

# XIV Rider Training



## The Gender Difference Makes No Difference

BY MISTI HURST

When it comes to riding motorcycles, we all start out as beginners. An exception might be Valentino Rossi, who, at age 3, simply began riding a motorcycle as naturally as he walked and ran. But for most people, that just isn't the case. For us, riding involves an ongoing process of trial and error—hopefully, with the “error” part being held to an absolute minimum.

An excellent way to accomplish that goal is to attend one of the many riding and racing schools that are currently in operation. This kind of formal training greatly accelerates on-bike skills, allowing graduates to ride with more confidence and a higher margin of safety on either the street or the track.

But does that philosophy also apply to female riders? Motorcycling traditionally has been a male-dominated activity, so most of the sport's priorities have been tailored to serve the needs of the Y-chromosome group. But more

women than ever have been taking up motorcycling in recent years, and that prompts the question: Is there a need for rider training geared specifically for women?

According to Keith Code, former roadracer, founder of the California Superbike School and author of *Twist of the Wrist* and several other books on riding techniques, “In the area of rider training, the motorcycle is insensitive to gender. The basics remain the basics, no matter who is sitting in the saddle.”

I agree entirely with Code's statement—which is no big surprise, as I am one of the instructors at his California Superbike School. And as you probably have already assumed, I also am a female, in addition to being a roadracer and avid motorcyclist. So, I know firsthand that women are just as capable as men of riding a motorcycle and riding



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it well. The skills for the street and the track are essentially the same for all riders. The controls, the corners, the problems and the methods of instruction do not change with gender.

This doesn't necessarily mean that there are no needs that apply specifically to women riders. There seem to be two main hurdles that female students struggle with more than their male counterparts: The first is confidence; the second is physical size and comfort on the motorcycle.

Many women are intimidated by the

prospect of attending a co-ed training school or track day for the first time because they lack confidence in their riding ability. Those who do gather up the courage often arrive with the preconceived notion that they will not be as good or as fast as the male riders.

They shouldn't worry about such things. I've had the opportunity to coach both male and female riders at different tracks around the world and found that many of the women have been a little scared or insecure about coming to the school. Their fears usually included being the only girl in a group of testosterone-charged males; riding too slowly and holding up the guys; getting passed aggressively; or sharing the track with a bunch of super-fast racers. Usually, by mid-morning, their fears have been replaced with mile-wide smiles as they realize that it's not that scary out on the track, that they aren't the slowest, that other riders treat them with respect and kindness, and that they are learning important skills while having a fantastic time.

For women who still aren't sure about taking to the track with a bunch of men, there are some female-only track days and riding-school options. In 2001, Aprilia USA backed Femmoto, the first women-only track-day series that continues to this day. Explains Robert Pandya of Aprilia, “We wanted to help dissolve these initial barriers of entry by helping to create a non-threatening, all-female track environment that catered to the slightly different needs of women riders. We had spotters for the in-seam-challenged and average-height riders, but they often were no longer needed by lunchtime.”

Pandya's comments reflect the indisputable fact that many females face

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certain physical challenges that can make riding a motorcycle slightly more difficult than it is for most males. Women typically are smaller and lighter than men and often have difficulty just getting their feet to touch the ground. I know the problem well: At 5-3 and 120 pounds, I usually cannot get both feet on the ground when straddling the average sportbike. This can make slow-speed maneuvering, parking and even stopping a challenge. My suggestions to women who face this problem are to make sure the ground is even when stopping; look for potholes or depressions in the ground; practice shifting your weight to one side so that one foot can be firmly planted on the ground when stopped; and don't be afraid of asking for help if you need it.

Other options are adjusting the suspension to lower the ride height, or looking into aftermarket lowering kits or shaved-down seats. Talk to your local dealership or mechanic about ways to make your motorcycle more comfortable for you. Your confidence in your ability to control the bike will go way up if the bike fits.

Some people might be surprised—or shocked, actually—to learn that women riders generally make better students than men. Stuart Smith, senior instructor at the California Superbike School, says, “Women focus a bit better on the skills of riding as opposed to proving how fast they are. Guys sometimes have that macho attitude of just trying to go fast. In my experience, women rarely seem to have any pre-set ideas of how to do some-



thing on the track. You tell them to go do something and they just go out and do it. More often than not, the female riders at our schools are the ones who make the most overall improvements.”

One of my more memorable students was a 13-year-old girl named Randi. She was an accomplished dirtbike rider, but the school marked her first time on a sportbike or a roadrace track, and she was initially terrified. After I took a little time to help boost her confidence and make her feel more comfortable, she went out on the track and did the drills. She soon started making incredible improvements and was less fearful and willing to try new things. By the end of the day, she definitely was *not* the slowest rider on the track!

For men looking for ways to get their wives, girlfriends, mothers, sisters or daughters to attend a riding school, I suggest you simply encourage them to do so rather than trying to force them. Let them know there are quite a few inspirational female riders out there breaking the stereotypes, and inform them of other options such as schools and track days dedicated exclusively to women. Don't pressure them, but let them know that there are plenty of opportunities out there.

My friend and fellow racer, Kathy Hubble, sums it up perfectly: “Once women realize that riding is not so dangerous and actually quite safe—with proper gear and all the safety precautions, of course—they love it. Then they become addicted, just like we are!”



### CONTACT INFORMATION

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