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ENDAY

Highway 1

AUTOS CALIFORNIA STYLE

She Who Rides Fast

Must Conquer Instincts

Motorcycles • At the first all-women session of the California Superbike School, students learn to override dangerous 'survival reactions.'

By MARRY SORENSEN
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

One recent Sunday, 54 women gathered in the desert just north of Lancaster to defeat their deep-seated survival instincts. No, you didn't miss the front-page story about a recent mass suicide.

These were women from around California and across the country who shared a common interest—motorcycles—and a desire to be better, safer riders. They came together for the first all-women session of the California Superbike School.

The locale: the New Streets of Willow Springs, a tight, technical, 2-mile-long racetrack next door to "the fastest road in the West," Willow Springs International Raceway in Rosamond.

The survival instincts they were attempting to conquer included the tendency to grab a handful of brake or abruptly close the throttle when going through a corner; to tighten up on the handlebars when the situation calls for a relaxed posture; and to fixate on an object in or near the roadway, thus heading straight for it.

These seemingly healthy "survival reactions," as riding guru and school director Keith Code calls them, may be the body's normal reaction to perceived danger, but they are potentially deadly when riding a motorcycle.

"To be a safe, effective rider, you have to overcome survival instincts," a charismatic Code told his leather-clad students, who listened intently during classroom sessions for nuggets of wisdom to take out to the track.

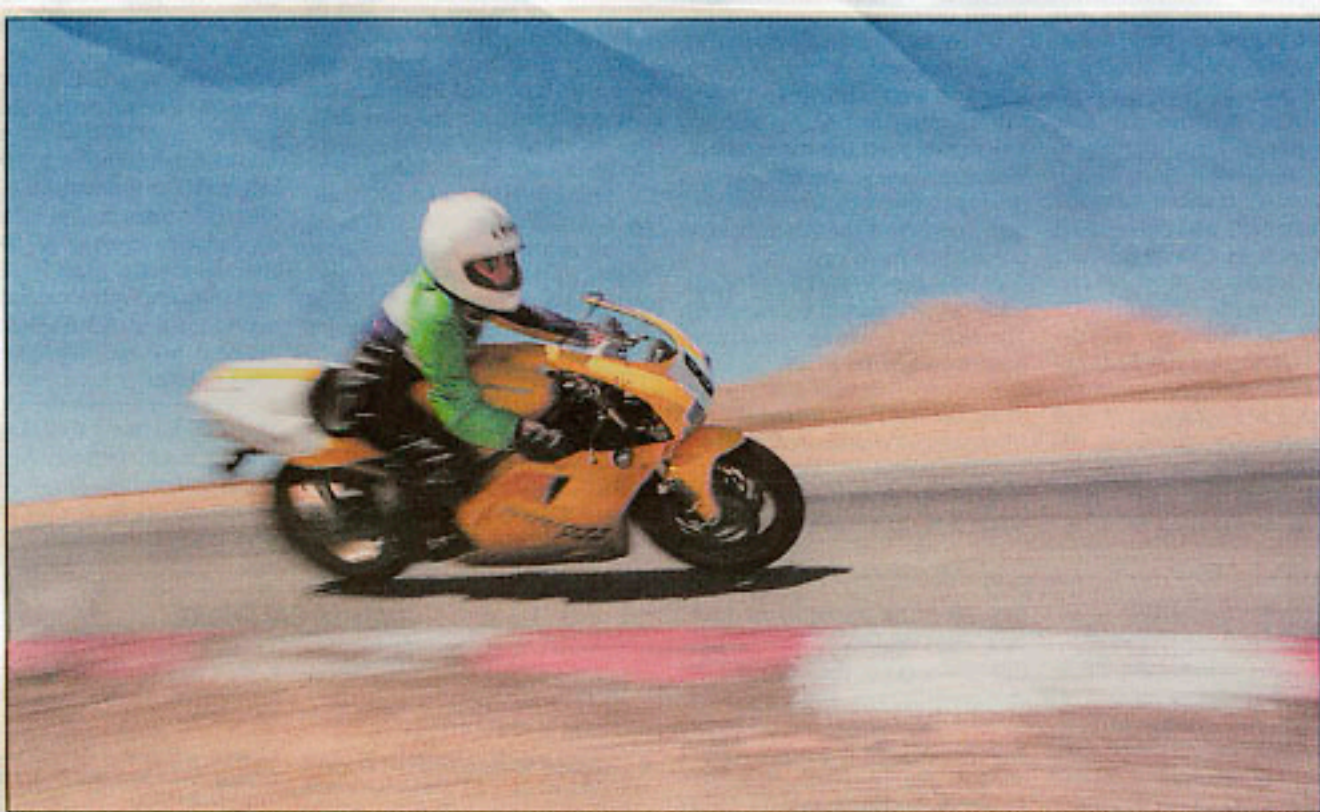
Inspired by the mantra "you do what you practice," those who sign up for riding schools such as Code's hope to beat the statistics that show that many riders involved in accidents never initiate evasive action when that proverbial car turns left in front of them or the truck they're following suddenly slams on the brakes.

In such cases, as Code's students learn, hitting the brakes or pulling back on the throttle can often be the worst—and final—actions a rider may take.

"Riding in the city, I can never be fully prepared for all the things that could happen," said Leasha Overturf, a photographer from Chicago who took to dirt bikes when she was 8.

"You have to deal with people double-parking, running lights. It's mayhem," said Overturf, 33. "I wanted to take the class to learn defensive-driving maneuvers. I also wanted get better in the corners. When I'm out riding with five guys who are zipping off in front of me, I want to keep up with them, if not beat them."

In other words, Overturf wanted to go fast, just like every rider who heads to the racetrack to improve her skills. Con-



Photos by ANN JOHANSSON / Special to The Times

Jennifer Proffitt of Reseda on the racetrack at the first all-women session at California Superbike School in Rosamond.



Leasha Overturf came from Chicago to learn defensive-driving maneuvers.

lently, the same techniques that might make a rider faster through the twisties can also impart the confidence and ability to yank a bike out of harm's way when necessary.

California Superbike School offers up to 50 sessions each year at racetracks around the country (including more than a dozen at Willow Springs), offering four levels through which riders can progress. Each student may bring his or her own motorcycle or ride one of the school's new Kawasaki Ninja ZX-6R sportbikes. Personal riding gear is also optional, as you can rent full racing leathers, helmet, gloves and boots at any track day put on by the school.

Why did a Southern California Level I class aimed solely at women fill to capacity?

"The fact that it was an all-women school had a complete and total impact on me," said Overturf, who was visiting a friend while on business in San Francisco when she heard about the class. "It was like a security blanket.

"I had been thinking about taking a school but always felt intimidated. Something about it being all women meant I could feel peaceful about signing up for



Jocelyn Kane of San Francisco with Keith Code, director of the Superbike School. Code says students must overcome survival instincts to become safe, effective riders.

my first riding school."

Renita Taylor, 41, who works in computer support at a special-effects company in San Francisco, also made the six-hour drive south to participate in the course, which was sponsored by Mota Motobike Gear for Women of Berkeley.

"When I heard about the all-women school, my first thought was it would be fun to be around all these other women who shared my interest in motorcycles," Taylor said. "I work at a place that's kind of a high-tech boys' club. I'm always in that atmosphere, so this was a chance to get together with other women and learn skills I didn't have."

Competition was West Hollywood resident Kelly Daugherty's intent when she signed up for the session based on Code's reputation in the world of road racing.

"I joined in spite of the fact that it was a women's school," said the 38-year-old BusinessWeek advertising sales executive, who rode motocross in pro classes as a teenager and recently took up street riding after 17 years out of the saddle.

"I absolutely want to race, and as an aggressive female sport rider, I found it a very frustrating experience," Daugherty said of the class. "There were far too many women on the track at any given time. Had it been a group of men, my guess is they would have broken the group out according to skill level, not based on whether you had a uterus.

"That part of it was very frustrating to me," she said. "I was out on the track with women who I was scaring. It was scary to me."

Please see Cycles, G2

Cycles

Continued from G1

Daugherty will stick to dual-gender classes from now on, which at California Superbike School typically have a ratio of two women for every 20 men, Code said.

No dates have been set for another women-only school, though Code said he's open to the idea if interest merits.

Whatever their motivation or take on the school, these women reflect the increasingly diverse group of female riders in the United States today.

Much like the nearly 700 women who gathered in Athens, Ohio, in July for the second American Motorcyclist Assn.-sponsored Women & Motorcycling conference, they were single professionals and ladies who lunch. They were white, black, Latino and Asian American. Some weighed 90 pounds, others more than 200. Some sported flowing tresses, others had cropped hair.

And they were just a tiny segment of the more than 420,000 American women who own motorcycles, according to the most recent statistics available, a 1998 survey commissioned by the Motorcycle Industry Council in Irvine.

"That number is increasing," said industry analyst Don Brown of DJB Associates, also of Irvine, who conducted the study. "There isn't any doubt about that."

Industry support of women's involvement in the realm is also on the upswing. Maybe you could call it survival instinct.

■ *California Superbike School, P.O. Box 3601, Glendale, CA 91221. (818) 841-7661; <http://www.superbikeschool.com>. Find other riding schools online by typing "motorcycles" into your search engine.*