

Beyond The Cones



by Tom Wright

THE ALMOST COMPLETE absence of on-road instruction has been a serious gap in American rider training. The transition from learning the fundamental operation of a motorcycle in a parking lot, to becoming confident and competent in traffic, is a major step in rider education. Recognition of this fact is widespread, but the lack of such training has more to do with the availability of insurance coverage than a desire to fill the need. This is finally changing.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Many new MSF Basic RiderCourse graduates recognize this situation, and the post-class wrap-up will usually include at least one question asking, "What's next, where do we go from here?"

There is a wealth of information provided in the BRC curriculum, both delivered in the classroom and mixed into the information given during the riding exercises. A minimum of 17 hours are spent giving new riders a solid foundation in the basic mechanics of riding and utilizing newly acquired coordination of their hands, eyes and feet, focusing on the motor skills required to balance the motorcycle, apply the correct amount of throttle, ease out the clutch, apply the brakes and have control over the machine.

Coordinating these newly developing motor skills can require the full attention of a new rider while many experienced riders perform them as second nature, almost without a thought. The BRC, administered in a parking lot with simulated intersections, stop signs, curves and road hazards, is an ideal venue for coach-

ing the novice rider during development of these new skills in a setting without the threat of traffic and road hazards.

Such a training class has been a new rider's best available option to become licensed to operate a motorcycle, and in most cases, the successful completion of the course results in a waiver of their state's licensing test.

The concern begins after the training has been completed and the new rider is faced with navigating the streets and highways in real-world traffic situations.

The question remains, "Where can we get more training?" The typical MSF instructor's response is to advise them to seek out uncongested areas to practice—on their own bike—the skills they have learned during the course. And once they have gained a better sense of control of their motorcycle, it is suggested they enroll in an Experienced RiderCourse (ERC). That's also a helpful suggestion, however, depending on what part of the country the rider is in, it can be difficult to locate an ERC course, since historically demand has not been as great for the ERC, and offerings can be limited.

There have been some notable exceptions, and some excellent on-road programs for experienced riders are available, such as the Staying Safe schools started by Larry Grodsky and The Rider's Workshop started by Jim Ford.

Jim acknowledges that a serious impediment to establishing a real-world, on-road training program is the availability of insurance. The genesis of The Rider's Workshop was Jim's desire to see other riders become proficient and com-

fortable enough with their riding skills to attain the same passion for the sport he has found so rewarding. The rides are planned to take place on interesting, congestion free, twisting and scenic roads. Prior to each ride, Ford reminds the riders that motorcycling carries an inherent risk and everyone is responsible for "riding their own ride." The training is directed at instilling self-confidence, smooth technique and an increased passion to explore. The ultimate goal of the Rider's Workshop is to help the rider attain a level of comfort in the potential of their machines in a variety of riding situations.

In large part, Jim Ford's insurance policy consists of a careful assessment of the rider's skills at the onset of the program and having the participants acknowledge that the rider's risk management is a critical part of motorcycling. Since so few on-road training courses exist, insurance companies do not have sufficient actuarial data to support the writing of a policy for the potential risks related to this type of advanced rider training and skill development.

Change Is In The Wind

Recently, one insurance company circulated a brochure announcing the offering of insurance for on-road training policyholders who meet certain standards. U.S. Insurance Services, based in Jacksonville, FL (www.us-insurance.com), is now offering insurance for an on-road program for clients who insure their MSF training programs through the company. Janice Bagley, Rider Education Director for U.S. Insurance Services, points out

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that these standard are not a curriculum; rather conditions a school must meet to qualify for insurance of an on-road training program.

Aptly titled, "Training Beyond the Cones," the carefully planned standards include requirements for the students, the instructors, the participants' motorcycles, the rider gear worn during the class, the roads used for the program, and the conducting of the course. Bagley says the reaction to the offering was immediate and almost overwhelming.

Requests for information on the program came from all over the country. Judging by the response, it seems obvious that the training community recognizes the gap in current training and is excited about the prospects of being able to fill that gap.

The Insurance Background

When U.S. Insurance Services, which also insures individual motorcycle riders, began exploring the idea of underwriting on-road rider training programs, their experience with insuring MSF training gave them the benefit of a large pool of experienced trainers from which to solicit information and gather suggestions for the guidelines. Bagley explains, "In speaking with schools around the country, we have long known that there has been a strong demand and need for on-road instruction. Coaches around the country have told us that completing a Basic RiderCourse (BRC) is simply the starting point of rider training skills and knowledge for most riders, not the end."

Eligibility And Guidelines

The standards for an insurable on-road school touch on all aspects of the program: The instructors must be experienced MSF certified RiderCoaches who hold current First Aid and CPR certifications. Like most state rider education programs, there must be pre-established procedures in

place for handling any riding or medical emergencies that might arise. Two instructors must accompany each group on the ride. The instructors must inform the students of the procedures to be used in the event the group becomes separated and also in the use of hand signals that will be used during the ride.

To be eligible to enroll in the course, the student must have completed an MSF BRC or similar approved riding course within the past five years. The motorcycles used by the students must meet safety and insurance guidelines for the state of registration. The gear worn by the students is also addressed, and any gear supplied by the school must meet those same standards. For example, students are required to wear reflective vests.

Prior to the start of the on-road portion of the course, the students would be asked a series of questions about their riding experience and comfort level in a number of typical riding situations. One example is, "How confident are you starting your motorcycle on a hill?" Each student must also sign a liability waiver and agreement to comply with the trainers' instructions, and confirm their physical ability to operate a motorcycle, and mental alertness which includes no use of alcohol, drugs, or medication that would impair riding, prior to the on-road riding portion of the course.

Prior to the on-road portion of the program, parking lot exercises will allow the instructor to observe the student demonstrating their basic skills in shifting, braking, clutch and throttle control, making left and right turns and braking in a limited distance. Instructors will be able to use these observations to ascertain the skill level of the student before they enter the roadway.

The roads to be used during the ride are also indicated. Initially, the course should be on roads having a maximum posted speed limit of 35 mph. The second portion of the course should be structured to

include a variety of riding conditions. The maximum number of miles for the course is also limited, to reduce the chances of rider fatigue becoming a factor.

As with all training where the motorcycle is provided for the students, it is very likely the day of training will be the first time they have ridden that particular style, make, or model of motorcycle. Therefore, the course guidelines limit training provider-owned motorcycles to engine displacements of 650cc or less. It also limits the *style* of motorcycle owned by the training entity and used by the participants to standard, cruiser, or scooter models.

While it is always advisable for new riders to start out on lighter weight, reasonably powerful motorcycles, these machines are frequently not what they buy, or have chosen to purchase even prior to licensing. Sportbikes, heavy cruisers, tourers, etc. make up a very large section of the registered motorcycles nationwide. And while these owners can use their own bike to take the course, they must still meet the pre-course and off-street evaluation requirements.

One admirable component of the guidelines is a flexibility to the unique characteristics of each prospective training location. It is not meant to be a set of rigid criteria. Differences such as urban versus suburban and rural roads, along with the traffic conditions relative to each area, can be taken into account from the company's risk management perspective. Bagley informs us, "The bottom line is that the on-road program may have minor amended variations based on those unique conditions."

Overall, the guidelines are reasonably conservative, and any situation with any discretionary latitude will have an inclination toward the safer solution. However, as with all pioneering endeavors, the journey has to begin somewhere. And the response to the company's initial offering for on-road training coverage speaks





well of the training community's readiness to fill the void that is currently found in so much rider training.

On-Road Training Is Insurable

The first on-street rider training school to be approved by U.S. Insurance Services is the NEET Motorcycle Institute of Lawrence, KS (www.neetmoto.com), operated by MSF-certified RiderCoaches, husband and wife Christopher and Kerri Hess. The pair initially began looking at taking the on-road training approach when locating a barrier-free paved lot of sufficient size proved to be an insurmountable challenge in the college town of 100,000 residents. But, at the outset, an even greater obstacle was locating an insurance carrier who was willing to underwrite the policy for the venture. This search eventually led the Hesses to U.S. Insurance Services.

Fortunately, the State of Kansas' regulations for rider training include provisions for on-road training. These regulations specify certain restrictions; for instance that the students must wear brightly colored safety vests, that no more than six students per instructor are allowed on the road at one time and that on-road training should be limited to one hour per day to prevent rider fatigue from becoming a concern.

The typical class at the Neet Motorcycle Institute begins with a four-hour classroom session on a Wednesday night, when the students are introduced to the state operator's manual, take the state written examination and receive information on the characteristics of motorcycle control. On the following Saturday, a 10-hour day starts with basic riding exercises in a parking lot setting, with the introduction of clutch and throttle operation and gradually progresses through various practice maneuvers. Once the participants have demonstrated basic control of the motor-

cycle, they are guided through the first stretching of their wings outside the confines of the 120' x 200' practice area with a guided ride around the training center property and down an alley.

Day three on Sunday is six hours in length, comprised of one hour on the road for a route of approximately 18 miles. The instructors utilize two-way radio communication equipment; the students are briefed on the use of hand signals and informed about safety procedures prior to leaving the parking lot. The route has been carefully selected to include various types of intersections, curves, turn-after-stop maneuvers and other situations a rider will need to negotiate during a suburban ride. The students are also shown three MSF motorcycle safety videos; "Guide to Group Riding," "Riding Straight," and "Intersections." The students who successfully complete the entire course are rewarded with a certificate of completion that waives the DMV skills test, allowing them to add the motorcycle endorsement to their license.

Student evaluations of the program typically state the on-road portion was the best part of the course. But not all of the students are happy with what it teaches them. One student pulled to the side of the street within the first few minutes of the road portion and had decided that, once in traffic, motorcycling was not for him. For this prospective rider, having an opportunity to participate in a structured setting for his first street ride proved decisive. Motorcycling in traffic is not for everybody. But for those who have decided to take up riding, this experience establishes a basis for lifelong learning.

Trainers and riders alike recognize the value of a course that transitions riders from a parking lot training environment to the street. A course that follows the basic guidelines developed through a cooperative effort by U.S. Insurance

Services offers an excellent setting for the introduction to road riding and another occasion to convey knowledge about safe riding practices.

Roadblocks To More On-Road Training

Riders in Kansas are fortunate that the state regulations are flexible enough to allow this course offering. Many states that have regulations on rider training have adopted the MSF curriculum as the *only* approved course for a rider to be eligible for a waiver of the motorcycle road test. State advocates for rider education and motorcycle rights organizations should review their states' laws and regulations to determine whether this type of mentored on-road rider training is officially recognized. If it is not, we urge you to contact your state legislators, state highway safety office or other regulating body and ask what must be done to update the regulations.

One especially good starting point is your state motorcycle program administrator. Most states belong to the National Association of State Motorcycle Safety Administrators. Their web site and a link to the administrator in your state can be found at www.smsa.org. Encourage them to make certain that the regulations governing motorcycle training and licensing are up-to-date and allow for the inclusion of on-road rider training opportunities.

History shows that when one entity develops a product to fill a previously unfulfilled void, it catches the attention of consumers and competitors alike. As more trainers begin to offer on-road programs to transition riders from the parking lot range to street, we can expect demand and competition to grow. That will lead to more conveniently located programs, increased enrollment, more confident, trained riders and ultimately, fewer injuries and fatalities. ■