

THE OUTSIDE EDGE

By: George Tranos



STREET SKILLS -V- TRACK SKILLS

For many motorcyclists, the thrill of riding on the track is unequalled. High speeds, extreme lean angles and measurable results can all be achieved. It has been proven that riding on the track can make you a better street rider. But is the reverse also true – is being a good street rider necessary for success at the track? To answer this question, I recruited the help of Jimmy DeVito, a certified coach for Team Pro-Motion, a track-day provider based in Warminster, Pennsylvania, and a licensed CCS racer. He can be found most weekends coaching or racing at a racetrack somewhere in the Mid-Atlantic region. DeVito feels that "a rider must be proficient in the operation of the motorcycle. That proficiency generally comes from street riding. However, if they gained it simply through instruction without ever buying a street bike and going street riding on their own, then yes a rider can develop the skills necessary at the track."

Track riding can be very intense. There are normally 15 to 20 minute sessions interspersed with off time. You are constantly moving your body as you adjust position relative to the course. Side-to-side transitions, braking zones and straight-aways take conscious effort. Riding at such a high level can create tension – learning to relax the arms and use abdominal muscles during braking eases cornering effort. By the end of the session, many riders are very tired and require rest.

The street poses a whole different series of challenges. We must constantly scan the roadway, look far ahead for hazards and be aware of all that is around us. Riding on the road can be fraught with the unexpected. Managing risk requires a riding strategy and proper attitude and awareness. Intersections, blind curves, debris in the roadway, unskilled drivers, variances in vehicle size and speed, construction zones, pedestrians and other distractions are major areas of possible conflict.

Riding on the track entails dealing with other concerns. You will be riding the same, closed circuit again and again. Each curve will have its own radius, camber and surface. As a rider goes faster, more of the roadway should be used. The entrance, apex and exit point of the curve must be determined and the turns must be linked together properly or you will be off-line going into the next corner.

DeVito adds, "On the street, signs, markings, and other vehicles dictate when, where, and at what speed we turn, stop, or accelerate. On the track there are no such markings, with few exceptions. The track is simply laid out in front of us and we must create reference points for where we initiate braking, turning, and acceleration. During track days, cones may be used to assist a rider with reference points for turn-in, apex, and exit. When racing, there are no such cones and the racer must create reference points for themselves."

What other skills must a track day rider or racer possess? DeVito feels street riders must adjust to riding in close proximity to other riders, use a higher amount of control input, different body positioning and ride closer to the limits of the motorcycle. "People who have ridden on the street for any period of time rarely feel comfortable applying the brake lever with sufficient force to threshold brake. Their time on the street has trained them to avoid this extreme braking pressure. Oil, sand, the inability of the car behind them to stop as quickly, results in a much more gradual braking style that does not translate well to the track. There is no need to hang off a motorcycle on the street, we simply do not ride on the street with the speed necessary to use the lean angle we do on the track," according to DeVito.

Because of the gyroscopic effects of the rotating wheels, motorcycles become more stable as they go faster. DeVito adds, "At speed, a motorcycle simply wants to go straight. But that same "desire" of the motorcycle to remain upright and in a straight line requires more and more force to turn as speeds increase. Being that we rarely exceed 50 or 60 miles per hour on the street, especially when turning, this force to change directions is never very great. On the track, it is not unusual to need to quickly change the direction of the motorcycle at speeds that can exceed 120 MPH. This takes effort and force never practiced on the street so again we see many street riders reluctant to impart the forces necessary to get the motorcycle to change directions quickly."

The visual part of riding is even more important at the track. According to DeVito, a street rider's "field of vision is still not looking far enough ahead for the track." DeVito feels, "even though they are looking ahead the necessary distance to be able to see all the dangers around them, it is still relatively close to the motorcycle. This field of vision is in fact much closer than what we would ideally like to have on the track. We strive to look as far down the track as possible, in some cases when I am racing, I am actually looking to a point off in the distance which has not yet come into my field of vision due to elevation or distance." Is it required to have a motorcycle license to ride on the track? DeVito says, "as for the motorcycle endorsement, I see no reason why it would be necessary to ride on the track. Although I have no hard data on this, I would expect many track riders have never taken the steps necessary to get the legal endorsement even if they do ride on the street. To take it a bit further, we have had riders on-track as young as twelve years old. PJ Jacobsen and Elena Myers, were both AMA licensed before they were old enough to be street licensed. So the short answer I suppose is no."

Both street and track riding can be exciting and fun. Each has its own risks and rewards. Try both and decide for yourself if you can master them.

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