

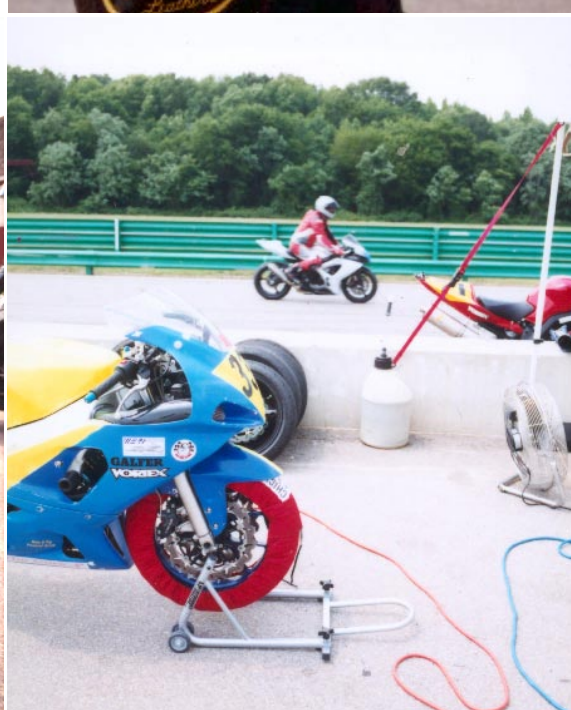
A high-angle photograph of two motorcyclists on a paved track. The rider in the foreground is on a red and yellow flame-patterned motorcycle, wearing a red helmet and a black jacket with 'Ducati' written on the back. The rider in the background is on a yellow and black motorcycle, wearing a white helmet with a red stripe and a black jacket. The track is bordered by green grass on both sides.

motorcycle mama

WHEN AN ERSTWHILE RIDER
GETS HER HANDS ON A GLEAMING
NEW DUCATI, IT TAKES A DAY
AT THE TRACK TO FIGURE OUT
WHAT THEY CAN DO.

BY PHAEDRA HISE
PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOHN HUBA





Me, plus two dozen 20-

IT WAS WHEN the instructor started talking about “early apexing” that I realized I was in over my head. I had picked up my gleaming yellow Multistrada three days earlier from Ducati Richmond. After a brief honeymoon with my muscular new Italian love, I rode the three hours to Virginia International Raceway in Danville, where I was registered for this advanced motorcycle class, to push myself on this bike and learn our limits in a safer setting than on a busy highway. The morning before the class, I taped up the mirrors and safety-wired the heck out of the things that could fall off in an accident. It was a beautiful bike. It looked fast. I hoped I wouldn’t disappoint it.

I had chosen Aaron Stevenson’s Cornerspeed Riderschool over several other local “track day” events because I had heard the emphasis was on teaching, not macho posturing. As a kid I had learned how to ride a motorcycle, but after college hadn’t ridden again until two years ago, when my husband bought a bike and I took a Motorcycle Safety Course to get my “M class” license. Even though I’d been back on two wheels for a while, I was still uncertain in steep turns. I wanted Cornerspeed to help me find out how far I could lean my baby over on one of those circular highway exit ramps.

My classmates immediately overwhelmed me with fast-paced chatter about holding the racing line, exit speeds and establishing rhythm. So there I was: me, plus two dozen 20-something hot-rodding guys.

Aaron ran through the meanings of the flags and hand signals before we suited up to head out for our first of eight track sessions. “Any questions?” he asked. I thought about raising my hand. I looked around at the other riders with their fancy racing boots and pro-quality back protectors. I saw the excited gleam in the track instructor’s eye. Instead, I zipped up my armored leathers and headed outside to the bike.

Cornerspeed awards provisional racing licenses to graduates, but more importantly it focuses on building rider skills and confidence. Lots of racer wannabes take the course, but so do riders who just want to ride gracefully and safely on the twisty Blue Ridge Parkway. That’s me. After I registered I checked out



BUILT FOR SPEED

Opposite page, top to bottom, left to right: in the classroom with the instructor; the author starts out tense; the raceway the author; lining up to get started; in position, bikes being repaired; the author on her yellow Ducati. Above: the author talking with her instructor.

About halfway through the course, the bike jumped off course and jerked toward the grass.

the course map. There were 19 numbered turns and a few extras that aren't even marked. Either I was going to master turns or die trying.

Aaron, the head instructor, taught in the classroom, and 12 more instructors helped out during the track sessions. In the first session I got my own teacher, leading me through the track run. The turns came and went, with their apexes marked with orange cones. I leaned gingerly into each one. Three laps later we pulled into the pits. I pulled off my helmet as another instructor walked up. "Is this your bike?" he asked. I nodded proudly, thinking he was admiring my gorgeous Italian machine. He shook his head. "I saw you riding," he said. "You have got to relax out there."

In my defense, I was still getting to know my bike. Ducati says they designed the Multistrada to handle pretty much anything, from a race track to the dirt and gravel roads I take to visit Virginia wineries on the weekends. The Multistrada rider sits slightly upright, a position I prefer to being draped along the bike, sport-style. At 5'6" and 108 lbs, I can reach the ground and handle this 400-lb machine. But because it isn't a classic sport bike like most of the other students were riding, I wasn't sure how it would behave on a track.

The second session started pretty much like the first, although I was running a little faster. I was working on my breathing, trying to relax. About halfway through the course I swung too wide to the right and my front tire caught the bumps on the edge of the track. Thud-thud-thud-thud, the bike jumped off course and jerked toward the grass on the left side of the track. Don't over-control, I told myself, that's how accidents happen. The Duck attacked the grass, bumping along confidently as I relaxed the throttle and loosened my grip on the vibrating handlebars. It popped smoothly back onto the track at the next turn, hadn't even wobbled. I took a deep breath, lined up for the bend, and took three more laps. Clearly, this machine could do more than I was giving it credit for.

Afterwards, my track instructor, Louis, bounded over and shook my hand. "Congratulations!" he grinned. "You went off the track and didn't go down!" Which was when I realized that I had a few things going for me: I hadn't panicked, and I wasn't pushing my limits. By this point, one rider had already gone down. He wasn't hurt but his bike was too damaged to continue the class. Others were pulling into the pits for breaks. Instructors were doing some yelling, telling riders to slow down and focus on the drills. The yellow Duck and I were plugging away, getting a little faster and a little more confident.

I was looking forward to the third session until Aaron talked about the drill we were going to try. Not everything he said was sinking in, but this caught my attention, "I want you to run through the course with no brakes," he announced. No brakes?

According to Aaron, the key to being a better rider is to





I was piloting the

develop a rhythm. Instead of running through the turns with the wham-slam of throttle-brakes, throttle-brakes, we were supposed to find a Zen-like zone of smooth movements, swaying through the course in a relaxed dance. It seems contradictory, he said, but you have to slow down to go fast.

We ran through two 'no brake' sessions. Eight laps and I swear I only used my brakes a handful of times. It was like magic. I moved around more on the bike, sliding my butt off the seat to lean the machine over. For the first time I wasn't thinking about myself or even about the bike and whether or not it was going to fall over. I was thinking about the turn, about its entry point and apex, about moving through it smoothly. And that sleek yellow bike followed right along.

By the 7th session I was wearing a big grin. My butt was hanging off the bike, my elbows were out and I was working the gas tank, turning the bike with my body and barely using the handlebars. I was piloting the machine, leading instead of following it around the track. I had finally figured out how to line up for a particularly nasty S-turn combination, was moving faster through the wide first turn and was no longer afraid of the blind-apex downhill curve toward the end of the course. I was hitting 104 mph on the straightaway and the sides of my tires were worn from leaning over. By the last session I didn't want to stop.

Don't get me wrong, even at 104 miles per hour I was slow compared the hot-rodders. When Aaron handed me my racing license he grinned and said, 'You need a lot more track time before you race.' But I was thrilled. For the first time, I really liked turns. I wanted more turns.

The next day, my thighs were sore. I was exhausted. But my brain was still working the previous day's lessons. As I ran errands in my car, I was analyzing each turn, looking for its entry point and apex. I took a big circling entrance ramp to Interstate 64 and automatically slid my knee over to the right to initiate a lean. I was thinking, 'This would be really fun on the motorcycle.'



**MOVING WITH THE
TURNS**

Opposite page: the author taking control of the bike; leaning in the turns; the sleek, yellow machine. This page: the author and her machine.