

BMW Motorcycle Club
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GOT Dirt?: *Secretarial Scriblings on*

Her Latest Two-Wheeled Exploration

By Joyce Sampson

Anyone who's been at a NORCAL general meeting in the last six months knows I'm on the investigative prowl to get into Adventure Riding. Indeed, I can probably name a few club members who are sick of my endless string of questions about the positive and negative aspects of this or that GS while I'm in the throes of the circular analytical madness of deciding which bike to buy. Not that I haven't ridden off road, as I've done on my current beloved 09 RT. But that's just it. Drop that beautiful baby, and I'll be digging deep into my pockets to fix the carnage.

As part of my research, I've considered going to Rawhyde in Southern California. As most of you know, that is BMW's officially-endorsed GS training course. It has some very useful course choices for off-road riding skills and if need be, rent a GS800 and/or 1200 to do so. An even more tempting alternative is their "Demo Program," a rather new edition to their schedule. Designed for people who are interested in buying within the next three months, this course exists in a one or two-day option. It provides some off-road skills, and a chance to ride three different GS models, each on a 1.5 hour ride that splits the time between street and dirt. The pot of gold at the end of this seemingly-expensive rainbow is reimbursed tuition fees in the form of a \$500 certificate towards a new bike redeemable at participating BMW dealerships for the one-day course, and the certificate plus a new set of Sava tires for the two-day class. For more details on all their programs, check them out: <http://www.rawhyde-offroad.com/home.html>

In the course of inquiring about Adventure riding, someone told me about Hollister Hills State Vehicular Recreation Area. So I popped on the Internet, found their website and began to wonder whether HHSRVA had any off-road riding courses, especially since the place is less than an hour from where I live. A few mouse clicks later, and Voila! Up popped the real *raison d'être* of this article, Brian Garrahan's two-day "Intro to Dirt" Course, which I took on the weekend of 25-26 October 2014.

For those of you who might not be familiar with Garrahan, he is a champion "International Six Days

Enduro" racer with numerous wins in Hare Scrambles and other dirt-bike events. His riding school, GARRAHAN OFF-ROAD TRAINING (GOT), offers different types of instruction for riders of all ages, both genders, and various skill levels. The "Intro to Dirt" course is aimed at new dirt riders or experienced ones wishing to improve their skills. Aside from myself and one notable exception (a young man who was completely new to motorcycling), all of my classmates had dirt riding experience, and by their own admission, were seeking to get rid of the bad habits they had acquired over the years, or because they were self taught and never really knew proper riding techniques.

Here's the BLUF (bottom line up front): GOT's "Intro to Dirt" course is an outstanding and fun bang for the buck that is absolutely worth every spent penny. It included a well-balanced and well-paced mixture of demonstrations of techniques, skills-building exercises, and actual time on the tracks and trails of Hollister Hills. I rented, from GOT, all the appropriate dirt-riding gear: helmet, jersey, pants, gloves, knee pads, chest protector (which my Early Modern European-historian self persists in misnaming a "breast plate"), socks (whoohuh think they have special socks and that they're comfortable?), and a little Honda 125 motorcycle with the number "4" on it. Now you might be wondering, "what about elbow pads, why that motorcycle, and how much did it cost?" More on that later; first let's get to the brass tacks, the training days.

Day 1 of Intro to Dirt:

The class began at 9am, but Brian asked "gear renters" to arrive early to get kitted out and ensure everything fits. After trying a few boots, getting dressed and looking conspicuously like the cat who had been standing nearest the Old Fashioned Sticky-Candy making machine when it exploded, I joined a small bevy of gathering students who were attired in equally outlandish dirt bike gear. Even the clothes are fun!

Brian began the class by using a motorcycle propped on a stand to demonstrate several elements of proper body positioning and riding techniques. These included standing positions for balance in general, for riding in different types of terrain, for uphill and downhill riding, and the ever-important position for braking.

Basic explanations finished, we headed to the practice field, where it began to pour a good rain. Nothing better than wet dirt biking, because, well hey, it's dirt and why not get dirtier? Not to mention that it really squelched the sand and dust, creating a nice pack—sometimes downright slushy mud bogs—on the trails we rode later. Mud-Biking!

Fantastic! Ok, well, except for the minor problem that I couldn't see because goggles don't come with windshield wipers. The practice field was a flat, graded dirt area, with a mini hill on the left side and, eventually, over the course of the two-day instruction, cones, and wooden planks, ranging in size from overgrown toothpicks to railroad ties. There, we went through several drills, including really slow riding (which helps hone your control), braking exercises, cornering drills, and how to get yourself out of the "I stopped on this hill and didn't mean to" pickle. Throughout the day, we switched between practicing skills in this flat area and putting them to use in the real world, as we rode on the Hollister tracks and trails. The pacing between skills practice and putting them to use was perfect.

Day 2 of Intro to Dirt:

Began the same as Day 1. Brian went over proper body positioning and riding—the repeat was helpful—and we headed over to the flat field. We practiced some of the skills from the previous day initially, but also as the day advanced, added more difficult skills, such as such as how to pull a wheelie, with the aim of getting the front tire up and over obstacles, first imaginary ones and then real ones, at our own pace when we were ready to try them. I was never able to pull the wheelie, but still able to get over the obstacles (although I did not try the railroad tie), probably due to the fact that several of my mountain-biking skills translate to motorcycles. If you ever took a street course whose instructions included going over obstacles, which I have, that, too, translates to dirt. On- trail experiences on Day 2 included some of the same trails, but also some more challenging ones, including some pretty steep downhill's and uphill's. I did well except for one downhill "get off" when I started to "think" about what I was doing, rather than just "feel" it. The last ride of Day 2 was, in my view, perhaps a little too challenging for truly new dirt riders, because it involved some fairly severe ruts in short spaces. On that trail, many riders hit the ground, or as a dear friend of mine likes to say, "Nonsense! I didn't crash, I was taking a soil sample!" I was among them and after about four dirt kisses, exclaimed loudly: "I'm done wrecking for the day."

Both class days finished about 3:30, and I was exhausted each time. I'm positive I lost weight in the course, because on Day 1, the pants I rented were

Pictures: Top to Bottom, Picture 1 and 2 Brian explaining then demonstrating body positioning. Picture 3: Me riding in the cornering exercise.



pretty tight in the waste, and despite a washing and drying on Saturday night, were not as tight when I put them on Sunday morning. This is a great sport for maintaining physical fitness, but like street riding itself, also requires excellent fitness to do it, indeed, much more so.

A person can be an expert in a subject, but that does not always mean he or she can teach it effectively. This is most definitely not true of Brian Garrahan. He is an outstanding teacher. One of his excellent teaching aspects is his consistency in explaining and demonstrating, not only the “what to do’s,” but also the “what not to do’s.” There’s nothing better to understand the “why’s” of certain techniques than to visualize what happens when you do what you’re supposed to do, and what happens when you don’t. Ok, I lied; there is something “better.” But it’s worse, not better, because that’s to experience an “I’m riding an 100-year-old stage coach in Moab with no shocks ride” or worse yet, a “get off.” When the latter happened to me for the first time—on the first day—I felt like I had been bucked off a world-class bull.

Remember that “little” 125 motorcycle and the missing elbow protectors? The “incident” happened while practicing the following cornering/steering skill around a cone: get up some speed as if you’re approaching a corner, brake fairly hard before the corner using proper braking positioning, sit down on the gas tank, extend the inside foot forward, release the clutch some, and twist the throttle, so you slide the motorcycle’s back wheel to get you around the corner. All was going well until . . .

Well I don’t really know what happened other than a monster—who was apparently sick of the fly on its back—threw me off violently to the bike’s left side. In retrospect, I think I hit the front brake a little too hard, but not hard enough to Endo. As a trained street rider, I’ve always used the whole-hand method of steering, clutch and braking control. Dirt biking recommends one or two fingers on the clutch and brake controls, so that the remainder of your hand remains on the grips. That’s key so that an unexpected bit of chunky terrain doesn’t rip the handlebars completely out of your hand. It’s either that, or I hit the back brake too hard and lost the back wheel. With no elbow pads, I got a nice little cut on my left elbow. Smartly, I decided to ask for elbow pads on Day 2—a thing I had considered do-



Pictures: Top to Bottom, Picture 1:Me after I hit the ground in my cornering "Get off" Picture 2: My bloody elbow (from the cornering "get off")Picture 3: Brian stepping in front of a rider during a "control the bike" exercise.

ing on Day 1 at the very outset of class, but did not. AGATT. Lesson re-learned.

Returning to Brian's teaching techniques. Another superb point is his conscientiousness about student-to-teacher ratio. He had two excellent assistant instructors: Kirk Cote and Branden Leopard. On Day 1, there were only seven students, so that was a 2-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio, and on Day 2, about eight more students showed up, making a 3-to-1 ratio. When I asked Brian how many students he teaches before adding assistant instructors, he said eight. The assistants Kirk and Branden were very helpful, watchful, and encouraging throughout each day. Kirk was a very congenial soul who took charge of the first aid for my bleeding elbow, while Branden was more reserved but had the most amazing ability to appear out of nowhere on the trail to help or provide instruction while you were riding. These two were outstanding riders who demonstrated great control of their bikes, but Brian is poetry-in-motion.

A third aspect about his teaching method that was really helpful was that while you were on a track or trail, Brian, Brendan or Kirk would ride behind you, and provide instructions, praise when you were doing something right, or just add a little encouragement. The way and frequency with which they did this was not intrusive. In short, Brian's teaching technique, philosophy, and approach at the school lives up to the description on his website's "About" page and is very effective for riders seeking to learn or improve their dirt biking skills.

The only negative aspects about the class are two things for which I have suggestions for improvement. First, on Day 2, when we were on the flat field and the class was larger, Brian tended to explain things to the left side of the class, with his front facing away from the right side. That made it hard for the right side to hear instructions. So, to ensure he is heard and to save his own voice, it would be better for him to ask students to form a semi-circle around him while he provides instructions. Otherwise, although it might be harder on his voice, he could provide instructions to one side and then to the other, or stand farther away from the group and speak louder than he already does (but he is at the appropriate volume already).

A second suggested improvement regards safety during skills practice. On Day 2, during the cor-

nering drill, Brian divided the class into four smaller groups who were to practice around four separate sets of two cones. I was nearly hit about four times in a row by riders who were running up on me and braking while I was just at the point of braking and sitting down on the gas tank to get around the cone. That's the point in the exercise where a rider is most likely to make a mistake, because all the body movements required to execute sharp cornering and sliding the back tire. Those are the very skills that you're practicing. I think the riders were just excited to try the exercise, but it was definitely not safe and it unnerved me, so I went and got the "ok" to get in another group. Thus, I would recommend that prior to this exercise, he instruct riders not to begin their ride toward a cone until the other rider has cleared it.

So, to finish: Earlier, I said this was a great bargain. The cost for all that fun, learning, and gear rental (including motorcycle and socks)? \$448, a bloody elbow, sore wrists, fatigue, and lots of basic off-road riding skills that will translate to Adventure and street riding. If you bring your own gear and motorcycle, and/or take the one-day class, prices are cheaper. GOT Dirt? Brian Garrahan's Off-Road Training school certainly does. Check it out at: <http://www.garrahanoffroadtraining.com> --Joyce Sampson



Above: Class photo on Day 1, Assistant instructor Kirk Cote @ far left (wearing the black and white KTM jersey) Assistant instructor Brendan Leopard @ far right (wearing the orange and black riding gear).