

Basic Motorcycling Training Fails (Part 1)

Jon DelVecchio

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If I had a nickel for every time I heard someone say “don’t use your brakes in a curve” I’d be rich. Honestly, I’ve said it countless times myself coaching the basic motorcycling course. Plenty of experienced riders would tell you the same thing. But it’s simply untrue.

Other questionable advice includes “not covering the front brake lever” and “always roll on the throttle at the beginning of a curve.”

These are just some of the things taught in basic motorcycle license waiver courses across the United States. When new riders leave the parking lot, tips and techniques like these can impede future skill development or lead to a mishap down the road.

At this point I should probably explicitly state, on the record, that I value waiver course curricula and do not advocate changes. These brief learning experiences are exceptional at preparing unskilled people for a start in motorcycling. It should also be noted that fundamental skills can be effective for a lifetime of conservative riding.

The waiver courses have quite a hefty task. Teaching the mental and physical skills required to safely operate something as sophisticated as a motorcycle on public roadways is an enormous responsibility. These programs are unmatched when it comes to cognitive strategies and traffic preparation. Where they lack longevity is in the cornering skills content.

I’m not suggesting that waiver courses should teach more advanced cornering techniques. It’s vital that new riders initially grasp the basic slow, look, press, roll sequence. Beyond that, in a two-day course with seemingly infinite directions, it would be easy to get overwhelmed.

In my experience teaching advanced training, many people naturally recite and perpetuate misconceptions learned in the waiver courses well into the future. There are advanced techniques not being discovered, which is potentially holding back riders once they leave basic training.

I compared a popular license waiver course to what many teach in advanced courses. The evidence for my conclusions was pulled right from the waiver course curriculum and first hand experience coaching riders in both stages.

Keep in mind that the waiver course student handbook briefly mentions advanced concepts buried in the text. However, when students actually ride and develop their motor skill function these advanced techniques are absent.

This article highlights four primary variations between the two levels of training. My next article will focus on secondary variations.

Narrow Cornering Focus

The waiver course materials explicitly state that the goal is to teach fundamental skills

and participant safety is the #1 priority. They also assert that aggressive riding and challenging the roads are activities reserved only for the racetrack.

While the cornering techniques provided are foundational skills, they are overly simplistic under scrutiny. To further prove this point, only 14% of the knowledge test questions are related to cornering.

Cornering skills are complex and difficult to transmit to others. Imagine asking Marc Marquez to explain how to do what he does. The phrase “slow, look, press, roll” is the correct starting point, but it can take a lifetime of effort to fully comprehend those four simple words.

It would be difficult to argue that a graduate of a basic course will be able to ride expertly after only two days of instruction. Since most riders are uninterested in subsequent training, they continue to apply entry level skills to expert level riding situations.

The bottom line here is that most riders would benefit from expanding their skill set. Advanced instruction is readily available.

Brake/Throttle Hand Position

For better or worse, waiver courses flat out prohibit covering the front brake lever. This action can be described as resting any number of fingers on the brake lever in anticipation of squeezing it. Doing this is expressly stated as an error that should be corrected. Having all fingers curled around the throttle is considered “good posture.” Who wouldn’t want that?

Covering the front brake is a good idea in the real world. A throttle hand fully curled

around the grip severely handicaps a rider beyond the initial novice stage. This is true in both traffic and curvy environments.

Throttle hand placement commonly taught outside of waiver courses teaches resting the first two fingers on the brake lever and curling the last two fingers around the grip. This positioning allows for more precise brake/throttle transitions, which are essential for higher levels of control.

Never corner with your right hand in a fist. Doing so delays reaction time and typically results in more abrupt speed and steering responses.

Entry Speed Definition

Because waiver courses are designed to be conducted in parking lots with minimal risk, they are constrained to a single corner entry speed: slow. A safe and good entry speed is defined in the waiver course as a speed that allows the rider to maintain or increase throttle through the entire curve. Riders are told to get all their slowing completed by the entry point of the turn while upright.

When people leave parking lot training, they approach corners at a higher rate of speed and without supervision. The definition of entry speed then merely becomes the speed a rider is traveling at the point they enter the curve. As many sport riders would agree, a faster pace in the twisties means slowing until somewhere near the apex. Transitioning to throttle at the entrance of the curve in this situation would be risky.

The speed you enter a turn dictates how long you have to stay on the brakes. Some experienced riders take every corner so conservatively that they hardly need to lean

the motorcycle. For them the waiver course definition of entry speed holds true: start rolling on at the moment leaning begins.

For everyone else, it's important to understand that adding throttle should only occur when the bike is at its lowest mph speed in the curve and it's time to accelerate through the exit. The most controlled way to do this is by using the throttle hand placement discussed previously. Never corner with your hand in a fist.

Braking in Curves

Successfully passing a waiver course reinforces the idea to never slow or apply braking in a curve. Coaches are told that slowing in a curve is an error in judgment and should be corrected. This may lead to short term success at the expense of long term skill development.

New riders are only trained for corners where they are forced to enter slower than real world standards, requiring throttle from start to finish. This leaves them at a disadvantage under their own judgment at more realistic corner entry speeds.

Covering the brake lever with the first two fingers is essential for getting the timing right each and every corner. The transition from brake to throttle depends on entry speed, not a specific curve location. When competent riders wisely carry their brakes into a corner, this is braking in a curve.

Braking while leaning in a waiver course is risky because fine motor skill function is not yet acquired. In the real world, closing the throttle or applying the brakes in a curve are appropriate methods for controlling

direction. Bridging the gap between these conditions is somewhat challenging, but not impossible. No matter how you slice it, you're not going to learn vital mid-corner braking techniques in a waiver course.

Conclusion

I'm not crazy enough to say that we need to teach these advanced skills in waiver courses. My intention is to openly discuss these omissions and variations so riders can acquire next level skills. There's way more to learn than what's presented in basic training.