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A CLASS Ride

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When I told my wife I had signed up for a training class, she asked, “Why are you taking a class? You’re an instructor.”

While I can demonstrate beginning riding techniques perfectly, is that good enough to ride safely on the streets? Because I didn’t want to continue riding the same way I have and experience the same nervousness with every corner while struggling to find the right line through the curves, I began looking for classes to increase my skills. While I have taken intermediate and advanced classes in parking lots, I’ve never set a tire on a racetrack, and I believe we learn by pushing ourselves past our comfort zone.

I was ready for instruction in a controlled track environment where I could stretch my skill level past my current boundaries. With no oncoming or cross traffic, hard barriers or gravel to threaten me, the track would provide all of the fun of a curvy mountain road with less danger. Additionally, a track would offer a variety of actual paved curves and not just circles indicated by cones on a flat parking lot.

There are a lot of track days and racing schools, but I wanted a course that teaches street techniques, not racing. I believe I found that with CLASS. Reg Pridmore’s CLASS Motorcycle School teaches riders to ride smoothly and in control. Smoothness, control and confidence were my goals, and after reading Reg’s book, I was impressed with how he explained his reasoning for choosing a safe line through corners. I also wanted clarification on his suggestion of “weighting the peg” and pressing on the tank to turn my motorcycle.

CLASS sessions bring six to ten instructors to tracks to provide personalized instruction for every student. Reg and his wife Gigi are the chief instructors, and I was lucky enough to know one of the instructors who answered a lot of my questions while assuring me that this was a school for street techniques that welcomed track neophytes like me. I had been leery of track days as I’ve heard stories about reckless passing and frequent crashes. CLASS made it clear they had strict rules for passing and had strict safety rules. Also, Reg splits the class into a faster and slower group so I would not be thrown into a group of experienced track day riders.

The CLASS at Virginia International Raceway was a two-day class. I liked the two-day format because it gave me the opportunity to get a good night’s sleep and let the first day of instruction to sink in. Then, the next day I could start rested and with a higher skill level. Although the \$950 price for two days of instruction is a lot, the MOA Foundation’s Paul B. Scholarship program would pay \$250 towards that cost. Months before the

class, I filled out the application on the BMW MOA’s web site and the Foundation approved it.

I then signed up and reserved a room at the VIR Lodge for three nights. Since I had recently bought a BMW F 900 XR, the class would also be a bike-bonding experience. A friend and I rode to Virginia International Raceway in Alton, Virginia, and were surprised at the beautiful facility with its manicured grounds, an elegant tavern, and beautiful hotel.

The first day started with tech inspection. After removing my mirrors and covering the taillight with tape, the inspector approved my bike. There was no need for safety wire or coolant change. A few riders had trailered track bikes with slicks, tire warmers, and no lights but most of the motorcycles were street legal. In my slower “B” group, all the bikes were street legal, and they included R 1200 GSs and K 1600 GTLs, as well as an older K 75 and a lot of 500cc Kawasakis. About half of the riders had full leathers, but many of us, including me, wore Aerostich or Klim textile riding suits. Everybody wore full-face helmets.

Reg explained the track rules in the first classroom session. He had strict rules for passing, prohibiting passing in two zones where curves had no straight between them. Passing on the inside was strictly prohibited for safety’s sake and soon my worries about “track days” proved unfounded. The instructors and track workers provided a safe environment to focus on learning. Soon, I felt at ease on the track and despite the higher speeds, the track provided a safer environment to learn.

Our first laps on the track were slow to allow our tires to warm up. The heat is essential for the rubber to become pliable and stick to the road surface at the higher lean angles. One rider did not take warm-up seriously and crashed on Turn 4, ending his two-day class. After warm-up, we took turns following an instructor as he showed us the good line through the corners. Reg’s line through the corners was a line that works on the street to avoid oncoming vehicles that drift over the center line. The instructors started slowly and gradually increased speed to a brisk pace.

When following the instructors, they would watch us in their mirrors and signal us when we did not follow their line. After each lap, the instructor would signal the following rider to go to the back of the line so the next rider could follow behind him.

Following the instructors taught me how to better pick a line when there are two sequential curves. Before CLASS, I had never considered how the entry point for the first curve set up the start of the second curve. At VIR, the delayed apex in left Turn 4a would set up best for entering right Turn 4b. Smoothing the line of



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Turn 1 would make two apexes into a single arc. The difficulty I had always experienced with choosing and following a good line was soon fading as my confidence grew.

During the day, we alternated between equal amounts of track time and classroom time. Our classroom sessions offered a combination of lecture and question time, and I was able to get all my questions answered, including the question I brought to the track regarding steering with feet and knees. Practicing that technique on the track, I finally understood how it worked to brace my body and push the center of mass into the curve while relaxing my arms so they didn't put unwanted input into the handlebars. The result was that my bike turned more easily and quickly through each corner.

Additionally, both days featured a braking exercise allowing us to practice smooth transitions into turns. I expected this to be easy, but found doing it smoothly was surprisingly difficult. The point of the exercise was to avoid abrupt inputs that would upset the suspension and use up traction. Since my new F 900 XR has much more powerful brakes than any of my previous bikes, I needed a lot of practice to master them.

At the end of the first day, I was tired, though more mentally tired than physically tired. That evening, my friend and I enjoyed a delicious dinner at the tavern which is a converted mansion from the 1840s. The cuisine was a lot nicer than I expected at a racetrack, and any fancy country club would be proud to have a restaurant that nice. Although I went a little overboard with steamers, fish & chips, and craft cider; the price was reasonable for a large meal of good quality.

Our second day was basically a repeat of the first, but we all started with higher levels of skill, understanding, and confidence. I expected a good night's sleep would help learning, but I was surprised how much of an improvement the data would show. I gathered data from the odometer, fuel consumption, and BMW's Connected App. BMW's TFT screen communicates with the app on my smartphone to record location, speed, lean angle, and when the ABS and Dynamic Traction Control activate to maintain traction. Through the data offered by the app, I could see there was a big difference between days one and two.

Even though I had about the same amount of riding time on both days, I rode 120 miles on day one but 148 miles on day two.

METRIC	DAY 1	DAY 2	IMPROVEMENT
Miles	120	148	23%
MPG	34	36	6%
ABS	26	7	73%
DTC	1	0	100%

The higher speed came from confidence and smoothness. Data showed how much smoother I was. Gas purchases at the end of each day showed 34 mpg on day one and 36 mpg on day two. The 93-octane fuel trackside was about 75 cents more per gallon than it was in town and 100-octane was a couple of dollars more per gallon. Better fuel consumption was a data point showing improved smoothness, but the BMW Connected App provided more compelling data. The app records each time the F 9000 XR's ABS or DTC activated. The data from day one shows the ABS and DTC kicking in 27 times. Day two data showed seven times. That data proves that CLASS made me a faster and smoother rider.

The day after the CLASS, I headed to the twisty roads of the Blue Ridge Parkway, southwest Virginia, and West Virginia. I found the lines through the curves to be more obvious, and I followed them better than before. My confidence soared as I cruised along Squirrel Spur Road, Indian Valley Trail, and Route 311. Reg Pridmore's lessons made me smoother, which made me a happier and safer rider.

I look forward to attending again next year and getting even better. **ON**



Homeward bound along the Blue Ridge Parkway. Photo by Bruce Dimon.