



Hit the books

Abhinav Mishra knows the learning never ends even if you are the rider-in-chief at *Top Gear*. So, he went back to school – the California Superbike School

Photography: ADITYA BEDRE

A silver Toyota Qualis comes to a halt in the pit lane of the Madras Motor Race Track (MMRT), in Chennai. There is something strange about this particular Qualis, though – it does not have rear seats, which have been removed to make space for stuff. ‘Stuff’, in this case, is a BMW S1000RR. The driver waits for his helper to offload the precious cargo, and once it’s out, he steps out, pilots it into the garage and parks it next to a long line of superbikes.

This isn’t a track day, and nor am I testing a new sportsbike. What I am here to test, is myself. You see, even though I have been riding for over a decade and now head TG’s two-wheeler section, my track riding skills still need some refining. You can only learn more with



Two dozen eggs, tight through C1... wait, what?

every kilometre you ride, and so, when the good folks at California Superbike School (CSS) asked me if I’d like to attend their track session, I had no reason to not go or to ask one of my colleagues to ‘share the load’.

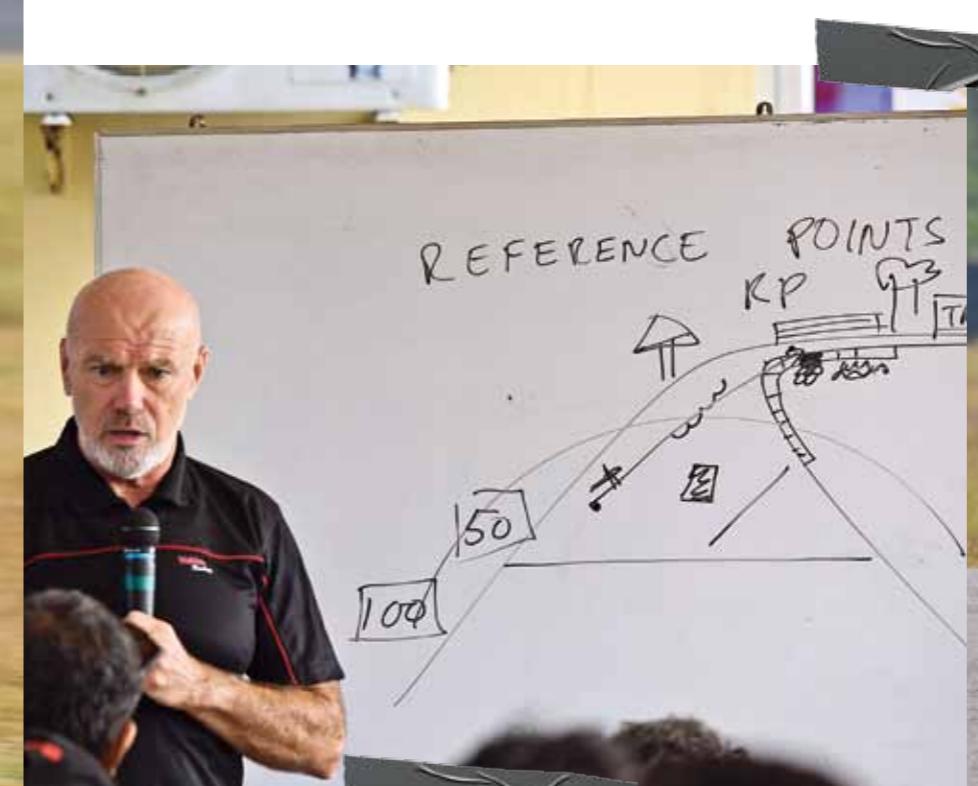
CSS was founded in 1980 by former motorcycle racer Keith Code. It’s the place to be if you are an aspiring racer or an enthusiast wanting to learn track tricks. CSS organises a three-day course annually which sees a team of international instructors watching your every move on track.

Don’t let the ‘superbike’ in CSS fool you, though. The next three days are about refining and learning new techniques, and not setting lap records. Participants can get their own motorcycle to the track, where it will be

inspected by the coaches and cleared as track-worthy. If you can’t get your own bike, no problem. The school will provide you with its very own track-spec TVS Apache RTR 180.

I have brought along ‘my’ motorcycle: the Suzuki Gixxer Cup bike. It’s basically a run-of-the-mill Gixxer SF, with the headlight and certain other production bits removed. This helps reduce the weight of the motorcycle by 20kg. The front suspension height has been dropped by 20mm, and clip-on handlebars and rear-set foot pegs have been included. Oh, and there’s also a free-flow exhaust and a race-tuned carburettor for more power.

Over the next three days, there will be five five-lap track sessions. That’s close to 100km of track riding each day. A coach is assigned to three students in a group. The



Speeding displays don't go down well with the coach

coach monitors every student closely in each session. Riders, on the other hand, must monitor their lines. The speedometer is covered with duct tape to keep distractions to a minimum. The message is clear: eyes on the road, boys and girls.

With the pit crew signalling me to go, it was instinctive of me to crack the throttle open on my way out of the pit lane. I go too fast, and completely miss the racing line diving into the first corner. Like a restless pup, I stay on the throttle. After a series of bends that I’ve taken way too fast, I stand on the brakes when I realise I’m about to go off-track.

This display of speed hasn’t gone down well with my coach, Spyros Koutras. I didn’t realise he was riding right behind me. Back in the pit lane, I am asked what I’m doing wrong. I know the answer all too well: “Too much speed.”

The coach’s instructions are simple in theory, but tough to follow on the track. “Go slow, and concentrate on throttle control than braking,” he tells me. It’s an eye-opener of sorts. It’s frustrating as I am surprised at seeing how I have reached my limit on the first day. After that, whenever I go back on track, I keep this little but important piece of information in mind: go slow.

With the speed in check, and throttle input a lot less jerky, I’m making steady progress. There are yellow X markers placed on every corner for us to use as reference points. Enter the first corner ▶





right and the rest of them will fall in place, we're told. I have more time to look around and adjust the speed for the next corner. With the speed low, I am also constantly learning the track better and making mental notes on how to take a corner more effectively.

After every session, I have a chat with the coach and talk about how I'm doing; whether I've actually made any progress or if it's all inside my head. Based on these inputs, he makes a few suggestions. After that, it's back to the classroom.

Unlike in a school classroom, things in a CSS classroom are a lot more interactive and interesting. What happens to the suspension on a motorcycle when you open the throttle? Most would think the front suspension extends while the rear compresses. Most would be wrong. The suspension extends at each end. That sounds strange, but once we see it for ourselves, everything falls into place.

Every theory session covers a new topic, after which students are asked to go and put it into practice. With basic cornering out of the way, we move on to more technical bits like counter steering, target fixation and body positioning. Little things that need to be experienced on track than just read about to understand them better.

My confidence levels are on the upswing with every track outing. I am able to concentrate on the finer aspects of riding. It is here that I realise there is so much more to track riding than pure speed. By the end of the third day, I feel like while I'm doing everything right, I'm going a touch too slow. Which, like many of my notions at CSS, is again completely wrong.

While I have gotten better at tackling corners, I have missed how I am



HERE'S HOW YOU APPLY FOR CSS
California Superbike School is an annual event held at the Madras Motorsport Race Track, in Chennai. To get more details on the next event, log on to: www.superbikeschoolindia.com

harnessing the power from the 155cc motor even better. The speedometer being hidden from sight is making me rely more on the exhaust note. This is helping me use the throttle and gears even better. The sticky MRFs are providing ample grip. Scraping the foot pegs is not unsettling any more.

Soon, I find myself tailing a student riding a Yamaha R1. Though the little 155cc motor is no match for a 998cc inline-four, I am surprised by how

close I can stay with the R1 in a corner, before he blasts out of sight as soon as the main straight appears, only to be reeled in once again a few corners later. And, every time I'm tempted to push harder, I remind myself this is a school, not a track day.

These three days have been a revelation of sorts. Not only have my basics been sharpened, but I have picked up on the finer nuances of circuit riding that only CSS can help you imbibe.

That guy brought his S1000RR in a Qualis. Jeez.

