

West Coast SuperMoto School Review

By George Tranos

Is your riding getting stale? Are you tired of the same-old route, same-old bike or boring routine? Been there, done that, got the T-shirt and want to try something new? Maybe Supermoto is for you!

A cross between street riding, racetrack and motorcross, Supermoto is different. The bikes look like dirt bikes but use street tires. The riders wear perforated leathers, body armor, dirt-type helmets with goggles and use special motorcross type boots. Learning to ride a Supermoto bike properly is a challenge, regardless of your previous motorcycle experience.

While dual purpose bikes have been around forever, production Supermoto bikes are relatively new. Aprilia, KTM and Suzuki all offer models specifically engineered for Supermoto that work well right out of the box. The sport has become much more popular, with bikes and riders appearing at regular track days and specific Supermoto events.

So how does one learn to ride one of these bikes? Most learn the hard way – through trial and experience without any formal training. But there is another, better way to learn – through a format-specific school. One of the best out there is West Coast Supermoto School. Run by Darrick Lucchesi, his one-day Supermoto course was recently offered at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway in conjunction with the Femmoto 2006 women's track day on October 7 and 8.

Seven students with various levels of Supermoto and general riding experience participated. Lucchesi offers a step-by-step approach to riding these machines and tries not to overwhelm the new student with too much information at one time. After introductions and preliminary paperwork were completed, it was out to the track for the first session.

The track was set up in the parking lot of the raceway, and marked by orange cones. Students are first taught the proper lines to follow. Red tape about two feet wide is positioned around the course that can be used as a guide to ensure you are on the right line.

The first session consisted of following Lucchesi around the track at a fairly slow pace and is geared to learning the lines. Lucchesi wants you to learn how to be

smooth, so he asks that you don't use the brakes or shift in this exercise. He says that it is important to gain confidence in your front tire and that smooth throttle transitions and turn initiation are important for proper flow.

"You're not here to race, you're here to learn" is his initial refrain. He discourages those who are there to learn how "to back it in" – Supermoto vernacular for an advanced technique of sliding the rear tire going into a turn to get the bike slowed and turned in one motion. He says that doing this will just slow you down at first. The key to going fast is to be smooth, according to Lucchesi.

Lucchesi was assisted by Michelle DiSalvo, 33, a AMA national Supermoto racer. DiSalvo herself is fairly new to Supermoto having been a flat track racer for over 20 years. Her flat track background comes through clearly in the way she can slide her bike all over the track with confidence. Both Lucchesi and DiSalvo ripped it up during Supermoto demonstrations for the Femmoto event, held during the lunch hour.

The other students in the class varied in age and experience levels. Kim LaVigne, 48, of Saugus, California, has been riding since age 3. She rode trials, enduros and scrambles at first, graduating to motocross at age 13. By age 15, she was a national motorcross champion. She now thinks she is "too old for Supercross" but eager to try Supermoto. She was attending the school to "learn the proper Supermoto technique". She was riding her own 150cc mini Supermoto bike. LaVigne said "Backing it in – what a rush that must be to do".

Jamie Weisbrod, 48, of San Diego, California, also was attending her first Supermoto school. An engineer originally raised in Pennsylvania, Weisbrod has been riding for 6 years. She likes dirt bikes and mini's but has had a Suzuki SV650 and Buell Blast for the street. Her reasons for attending the school were "to improve my bike handling skills and learn the right lines". Weisbrod likes the light weight and easy handling of her 150cc mini Supermoto and when comparing it to street or motorcross riding feels "Supermoto is a more measured risk – it's not as agro".

The second and third sessions saw a marked improvement in all the riders. Lucchesi spent some time before each session talking about a new task or skill that he was adding that he wanted the riders to try. In the second session, he wanted turn initiation to start earlier instead of right at the apex of the turn. He wanted each person to set up for the turn sooner and watched as each rider took turns to try it.

After the third session, use of the rear brake was added to the skill set. This seemed to allow the students to set up for the turn better as it loaded the suspension and made turn-in easier. Speeds immediately increase. Lucchesi

encouraged each rider to "ride your own ride and not focus on the riders in front of you". He pulled aside riders to give one-on-one individual coaching. He also would give the student a big "thumbs up" when he went by them if he noticed they were getting the skill done right.

Erin Dyer, 27, from San Rafael, California was at the school because "Supermoto looks like fun". Dyer wants a dirt bike "but needs something for the street". She's been riding for two years now but doesn't currently own her own motorcycle. Coming from a family of race car drivers, motorcycles were attractive to her and Supermoto seemed like a natural progression. Dyer rode a KTM Supermoto and at the end of the day thought "the school was awesome – really great". She said that the "West Coast Supermoto School concept is smart".

Right before lunch, Lucchesi spent time with each student helping to dial in their bike's suspension. Lucchesi feels that many people don't understand how to properly set up a motorcycle for Supermoto use because it's not intuitive. He said that it's important to slow down the suspensions responses. He adds both more rebound and more compression damping so there isn't either a quick dive or bounce back to upset the chassis. Each student seemed to report back that there bike felt much better after Lucchesi's adjustments.

The afternoon sessions added use of the front brake and fanning of the clutch during braking and turning. DiSalvo demonstrated how the motorcycle rear tire chatters under hard braking when the clutch is not used and then repeats the exercise showing how squeezing the clutch during braking eliminates the chatter. The students are then set loose to try it for themselves.

Nick DeLucia, 34, from Las Vegas, Nevada, was another student new to the school. DeLucia has been riding for 10 years, mostly doing desert racing. Comfortable in low traction conditions, DeLucia seemed to take well to Supermoto. A veteran of 100 mile desert enduros, DeLucia had his Aprilia SXV only 3 weeks prior to taking the course. He has a 2004 Honda CBR1000RR that he rides on the street but likes his Supermoto better, he says because "it's way lighter, easier to turn and super fun to ride".

For the last session of the day, Lucchesi wants everyone to "put it all together" by going back to the beginning, ride the course first with no brakes or shifting and then adding each skill back in one at a time. While fatigue appeared to be a factor for some, most seemed to continue their improvement with this exercise.

At the end of the day, the students were all smiles. Some had just gotten their first introduction to Supermoto. Others improved existing skills and had taken it to the next level. All had gotten lots of seat time and a big boost of confidence.

Lucchesi brings both a boyish enthusiasm and a racer's eye to his instruction at the West Coast Supermoto School. An ex-racer whose teammates went on to become world Supermoto champions, Lucchesi has helped both other racers looking to improve and newcomers who just want to see if Supermoto is for them. Lucchesi feels his school is different because he keeps the classes small and provides intensive, one-on-one coaching. The transition from racer to teacher has been an easy one for Lucchesi because he "really loves teaching people better than any race I've ever done". His students seem to sense that as over 90 percent of them come back for another class.

For more information about the West Coast Supermoto School, see <http://www.westcoastsupermoto.com/> or via email at

wcsupermoto@aol.com



West Coast Supermoto School's Darrick Lucchesi backing it in!



George Tranos, left, riding an Aprilia SXV 450 during one of the early sessions of the West Coast Supermoto School at Las Vegas Motor Speedway on Sunday, October 8, 2006.



Darrick Lucchesi, right, giving students instruction during one of the West Coast Supermoto sessions held at Las Vegas Motor Speedway on Sunday, October 8, 2006.

Confessions of a Supermoto Newbie

By George Tranos

I thought I had tried it all. I've been riding motorcycles now over 30 years. While most of that time was spent on the street, I'd ridden quads and trikes off-road back before they were fashionable. I've recently become a track-day junkie, having spent many weekends this year traveling to and from racetracks to ride. I even bought a dedicated track bike that's not legal to ride on the street. About 6 years ago, I decided I wanted to give something back and took a motorcycle instructor prep course. That class opened my eyes to how much I didn't know.

I went on to be an MSF instructor, a driving school instructor and am now qualified to teach new car drivers the prelicensing course in my home state of New York. I've seen many hundreds of students go on to get their motorcycle license. I've seen the look in the new student's eye when they finally get it and master that skill they've been working on. I've shared the thrill of achievement the student gets when they pass their skill evaluation and earn their motorcycle endorsement.

The hunger for knowledge is universal, whether learning to ride a motorcycle or master a computer keyboard. In life, I've learned to rely upon other professionals to do their jobs properly. Motorcycle training is no different and is one field that is underappreciated. There are so many different types of motorcycling activities today and each has become specialized. So it was with great relish that I enlisted in the West Coast Supermoto School to try to learn how to properly ride a Supermoto bike from a professional Supermoto rider.

This whole Supermoto thing looked difficult. Here we are on a bike that looks like a dirt bike but has the tires of a track bike. You turn it by leaning the bike and counter weight, also like a dirt bike. But the tires stick like glue and the front wheel can be turned on a dime. My first time out there, it just felt awkward. I was supposed to do something with my front foot but I wasn't sure what. I normally keep those puppies tucked in tight so they can't touch the ground. Knees were different - on the racetrack, if they touched the ground you were doing something right! But on the Supermoto track, if your knees touched you were in trouble!

So out the foot went. Later I was to learn that the foot just can't go out, it must go forward! Your body should follow and that felt weird too. I don't remember the muscle in my thigh hurting just by lifting my foot, but that happened too.

Each hobby or sport has its own vocabulary and Supermoto is no different. At first I was confused. They were all talking about wanting to learn how to "back it in". I thought that I can do that – I do it every day with my car when I parallel park – so what could be so hard?

But in the Supermoto concept, backing it in means something completely different! So off I went and round we go. Each lap seemed to get easier and then they would go and add another technique to try. In the meantime, the little minis were passing me and I felt slow and uncomfortable. By the second session, I stopped looking down at the lines. This was supposed to help keep us on the right line but was so anathema to my training that it was counterproductive. I started looking ahead to the next corner. Immediately, my speed went up and my lap times went down. When I did look at the marker lines, I seemed to be pretty close to them. I found myself looking ahead at the upcoming marker lines for the next corner entry point and this did seem to help. I initially wanted to early apex the corners but by using the marker lines as a guide, I started late apexing them and my corners flowed better.

"Keep the corner speed up and carry your speed through the corners" was the refrain. This was difficult to someone who had never ridden a dirt bike let alone one with funny wheels shod with tires akin to racing slicks. Learning to trust those tires and to have confidence in your ability to get the bike turned would be the hardest skill for me to acquire. Luckily and thankfully, the steps that Darrick Lucchesi and Michelle DiSalvo added during each session seemed to help. I started getting it. One corner at a time, then one lap at time, the individual techniques started getting easier.

Then they added fanning the clutch during braking. This is a skill that is so unintuitive to me. At first, it was a step backward as it slowed my corner speeds considerable. I felt just slow. I was getting tired, the day was coming to a close and we had one session left. Would I ever get it and put this thing together?

The last session came after a short rest and water break. I felt reinvigorated and my legs stopped hurting. It was still warm but once I got back out there, I forgot about everything else and just focused on one corner at a time. This seemed to work. I started at the beginning as Lucchesi suggested and added the skills back in. First no brakes, then add the rear brake, then the front and rear, then fan the clutch during braking and corner entry. Wow – this stuff does work! I started to really go faster. So much so, that I finally made it to third gear down the big straight and had to downshift for the tight left-hand corner at the end. Carrying all that speed, I squeezed both brakes and fanned the clutch, finding just the spot where the chatter stopped and I was able to tuck it into the turn. Easing out the clutch at just the right spot, I was through! This Supermoto stuff is sure fun when you finally get it right!

After about 20 minutes of this, I was running my fastest laps of the day, my confidence was sky high and I thought maybe, just maybe, I get this Supermoto thing and it might be for me! It was great to learn a new thing and open my mind to another great type of motorcycling! The whole day just reinforced my feeling that if you want to learn something new quickly, you are best off getting proper training from a pro. Lucchesi and DiSalvo certainly qualify and made it painless to learn a new skill. If they can do it for me, they can do it for you, too.