exercise, which was practicing having a wide view and eliminating target fixation. Keith feels this is one of our worst enemies when riding motorcycles. Getting good at having a "wide view" is the best method to avoid target fixation.

Our last drill of the morning was something called "The Pickup." The point here was to push the bike up, away from you, toward the end of the turn. This technique allows you to get back hard on the throttle faster, speeding your corner exit considerably. This was fun and, like all the other exercises, worked as advertised.

The afternoon was devoted to individual work with our instructors, with additional track time, and another go on the "No B.S." bike (no body steering), the lean bike, the slide bike, and the braking bike. In addition to all the different specialty bikes, the school also has a camera bike. It comes equipped with a color camera welded to the bike's frame and situated behind the rider, with a Hi-8 video recorder under the seat. It produces a video that you and an instructor watch to see exactly where you turned in every corner, whether or not you hit the X, how fast you turned the bike, how accurate was your line, how consistent was your throttle application, etc. Be warned: The video camera does not lie, and when you sit down with the instructor who specializes in showing you exactly what you did right or wrong, it is incredibly effective. This tool, along with the instructors on the track, was very powerful. I actually found the video more helpful than some of the live coaching on the track. When I got pulled over and the instructor asked me if I had turned when I wanted to in that last corner, I wasn't always sure that I'd really messed up the way he thought I had. With the tape, there it was in black and white—or, in this case, living color. Each student was videotaped at least three times over the two-day period, and we got to keep the tapes. After reviewing them at home, I was delighted that I could easily see my improvement from ride to ride.

In reviewing my times with Keith at the end of the class, it was clear that there had been a very steady and consistent lowering of my times in each session. It made me feel that I'd accomplished exactly what I'd set out to achieve. During my drive back to L.A., often at speeds in excess of 80 mph, everything seemed to go in slow motion. A truly awesome experience!

Was it Worth it?

And more importantly, should *you* go? These schools aren't cheap. Code's two-day training package was $1950 and included bike rental, full-gear rental, meals and a free T-shirt (See sidebar for price comparisons). For me, although pricey, it was worth it. While it is quite possible that one could obtain high-quality training for less money, closer to home, schools like Code's have trained tens of thousands of riders. They don't waste time and there is very little they haven't seen before. I came out of the school far more confident in my riding.

More importantly, I became grounded on "a right way" (of course, not the "only" right way) to do things, something that I can use to critique and practice consistently while riding on my own. Now, if a turn does not go right, I have the perspective to diagnose what was wrong, and the skills to do it better the next time.

Riding School Discounts

Honda, Yamaha, BMW, Kawasaki and Harley have much more in common than you might think. Each has its own incentive program designed to benefit RiderCourse graduates.

American Honda offers a maximum $75 reimbursement (per year) to members of the Honda Rider's Club of America (HRCA) before or within 60 days of the course completion date. This offer is limited to the MRC:RSS and ERC courses.

Yamaha has taken a slightly different approach. They are offering a $50 U.S. Savings Bond to purchasers of a new street-legal Yamaha, regardless of model year, when the purchaser completes the RiderCourse. Training must be completed within six months of purchase. To receive the Savings Bond, you must submit copies of your Yamaha bill of sale, your RiderCourse tuition receipt, your RiderCourse completion card and a payment request form (given to the customer by the dealer at the time of purchase) to Yamaha.

BMW offers full tuition reimbursements with the purchase of a new, street-legal BMW motorcycle, regardless of model year. Training must be completed either six months prior to, or six months after, the purchase. The tuition fee is paid by the student to the state. After completing the RiderCourse, the student must mail copies of the tuition receipt, the purchase invoice, the RiderCourse completion card, and the BMW reimbursement form.

Kawasaki, through their Good Times Owners Club (GTOC), will reimburse $50 for completing the RiderCourse to members of the GTOC. One course reimbursement annually. Reimbursement will be received in the form of Good Times Owners Club bucks. Present to your dealer for cash or put it towards your next accessory purchase. To receive your reimbursement, submit copies of tuition receipt, RiderCourse completion card and your membership number to Kawasaki Motors Corp. USA/GTOC.

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