

# Riding around

## MotoVentures

Three hundred acres of dirt, boulders, washes and hills teach riders how to handle hazardous conditions.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE LARSEN

Many experienced street riders want to improve their skills, competence and confidence. Spending time riding in the dirt with a good coach is a low-risk way to make rapid progress. Exercises that terrify riders on asphalt can be fun in dirt or sand.

Gary LaPlante, six-time Arizona State Trials Champion and a four-time motorcycle world speed record holder operates MotoVentures, which offers dirt-bike tours in Arizona, California and Colorado and dirt-bike and trials-bike training at his ride-in ranch in California. I met LaPlante when he led a tour group from Wickenburg to Tortilla Flat, eschewing paved roads. The trip was too soon over, leaving me craving more of LaPlante's riding advice. Consequently, several months later I met him at his private 300-acre dirt-riding ranch near Temecula, California.

LaPlante approaches motorcycle training uniquely. Rather than deliver a structured format of classroom instruction followed by students doing the same exercises together, LaPlante takes time to understand each rider's current skill level and the areas in which they

want to improve. He then customizes exercises to achieve specific objectives within the rider's time frame.

Assessing my desert-riding skills, LaPlante comments, "You use speed to mask poor technique and some uncertainty. Speed, while a stabilizer, is also a crutch." LaPlante illustrates his point with a trials bike. With jaw-dropping control and effortlessness, he rides onto a platform, walks the bike around and back down, rides it over stepstools, a picnic table and part way up a tree at no more than walking speed, with feet on the pegs the whole time.

### Reaching and Riding

While donning body armor, boots, gloves and full-face helmets, students listen to LaPlante talk about the mental game of riding. "Good visual habits are important. Learn to spot traction and no-traction zones, off-cambers, kickers, ruts and rocks. Scan far ahead as well as just in front. Master terrain reading and you'll never be surprised or tripped up because you didn't see something. Read the terrain, pick a path through it (line selection) and aim for inch-perfect tire placement. Choose the smoothest, highest-traction, safest route."

### Weight Right There

Street riding courses teach proper seat position for maximum stability and control. Standing up is not normally recommended. In the dirt, however, when the going gets tough, the tough get off their butts and onto the pegs. Instructors demonstrate two basic standing positions. One is the attack position: lean forward on the bike, into the wind and push the front tire into the ground. The second is the energy-conserving position—standing straight and relaxed. Shifting one's weight dramatically affects handling. Good riders constantly move around. Turning at slow-to-moderate speeds on loose terrain teaches us to counter-balance to keep the bike stable.

Top: We lean the bike and shift our hips and torso. Proper body alignment is shoulders squared with the handlebar. Right: Current-model Yamaha dirt bikes.

### The Lesson of Gravity

LaPlante explains how active legs achieve greater results from dirt-bike riding. Standing on the footpegs lowers the overall center of gravity, even though our heads are higher. With all our weight on the pegs, our center of gravity is down below seat height. Lower your center of gravity and you gain stability. Our legs contain the biggest muscles in our bodies and are often underutilized.



MotoVentures owner Gary LaPlante in a moment off the bike.

While street bike riders “glue” their knees to the tank, dirt riders will ride a bit bow-legged to more easily move the bike back and forth.

We learn to steer the bike with our legs and feet. Using only footpeg pressure we lean the bike for turning while standing. LaPlante instructs, “Keep your upper body free to work the throttle,

front brake and clutch. Keeping feet on the pegs uses less energy, improves bike handling and makes the rider less open to foot injuries.”

### Turning Tune-up

LaPlante teaches three methods for turning the bike: 1) handlebar; 2) leaning; and 3) sliding. “We learned to use handlebars to turn on our tricycles as children and it’s hard to unlearn but the more you use the other two, the better you ride,” LaPlante states. Starting with a seated turn, we get the feel of the attack position. Soon we’re standing and really pushing the front tire into the ground for maximum corner-carving traction.

The standing turn teaches counter-balancing—the act of leaning the bike and shifting hips and torso off-center in the opposite direction of the bike lean to maintain balance. We learn proper body alignment, which is to square our shoulders parallel with the handlebar. This ensures correct weight placement and body positioning. LaPlante cautions against countersteering. “Countersteering doesn’t matter much in the dirt. It doesn’t apply until you go really fast. The secret is proper counter-balancing.” Confident counter-balancing allows us to make tight turns anywhere without losing control.

The slalom turn is fast-and-furious leaning. Although the bike speed isn’t so fast, the rate at which we shift our body weight from left to right and back is very quick. We go around five cones set 12 feet apart. Body alignment and ap-



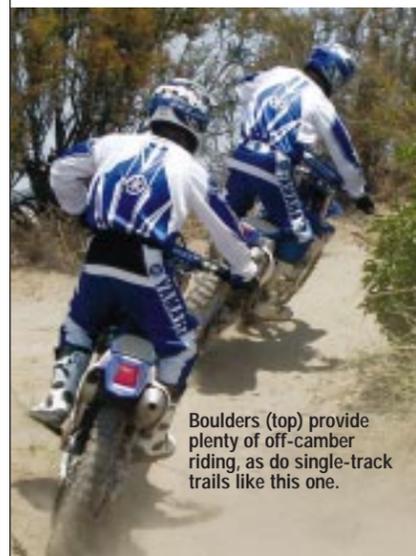
proach are important but so is the right speed—too slow and we end up merely weaving, too fast and we hit cones.

Slide turns come in two flavors, brake-on and power-on. First we use a braking slide to enter a turn. We approach in second or third gear, pull in the clutch, lock the rear brake, lean the bike in the direction we want to go, then counter-balance with everything we have and don’t release the brake until stopped. We quickly learn that too much lean causes a spin out or crash to the low side. If we don’t lean enough, we risk “high-siding,” one of the worst kinds of crashes. Score another point for body armor!

We begin to use power slides for exiting turns. Approaching a flat turn we follow a decreasing-radius arc and, at the apex, lean and quickly roll on the throttle to get the rear tire spinning. Careful coordination of throttle control, weight placement and lean angle are key here, and then this exercise becomes really fun.

### Braking Lessons

Precision braking skills can save your life. The best place to hone those skills is in the dirt, not on the street. We practice until we master stopping on a dime, overcoming our natural tendencies to release the brake and straighten too



Boulders (top) provide plenty of off-camber riding, as do single-track trails like this one.

early. LaPlante has us first hit the mark using only the rear brake and then front. Next, we apply maximum braking using both brakes, finding the threshold between braking and lock-up. Then we learn how to manage lock-ups. You know you’re a braking demon when you can confidently and consistently brake at or near the maximum in a variety of terrain without crashing.

### Climb and Control

The basic rule of climbing is to only try to get traction where there is traction to get. We stand and accelerate before the hill and use momentum instead of throttle to get through the no-traction

zone. As soon as the rear tire clears the no-traction area, we get back on the gas. Remaining seated during hill climbing results in “butt-steer.” LaPlante explains that this is when the rear tire hits a bump or rock, the jolt is transferred through the butt and torso to one’s arms, onto the handlebar, which throws the rider off the selected line of travel. The result is a grinding halt nowhere near the top. Standing solves this problem, allowing the legs to absorb bumps and not transfer body jostles to the handlebar.



Standing on the pegs and accelerating uses momentum instead of throttle to get through the no-traction zone.

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### The End Result

Time spent riding in the dirt makes you a far better street rider. In the relative safety of the dirt, practice and perfect leaning, sliding and aggressive front and rear braking. This improves your control and confidence when you return to the street. Practice opportunities and terrain challenges are endless at MotoVentures. Sand washes, mud, fallen logs, ledges, boulders, ruts and washouts are all part of a day’s ride. Getting comfortable with uneven, unpredictable terrain

and road hazards makes all other challenges more manageable.

MotoVentures offers off-road tours



LaPlante helps author Larsen with critical hand and arm position.

and dirt-bike and trials-bike training. It offers special women-only classes and has programs for kids. Check the Web site for more info and the latest schedule. The private 300-acre ranch is near Temecula, California, about two hours from San Diego or Los Angeles. New or late-model bikes are professionally maintained, and the terrain is ideally suited for teaching novices, yet offers ample challenges for the most demanding riders.

### MotoVentures Riding School

(951) 767-0991, [www.motoventures.com](http://www.motoventures.com)