

TROUBLE

IN RIDER TRAINING

Part 2 by David L. Hough

IN PART 1 of this series, we provided a brief history of rider training in the USA, noting that training seemed to be accomplishing what it had been created to do: Reducing the motorcyclist fatality rate. By 1990 almost all states had a motorcycle safety program, administered by the state, using curricula developed by the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF), and MSF certified instructors. At the encouragement of the MSF, state rider training administrators began to hold annual conferences, and in 1989 formed the National Association of State Motorcycle Safety Administrators (SMSA). By 1994, more than 100,000 new motorcyclists were being trained every year, nationwide.

But in the mid 1990s, several things happened that threatened to change the rider training system, about the same time the MSF hired a new president, Tim Buche.

MSF Takeovers

Ominously, the MSF started to take over several state motorcycle safety programs. The first was Pennsylvania. The deal was, by most accounts, a little...uhh... "odd." The MSF offered the Pennsylvania state motorcycle safety administrator a juicy staff position at MSF headquarters out in California. Then, with its administrator gone, Pennsylvania was relieved to have the MSF take over the administration of its motorcycle program. This was the first state where the MSF not only provided the training curricula, but also directly supervised the training sites. Why Pennsylvania? We're not sure, but let's note that at the time, Pennsylvania had one of the largest safety budgets of any state program, \$1.4 million back in 1993, and growing.

It was a little different when the MSF took over the rider training contract for New Mexico. The New Mexico program was in serious trouble, so the MSF was welcomed with open arms. And our contacts in New Mexico confirm that MSF management of their program was, and continues to be, an acceptable deal for everyone.

More recently, the MSF made a quiet bid for the West Virginia program, and got it. We hadn't heard any rumors that West Virginia was in trouble, and apparently the

MSF just underbid the existing contract. Then, in late 2003, the MSF underbid California's long-time training contractor. Rumors are that both Harley-Davidson and American Honda were unhappy that more riders weren't being trained, even though the California program had been graduating more than 20,000 new riders each year.

If you're wondering how a national corporation can underbid a state training organization, let's note that the MSF gets all the records from state programs as part of the deal of licensing its curricula and certifying instructors. Once you know what the bids were for the last five years or so, it's easy to underbid. Rumors have been spreading that the MSF is now interested in taking over the Florida, Georgia and Utah programs. The MSF doesn't admit this, but their track record has been to do what they want, and then hire a "spin control" public relations firm to smooth out the ruffled feathers later.

The MSF Clams Up

The second big change in rider training was that the MSF and the Motorcycle Industry Council (MIC) started choking off communication. Prior to about 1993, even journalists could call up MSF staffers and have a nice dialogue about what was happening inside the system. The late Roger Hull, as editor of *Road Rider*, used to have long conversations with MSF Presidents, and some of us used to stop by the MSF offices just for a chat. The MSF was a member of SMSA, and participated in conference seminars. Then suddenly, in the 1990s, staffers at the MSF began to quit. Others were let out to pasture. Letters from state administrators sent to the MSF to clarify policies were often not answered. The MSF stopped informing state programs of what it was planning, and finally dropped its membership in SMSA altogether.

Communication between the MSF leadership and state administrators (not to mention the motorcycling press) began to slow to a trickle, and in many cases actually turned hostile. For instance, during the development and testing of the new Basic RiderCourse, state administrators were understandably curious about what the cur-

riculum would look like, and very interested in helping smooth out any administrative wrinkles. One state coordinator who attempted to get involved in the process was told, "We don't want your input. We don't care what you think, we're going to cram it (the BRC) down your throat."

Riders Edge

The third significant change in rider training was that Harley-Davidson began to offer its own training program, "Riders Edge," independently of the existing state programs. That was an outgrowth of the concept that a student tends to buy the same brand of motorcycle he or she rode in training. The fly in the ointment was that up to the time of Riders Edge, the MSF had limited novice riders to no larger than 250cc training machines.

Harley-Davidson's plan was to develop a 500cc single-cylinder machine they felt would be suitable for a novice. Okay, the Buell "Blast" was twice the size of the MSF limit, but Harley-Davidson had leverage. Remember the Golden Rule: "Whoever holds the gold gets to make the rules." Harley-Davidson is a sponsor of the MSF and a member of the MIC. The current chairman of the MSF Board of Trustees is Lara Lee, who also happens to be an employee of Harley-Davidson. Harley-Davidson got its Riders Edge program approved, using Buell Blasts and a special curriculum, different from what the state programs were using.

New Curricula

During the late 1990s, there had been rumors of an update to the beginning-level MRC:RSS course, and most everyone in rider training was in favor of a revision. The old training style was more like that of a marine drill sergeant, and it needed to be loosened up. But no one outside of the MSF seemed to know *what* those revisions would be. And the MSF wasn't talking.

What the MSF was doing was developing a new training course with an entirely different style, based more on the theories of adult learning, and less on the knowledge of skilled motorcyclists. The MSF didn't let anyone in on the secret, even as it tested the new Basic Rider Course (BRC) in New

