

Ride Smarter, Not Harder!

Motorcycle Riding Concepts' Advanced Skills Course

Text by Bill Shaw • Photos by Donna Spiewak

PART OF BEING a responsible motorcyclist includes regularly inspecting our riding apparel, frequently examining critical components on the bike and staying current on maintenance. Another important element is maintaining the proficiency of our bike-handling skills. One way to do this, of course, is by periodically taking a safety class or training course. Unfortunately, even some of the most conscientious riders don't pursue rider education classes beyond taking a Basic RiderCourse or ERC, claiming it's not convenient or that time, logistics or money have conspired against them.

For a variety of reasons, the larger motorcycle training organizations have not been able to capture this market. So a number of regional programs have surfaced in recent years in an attempt to fill this void. One such entity is Motorcycle Riding Concepts, which has distinguished itself in the mid-Atlantic region by offering a novel approach to motorcycle instruction.

Located in Fairfax, VA, just outside of Washington, DC, Motorcycle Riding Concepts (MRC) is the brainchild of Jesse Bowman, a 31-year veteran with the Fairfax County Police Department and one of its motor officers. When Bowman took the requisite 80-hour certification course to become a motor officer, he quickly learned just how many bad habits he'd developed as a recreational rider. Over the next several years, Bowman often wondered if any "civilian" motorcyclists would be interested in taking safety classes from police officers. He eventually pitched his idea to four friends on the motor squad, Mark Payton, Jeff Thompson, John Harris and Mike Nicholson, and in 2004, MRC was born.

Interested students can choose from five courses aimed at those with little or no experience, reentry riders, or seasoned motorcyclists looking to improve on their skills. In this respect, MRC is different from other training regiments in four significant ways:



Students are taught by active duty police officers from one of the most decorated and respected motor squads in the country. MRC has an extremely low student-to-instructor ratio, which, in some courses, is an unheard of 2:1. The range is designed around the same course most motor officers are trained on. And when compared to other training programs, classroom time is significantly reduced to give students as much "saddle time" as possible.

So when we received an invitation to take the MRC Advanced Skills Course, we didn't hesitate. According to Bowman, the Advanced Skills Course is designed for students who have successfully completed a basic course, or have a level of experience that satisfies the basic curriculum. It consists of 7.5 hours of training; one hour of classroom instruction and 6.5 hours of range training. Our class was typical in that it contained four instructors and eight students, including one who drove down from New York. As anticipated, we spent the first hour in the classroom getting acquainted with one another and reviewing safety and procedural rules before spending the rest of the day on the range.

The price of admission also includes the use of a Buell Blast or for a little more money, a Harley-Davidson Road King. I was assigned one of seven professionally prepared Road Kings complete with fore and aft crash bars that I hoped I wouldn't need. Bowman admits having students ride MRC motorcycles is a central part of their training. "Much of what we teach involves mastering the friction zone and turning in tight spaces. So it's important for students to learn the proper techniques without worrying about dropping their personal motorcycle or if they're burning up the clutch."

After orienting ourselves to the controls and features of our mounts, we were then introduced to MRC's signature method of mounting and dismounting from the right side. Motor officers use this technique for a variety of reasons: The bike can be used



Doing things the right way, not the easy way, best summarizes MRC's attitude towards training. In this respect, Jesse Bowman reminds students of the importance to downshift to first gear during the "Brake and Escape" exercise.



The range is designed around the same course many motor officers are trained on. Here, the author applies the techniques he's learned, by looking where he wants to go, staying relaxed and using the clutch's friction zone.

as cover, it keeps them away from oncoming traffic (in most cases), if the sidestand isn't properly deployed or breaks, the bike won't fall on them, and for right-handers, immediate access to their firearm. For civilians, some of these apply, too, like dismounting away from traffic and being able to push the bike away if the sidestand is not secured.

The first exercise was an overview of proper braking techniques. As in other schools I've attended, we first practiced using the front brake only, followed by using only the rear brake. We then made a number of runs where we applied both brakes simultaneously to demonstrate the effectiveness of using them together. But in a first for any class I've taken, this was followed by a "Brake and Escape" exercise that involved stopping from 30 mph in the shortest distance possible, and then immediately accelerating around an obstacle. The exercise was designed to simulate maneuvering out of harm's way if a following vehicle couldn't stop in time. In other words, avoiding a rear end collision.

Doing things the right way, instead of the easy way, was continually reinforced throughout the day. In fact, the MRC's motto is to "ride smarter, not harder." In this regard, we learned the importance of staying relaxed, looking where we wanted to go, maintaining momentum by using the clutch's friction zone while padding the rear brake, and in an interesting departure from other programs—most notably the MSF's Basic RiderCourse—leaning *with* the motorcycle instead of counterweighting, even in the most confined spaces. Proper posture and seating position on the motorcycle was constantly emphasized, too. Not only are they important for stability and traction, but also by sitting in an upright position, you have a clearer view of the road ahead and avenues of escape if needed.

Founding partner and instructor John Harris also impressed upon us the importance of understanding the concepts behind the skills. As I quickly learned, it was much easier to perform a particular maneuver if I understood the principles behind the technique—especially since the range was not flat and had a noticeable incline. For instance, we were told that when going uphill after executing a U-turn in a 12' circle, it's best to use more clutch and less rear brake pressure. The opposite is true when going downhill. Even after learning the proper technique, I was

only successful about half the time. John's instruction was also a subtle reminder of the need to practice regularly and in a controlled environment.

Which leads me to my only complaint with the MRC program: We didn't get an opportunity to perfect each exercise before going on to the next. Time constraints simply didn't allow for this indulgence. But if requested from a student, MRC is happy to provide a template of the cone layout for those who want to practice on their own. This is encouraged since, as Bowman and Harris reminded us, these skills are perishable, and if not practiced on a regular basis, could be lost over time. Which is why virtually every police department requires its motor officers to take in-service training for at least 10 hours every quarter.

It has been argued that remedial training is the critical component to being a safe and responsible rider. Regardless if the instruction takes place on the road, track, or on a closed range course, learning new skills and techniques is essential for a long and safe riding career, which is why training must be continuous and ongoing. And as every law enforcement officer knows, people reflexively revert back to their training when under duress. Some enthusiasts even subscribe to the belief that we owe it to our loved ones to take a new and different class at least every two years. We couldn't agree more. While we admit that some training is better than no training, taking the same refresher class every time isn't nearly as effective as learning new techniques/skills.

But the training environment must also be enjoyable for both the student and the instructor in order for it to be successful. In this regard, MRC is an unqualified success. Not only are MRC instructors cheerful, motivating and passionate, but they also bring a wealth of knowledge to the range—in total, 65 years of training experience.

For those who live in the mid-Atlantic region, Motorcycle Riding Concepts should be on the short list of training classes to consider. Prices range from \$150 to \$1500 for the 35-hour course.

Motorcycle Riding Concepts Inc.—

P.O. Box 2728 Merrifield, VA 22116-2728; Tel: 703-491-9102; <http://www.saddleupva.com>



Maintaining momentum by modulating the rear brake pedal and using the clutch's friction zone is as critical as looking where you want to go, especially when making a U-turn in a 12' circle.