

Streetmasters Motorcycle Workshop

by Fred Rau

EPIPHANY. I'VE KNOWN WHAT that word means for many years now, but doubt that I could have related it in any meaningful way to my own life until just a few weeks ago. The event occurred while I was attending a Streetmasters Motorcycle Workshop being held on the Horsethief Mile track at the Willow Springs Motorsports Park near Rosamond, California.

The Streetmasters Workshop is a very new and different kind of motorcycling track school, designed specifically for touring and sport-touring motorcyclists. No sportbikes are allowed, and in fact, the highest speed attained at any time during the training is about 50 mph. But believe me, on this tight, twisting, 1-mile course, with 11 curves of every possible different description, 50 mph on a touring bike is quite challenging of most people's riding abilities, myself included.

Students were divided into groups of five, each with its own instructor, so there was plenty of opportunity for one-on-one instruction, and the instructors themselves were of the highest-caliber imaginable. The chief instructor and creator of the training curriculum is Bob Reichenberg. Reichenberg is known to most Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) instructors around the country as the former chief of instructor training for the Foundation. MSF Instructors are trained by Chief Instructors—and Reichenberg was the guy responsible for training the Chiefs.

My group had Walt Fulton as its instructor. Fulton's name will be recognizable to many in motorcycling as a former Daytona winner, former team racer



Streetmasters Workshop is a track school that's designed specifically for touring and sport-touring motorcycles. Instructors follow each student through the course multiple times, looking for skills that need polishing. Photo by Fred Rau.

for both Harley-Davidson and Kawasaki, one of the BMW "Legends" racers, and most memorably, as one of the riders featured in the documentary film "On Any Sunday." What most of them don't know, is that many of those famous racing sequences in the movie were actually filmed by Fulton, carrying an 11-pound movie camera on top of his helmet while he raced around the track. Fulton makes his living these days as a professional motorcycle accident reconstruction expert and a private riding coach, and is still such a motorcycle fanatic that he doesn't even own a four-wheeler.

During the first set of exercises in the morning, students are instructed to ride around the course at no more than 25 mph, in second gear, and are to try to avoid using their brakes unless absolutely necessary. Sounds easy, but it's not. In fact, after ten laps, fewer than one rider in ten had been able to negotiate the course without resorting to their brakes at least once. And again, that included me. With a little practice and a lot of engine braking, I could make it through ten of the curves, but there was one that eluded my every attempt. This particular curve was at the end of a very

steep downhill straight, making a hard, right-hand turn, with a decreasing radius, going steeply back uphill. Even with an entry speed of only ten mph, and the suspension on my GL1800 pumped up to its highest level, I was grounding out the engine bellypan so hard I felt I had to get on the brakes.

The way the Streetmasters system works is that an instructor follows each student around the track for several laps, then waves the rider into the "hot pit" for a quick critique, and gives suggestions for changing one particular aspect of that rider's style. Notice I said only one aspect. The instructor will want you to go back out onto the track for several more laps, practicing that

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single change until he feels you have successfully integrated it into your riding style. After that, you have a short break, then a session on the large "skid pan" practicing braking or swerving techniques, then another short break before you go back out on the track again. There, he follows you around for several laps again, checking to make sure you are still using the one corrective technique he gave you. Once he feels confident you have mastered that, he will once again pull you over, and instruct you on yet another change to your riding style. Obviously, the changes suggested are tailored specifically to each individual rider, but they commonly involve such things as changing your lane position or entry/exit speed for certain curves; or when, where, or how you use your brakes, shift, or clutch. But the emphasis is never on speed—it is on smoothness and efficiency.

As you begin to absorb the lessons, your allowable speed is slowly increased from 25 mph to 35 mph, then 45 mph. The use of your brakes, clutch, and gears are factored in one at a time as your proficiency increases. And it does increase, believe me.

Naturally, some riders absorb the lessons much more quickly than others and are able to advance to higher levels of training before the end of the day. Some of those in our class were still working on the first set of exercises when the day ended, about nine hours later. Most made it through about five levels of improvement, myself included, and two riders, who were obviously very skilled already when coming into the class, made it to the seventh level. No one is "pushed" to move on to another level until they feel entirely comfortable with where they are, and ready to move on. In this manner, the school is very much tailored to the individual rider.

During my fourth session on the track, and after my instructor had schooled me on five different, relatively minor changes to my riding style, I suddenly realized I had just gone through the dreaded downhill/uphill decreasing

Streetmasters Motorcycle Workshops

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radius curve without touching my brakes and without scraping any body parts on the tarmac! I hadn't been watching my speed, but I felt I had certainly gone through at more than 10 mph, and made a mental note to see if I could do it again on the next lap. As I made the last turn into the steep downhill, I began a quick mental checklist of the items I had been instructed on. First, move to the far left of my lane for maximum sight distance through the curve. Second, before initiating the turn, snap my head to the right and look all the way through to my exit point. Now, with my nose firmly planted on my exit point, choose the latest delayed apex point possible for initiating the turn. Very important now...wait for it...wait for it...*now*, keeping my eyes fixed solidly on the exit point, push down hard on the right handgrip, and start rolling on the throttle. And perhaps the hardest, for me at least, "try to stay relaxed—don't tense up."

As I rolled through the apex, I allowed myself a quick, cheating glance down at the speedo, and couldn't believe my eyes. The needle was just past 50 mph. And this was

a curve that, eight hours earlier, I was certain I could never negotiate at more than 10 mph. Even for an old wordsmith like me, it is difficult to put into words how elated I felt. Suddenly, after over 35 years and a million-plus miles in the saddle, in one short day I had become a much superior rider, attaining a skill level I had previously convinced myself I would never reach. It was a true epiphany.

I can't, and won't, say that it was the teaching style or curriculum of the Streetmasters Workshop that was entirely responsible for the phenomenon that happened to me. Maybe it was just my time. Or maybe something someone said, or something I did, just happened to make all the good advice and instruction I have received over the years from so many different sources come together at this particular time and place.

Whatever the case, by the end of the day I was flagged off the course for

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exceeding the maximum allowable speed. I suppose I should have been ashamed, but I was proud. And not just because I could ride through the curves so much faster than before, but because I was doing it so smoothly and so effortlessly that it came as natural as walking.

As I said before, Streetmasters is a whole new concept in rider training, and one that I applaud. As far as I know, there has never before been training at this level for touring riders, and it is sorely needed. I stand as a perfect example of that. Today's bikes, like the Honda GL1800 or the sport-touring Yamaha FJR1300, to name just two, have performance envelopes that would have been envied by high-level sportbikes just a few years ago. Sure, they can be ridden in great comfort and happiness just tooling down the interstate, but for the touring rider that also wants to experience the great satisfaction of whipping through the canyons like a low-level fighter pilot, these bikes can provide you with that experience also, if you're willing to take the time and trouble to learn how to handle them properly.

Our particular class was limited to full-dress tourers, but future classes will include sport-touring bikes, cruisers, and cruiser-tourers—exactly the kinds of bikes you won't find at any of the other performance riding schools. And Streetmasters has plans at a later date to initiate specialty classes for two-up riding, trikes, sidecars, and even trailer-pulling.

I highly recommend the Streetmasters Workshop. For now, classes are held only at the Willow Springs Motorsports Park, but there are hopes that interest will run high enough to expand to other venues in the near future. Prices run from around \$350–\$400, which is a tremendous bargain, in my opinion.

What have you got to lose? And maybe, just maybe, you'll be lucky enough to experience a motorcycle epiphany of your own. **FZ**

FZ

Quick Ride

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towards the corners before hauling the bike down from speed. Radial mount calipers are a boon to both street and track riders. The extra power will keep closed course junkies grinning while the extra finesse available to your right fingers will pay dividends when trail braking into an unfamiliar corner.

Buttonwillow has some bumpy sections to the track, and the CBR's suspension kept the chassis stable through the worst of the undulations. The stout front end contributed to my braking confidence. On one lap, I let the rear tire touch the curbing at the exit of the corner, and the back end stepped out with enough force to knock my foot from the outside peg. The Unit Pro-Link rear suspension made it possible for the bike to gather itself up without any problems. I've faced similar situations on other bikes with a bit more drama involved. Dunlop's D218 tires performed well during the half day of track riding that they were on the bike. I never felt limited by the tires as my speeds ramped up. When the rear broke free under power, it did so benignly. I'm sure I could have gotten a couple more track sessions out of the tires before they showed any ill-effects.

After a day at the track riding both the 2004 and 2005 CBR600RRs, I'd have to say that Honda has made some pretty dramatic improvements to what was already a good sportbike. Was Honda's decision to keep the briefing short an approach taken by people confident enough in their product to let it speak for itself? I think so. The 2005 600RR will be a formidable force in the middleweight sportbikes. **FZ**



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