

THE SCHOOL RUN



Going back to school is something Ruman Devmane never thought he'd do. But the California Superbike School is different like that.

PHOTOGRAPHY ADITYA BEDRE AND RUMAN DEVMANE

My cheap, waterproof watch read 7:22am as I fired up the Interceptor that morning. I was late by a couple of hours already, so I decided without much provocation that I could afford the luxury of revisiting an old memory. It was of an anecdote involving a wise old man who, in reference to the birth of an old friend of mine, had said it was 'not a bad time to start at all'. I anchored my optimism on that playful, if slightly mystical, declaration for the remainder of that morning, and it soothed my nerves as I waded through an already wide-awake Mumbai city. About 300km down the road, having handpicked a tree of sizeable circumference to park underneath, I realised I hadn't done too badly for someone who left home at 7:22am, having slept through a startling alarm bell. Sir Stirling Moss must usually be right about these things, then.

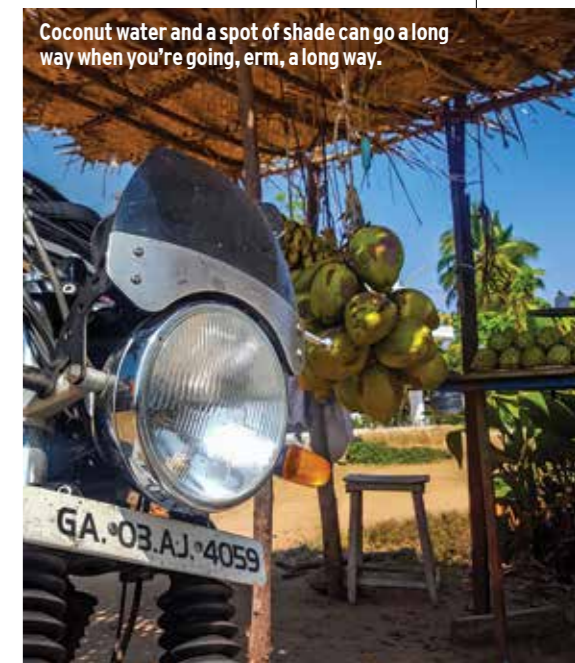
A LONG WAY TO GO

No longer anxious, I set off again. I could do a stop every 300km if I liked, or more if I fancied

running the petrol tank dry. With a cloudless sky above my mildly simmering helmet, I saw no respite in halting either. Life, I figured, would just go on like this for a while. It wasn't a bad place to be, if I'm being honest. The motorcycle between my legs was designed for this sort of lifestyle. From within my helmet, the faint beat of the 650cc parallel-twin assumed the role of a comfortable white noise that would become a part of my daily routine for the next few days. The suspension oscillated steadily, assuring me it would be there when I needed it, and my tailbone found comfort against the withered old bag I'd strapped to the back of the motorcycle. Inside it was a set of borrowed racing leathers I once called my own.

I don't usually look at my watch on a motorcycle journey. It seems like quite the antithesis of liberating travel, to remind oneself of being bound by time. Today was different, though. A few weeks to this day, the map had revealed I lived around 1,400km from the Madras Motor Race Track, where a session of the hallowed California Superbike School (CSS) was

Coconut water and a spot of shade can go a long way when you're going, erm, a long way.



to be conducted. This is an institution that has produced some of the best motorcycling talents in the world and 2019 was to mark its 10th appearance in India. I'd never been to the CSS – the inclination was never strong enough despite being a racetrack regular – but this time, the →



With no tyre removal machine around you, you're at the mercy of a hammer and some enthusiasm. Tubeless tyres, please?



Trying to impress a CSS coach with your cornering abilities is easier with the side-stand down. Just kidding.

riding days – the perfect real-world test. It's no wonder I kept looking at my wristwatch every hundred kilometres or so. There was a sense of accomplishment waiting at the end of the road.

With no sign of protest from the Interceptor, save for a punctured rear tyre just around sunset (it wasn't an easy fix, but India is an incredible country and a determined roadside mechanic made sure he got the job done), I rolled into the town of Tumakuru, a hair's breadth away from Bengaluru, just in time for dinner. The tripmeter indicated I had travelled 937km from home, and I was keen on a hot meal and some shut-eye. Having calculated

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Going faster would get me there early, but that would help only if I didn't enjoy being on the Interceptor.
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Fast, but doing it all wrong! 'Shoulders should point into the corner' and more things I learned at CSS.

← invitation rapidly took the form of an unavoidable commitment. I was going to have to go. A kindly manufacturer was quick to chip in with a race-ready bike – no questions asked – but I surprised myself when I politely declined the offer. There was no way I going to leave you, the made-in-India motorcyclist, behind.

As a growing motorcycling community, we are united by our quest for better days. We dream together, toil together, to make more motorcycles our own, to give them names, to figure out the uphill task that our lives tend to be in our own small ways. It just had to be about the motorcycles you and I are daydreaming about these days – the Royal Enfield twins. When RE's CEO, Sid Lal, comically revealed the prices of both bikes as a combined entity, only to further fuel the world's anxiety, he really did hint at a belief that implied you could fulfil most of your motorcycling dreams if you bought both together, for Rs 5.55 lakh or thereabout. Why not, come to think of it? Our modest means may limit us to owning just one big bike at a time – if not in an entire lifetime – but for the first time, you can possibly have two instead. The prospect tempted me no end. About five minutes after I had rearranged these thoughts to form one intelligible question, Royal Enfield's press man had confirmed he was going to fix me up with a Continental GT 650 in Chennai. This left me free to burden our long-term Interceptor with the 'Great Indian Highway' test, which would involve clocking a shade over 2,700km in four

The Continental GT 650 looks like it's a few decades late for Superbike School...



...but in the twisty bits, it can show the latest superbikes the merits of a simple, friendly layout.

nobody in this town would find any real use for racing leathers, or a tail bag that's breathing its last, I decided to leave it strapped to the motorcycle for the night. The lone security guard in attendance assured me of its safety and I was easily convinced. The next day would see me clock another 360km before I'd arrive in Sriperumbudur well in time to take possession of the Conti GT I'd been promised.

The air got overbearingly hot as I inched closer to Chennai, and the relatively shorter distance saw me taking more than a few breaks; coconut water works like a charm on a hot day of motorcycle travel, I discovered. And, thankfully, the Interceptor needed no more nourishment than its share of fuel. The soft-ish seat aside (yes, even the optional Touring seat our bike is equipped with), nothing on the Interceptor seems inclined to creating stress or fatigue. The motor, at ease chugging along at 120kph with the tacho needle nudging the 4,500rpm mark, makes covering long distances a matter of intent rather than endurance, and at no point did I find myself wishing for any more power. Going faster would get me there early, but that would help only if I didn't enjoy being on the Interceptor. I arrived in Sriperumbudur at lunch time, unloaded my worldly belongings and checked into what was going to be home for the next four days. The Conti GT arrived later in the afternoon with just 700km on the odo, and sufficiently pleased with everything having fallen into place, I called it an early night.

BACK ON TRACK

Well before the sun had risen, I had showered, made myself coffee, stuffed myself into the once well-fitting leathers (let's call it evolution – ahem!) and set off for the racetrack. I had reached in 10 minutes, but it could have taken me five had I not managed to lose the way, making me the only person to ever get lost whilst going in a straight line. By the time I had arrived, the paddock was already busy, with lots of serious-looking men in official CSS T-shirts strutting about with notepads. The pit garages were crammed with mostly superbikes that had probably been tucked in the night before, having gotten here from all corners of the →

Instructors rate students while on the go! Pens get tucked into knee-sliders. Incredible!





Nothing escapes the eye of a shadowing coach – and mine has four!

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The California Superbike School, above all else, fires up an attitude for learning, regardless of your aptitude.
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steering, clutch, gearbox, throttle and the two brakes – which, we realise in a moment of ‘Why did I never think this way before?’, alter just two things – speed and direction. The very premise of the CSS is to ride by thought. A lot of us get on a motorcycle and eventually get somewhere simply thanks to muscle memory. It’s enjoyable and in no way unfulfilling, but there is a lack of refinement to it that you can go on for years without noticing. With those imperfections – the more, the worse – you effectively hold the door open for mistakes. The lucky ones amongst us will probably get by for years (just like I have), but luck has a tendency to run out when you’re least expecting it. Let’s hope you never have to find out.

It also became very apparent that bringing the Continental GT 650 along had been a sort of masterstroke. Over the course of three days, we learnt 16 substantial new things about how to ride a motorcycle. If my memory serves me well, the last time I learnt 16 new things was back in secondary school, and that went on for an eternity – not a weekend! It was, therefore, very important that I’d put my mind to learning with absolute sincerity, something I may not have been able to do on a more committed machine simply owing to fatigue. Racing leathers don’t go too well with hot and humid weather, but

because the Conti GT proved to be so effortless, I often found myself at the start of the queue of riders waiting to be let out in each session. Mind you, save for a tyre pressure drop to 25psi, I left the motorcycle untouched, and it didn’t so much cope than put a few larger motorcycles (and egos, I hate to admit it) to shame. The sporty riding position never gets taxing and there is an inherent goodness to the chassis that, coupled with the right techniques I was being taught, meant I could master the racing line – a feeling of immense satisfaction, I must confess – while being, and looking, smooth. You could conceivably read a copy of Keith Code’s A Twist Of The Wrist while doing CSS lessons on track – that’s how easy the Continental GT makes it!

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEAD

Having said that, I mustn’t forget to mention my coach Siddharth Trivellore, a brave man indeed, for trusting me with not rear-ending him (or, somehow, reversing into him when he chose to follow) as he led me to every exact apex. Over the course of those three days, we developed a bond that is unlikely to fade away with time. At the end of every session, I’d hold my breath to see if he’d give me a jubilant thumbs up, and when he didn’t, I made up by being more attentive. This,

in fact, is perhaps the CSS’ biggest takeaway – it fires up an attitude for learning, regardless of your aptitude. It makes you believe that if you put your heart and mind into something, there’s no way you cannot achieve it. It’s a school that shatters your complacency and creates a well-deserved platform for the one thing we tend to not apply, or at least not enough, in our mechanical lives – thought. A thought-driven life is monumentally better than one that isn’t, and it helps if you can find ways to put a motorcycle between your legs as you figure it all out. It really is all in the head.

As the light gradually faded away from what was our last day at school, my time with the Continental GT also came to an end. I gave it a loving pat for giving me the most blissful 400km I will have ever clocked on a racetrack, and allowed myself a moment of silent glum. Do I want to own one, then? Desperately, and I’ve already picked a name for it – you will be the first to know, I promise. The next morning, having strapped my worldly belongings onto the Interceptor yet again, I set off in the direction that would lead me home.

A thousand kilometres had swept past from underneath us by the time darkness fell; I decided to halt for the night, more out of a want



to wake up to yet another day of riding than out of tiredness. When a motorcycle does that to you even after a 1,000km stint, you can be sure you’ve bought the right one. Speaking of which, I’ve reserved a name for the Interceptor 650 I’m going to buy as well. It’s not about them being perfect motorcycles – there is no such thing, in a sense – but rather about how they let you paint your motorcycling dreams. And you know what the best thing about dreaming is? There’s never a bad time to start. **AI**

← country. The sight of the Continental GT aroused eye-rolls and even a few sniggers (or it may have been the sight of me in leathers – I will never know), but I chose not to read too much into it. In any case, I was too hungry to bother.

Within the next hour, I had been patted down vigorously (don’t be alarmed, it was just gear scrutiny), gotten my motorcycle inspected, chomped down a sizable breakfast and ushered into an assembly room. What appeared to be 50, maybe a bit more, motorcycle enthusiasts filled up the chairs noisily, facing an army of CSS coaches. Suitably instructed on the basics of racetrack rules and regulations, we were dispatched to our classrooms or on to the track, depending on the group we’d been enrolled into. Over the next three days, we’d be graduating from Level 0 to 3; a more serious Level 4 group was in attendance, too, but we’d see them only over breakfast or lunch, if at all. Now, I won’t burden you with everything that went on in the classrooms because you’ve probably read everything about it many times in this magazine. If you haven’t, our meticulously curated website certainly isn’t going to disappoint you. And so, what I will tell you about, instead, is how the CSS impacts your motorcycling life.

The onus, to begin with, is as much on learning as it is on unlearning. With the CSS being a product of real-world riders, starting from the legendary Keith Code, a lot of what you learn there is simply an exercise in transitioning from the conscious to the subconscious and, sometimes, the other way around. For instance, the very introduction to the CSS involves enlisting all the six controls one engages – the



A grinning instructor may not always be a positive sign. Here, we discuss a little ‘outing’.



If you end up aligned exactly with your coach by the end of it all, you deserve a raise. Ahem!

