

Streetmasters Motorcycle Workshops

by Mike Douglas



HOW MANY OF YOU have ever attended a motorcycle training class? Probably quite a few. Being an instructor, I know the MSF courses very well. So when I was invited to attend the inaugural Streetmasters Motorcycle Workshop, held on the Horse Thief Mile track at Willow Springs Motorsports Park near Rosamond, California, I jumped at the chance. Heading out on a closed-circuit one-mile track—that sounded like fun!

The Streetmasters Workshop is a very new and different kind of precision cornering school, designed specifically for touring and sport-touring motorcyclists. Our inaugural class was made up almost exclusively of Honda Gold Wing riders, mostly on new GL1800s, but with a few GL1500s tossed in. The highest speed attained at any time during the training was about 50 mph. But believe me, on this tight, twisting course, with 11 curves of every possible description, 50 mph on a Honda-bago is quite a challenge for most people's riding abilities.

For the track training, students were divided up into groups of five or less, each with its own instructor. While one group rode the track, the second hit the "practice pad." There was plenty of opportunity for one-on-one instruction, and the instructors themselves were of the highest caliber. The lead instructor, and creator of the training curriculum, was Bob Reichenberg. Bob is known to most MSF instructors, me included, as the former Chief Instructor Trainer for the foundation. I received my training as an Instructor and later as

a Chief Instructor from Bob. One of the other principal instructors was MCN's own Walt Fulton. Besides being this magazine's primary test-bike rider, Walt's name will be recognized to many in motorcycling as a former team racer for Harley-Davidson, Suzuki and Kawasaki, also as one of the BMW "Battle of the Legends" racers, and most memorably as one of the riders featured in Bruce Brown's "On Any Sunday."

In the track portion, the instructor first explained the exercise and led his group out onto the track. After three laps, he then pulled to the rear, allowing the first student to lead for two laps, who in turn pulled off, filing to the rear just in front of the instructor, while the next student led. This pattern continued until all students had led and the instructor had a chance to evaluate everyone. I was fortunate enough to be in the group hitting the track first and Bob was the instructor of my group.

During the first set of drills, the students are instructed to ride around the course at 25 mph, in second gear, and try to avoid using their brakes unless absolutely necessary—sounds easy—but it is not! In fact, after 10 laps, fewer than one rider in 10 had been able to negotiate the course without resorting to their brakes at least once. With a little practice and a lot of engine braking, most could make it through 10 of the curves, but there was one that repeatedly eluded virtually everyone, myself included. This particular beast was at the end of a very steep downhill straight, making a 160°, hard right-hand turn with a decreasing radius going steeply back uphill. *Ouch*, my neck still hurts, just thinking of trying to look all the way through that turn. Even with an entry speed of only 10 mph, and the suspensions on their GLs pumped up to the max, most riders felt they had to get on the brakes to negotiate this particular turn.

Once we mastered this technique, the instructors threw a monkey wrench into the process. Students were now instructed to stay in the center of the lane all the way around the track, including the corners. I personally found this to be one of the most difficult challenges, since I have been trained and train others to use the "Outside-Inside-Outside" cornering lines. After the instructor had a chance to evaluate each rider during the drill, he would resume the lead and take us into the "hot pit" for a quick critique, and individual suggestions for changing one particular aspect of our riding style. Notice I said only *one* aspect. The instructor would then have you get back out on the track for several more laps, practicing that single change until he



Classes are divided in groups; on the track, the "Practice Pad" or in the class room.



Lead instructor and former MSF Chief Instructor Trainer, Bob Reichenberg created the curriculum.



With their instructor's help, riders hone their braking and swerving skills on the Practice Pad.



The dreaded "Beast"—a steep downhill, 160° hard right-hand, decreasing radius turn which goes steeply back uphill. After eight hours of expert instruction, course participants were able to tame the "Beast," safely increasing their confidence and speed through the turn from 10 to 50 mph.

felt you had successfully integrated it into your riding style. Once you had mastered that skill, he would instruct you to make yet another change in your riding style. Obviously, the changes suggested were tailored specifically to each individual rider, but they commonly involved such things as changing your lane position or entry or exit speed for certain curves, or when, where or how to use your brakes, gears or clutch. Emphasis was never on speed, but rather on smoothness and efficiency. To quote Bob, "Adding speed to bad technique equals a worse wreck!"

After that, it was a Gold Winger's favorite sound, the dinner bell. During lunch we all shared our experiences, and thus far it was all positive. Once our stomachs were full and our brains (and necks) rested, we swapped locations. Our group hitting the "Practice Pad" to work on braking and swerving techniques while the others hit the track. All the drills were designed to refine the fundamental skills we needed to conquer the track, but also, this gave everyone a chance to hone those not so well-used or practiced "street survival" skills.

As you began to absorb the drills, your allowable maximum speed on the track was slowly increased from 25 mph to 35 mph, then 45 mph. The use of the brakes, clutch and different gears were allowed one at a time as your proficiency increased. And it does increase, believe me. Naturally, some riders mastered the drills much more quickly than others and were able to advance to higher levels of training before the end of the day. No one, and I repeat, no one, is "pushed" to move on to another level until they feel entirely comfortable with where they are, and fully 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 five different, relatively minor changes to my riding style, I suddenly realized I had just tamed the dreaded beast—that downhill/uphill decreasing radius curve—without touching my brakes. I hadn't been watching my speed, but I felt I had certainly been going through it at considerably 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 learned. 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 the curve, which eight hours earlier,



The class was made up mostly of GL1800s and GL1500s, however all bikes are welcome, but the emphasis is on technique and not speed.

I was certain I'd never negotiate at more than 10-15 mph!

Finally came the time to put up or shut up, and to demonstrate to the instructors what we had learned. Student entered the track one at a time, to lead the instructor around the course for two laps while he evaluated our performance. Easy you say, especially after eight hours? Not so fast, these two laps were to be performed in the *opposite* direction. So much for memorizing the precise braking points, entry and exit marks. After a couple of deep breaths, Bob and I were off, with me leading the way. It was actually quite a bit easier than I had anticipated, thanks to all the instruction I received during the day. In fact, I was having so much fun that my two laps quickly turned into three and Bob had to pass me, pull me over and debrief me on the track. Oops, how time flies when you're having fun!

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. Today's touring bikes have performance envelopes that would have been envied by high-level sport bikes just a few years ago. Sure, they can be ridden in great comfort and happiness just tooling down the interstate, but for touring riders who also want 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 a mix of sport-touring bikes, cruisers and cruiser-tourers as well: Exactly the kinds of bikes you won't find at any of the other performance riding schools. To top it off, course sponsor Avon Tyres supplied a set of tires, plus a gift certificate for a new rear tire for a giveaway, and Helmet House, distributor of Tourmaster products, also provided giveaway items.

Streetmasters has plans at a later date to initiate specialty classes for two-up riding, trikes, sidecars and even trailer pulling. 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 locations in the near future. Prices range from \$350 to \$400, which is a tremendous bargain, in my opinion. The Spring 2005 schedule as well as contact information is listed below. 🍀

INFORMATION

Streetmasters Motorcycle Workshops

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2005 Schedule (all Saturdays) March 12, April 9, May 14, June 4, September 10, October 8, November 5.