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SMOOTHLY, EVENLY, CONSTANTLY

*Learning new tricks and unlearning old habits at
India's premier riding school*



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GOALS. IT'S IMPORTANT TO SET GOALS. MINE, for the second time out at the California Superbike School, was to get the quick-turn sorted. Two years ago, when I first did the CSS, the quick-turn was my biggest takeaway. I also realised that the quick-turn is easier said than done, being able to trust in yourself and trust in the bike to give the 'bars a firm push and drop it into the corner takes a major step up in confidence. And that's despite the coaches reminding us that nobody ever crashed by turning in quicker.

This time round I didn't lack in confidence as far as the bike was concerned.

A few months before CSS we sampled the TVS Apache RR 310 at the MMRT track in Chennai and I enjoyed it so much that if the TVS guys hadn't obliged me with an RR 310 at the track, I'd have sent our long-term test bike to Chennai. After all, the MMRT is where most of the development of the RR 310 was done and it works superbly on the track. While being quick enough, the crucial thing about the RR 310 is the chassis and suspension are so well sorted it lets you focus on the training modules without having to worry about the bike doing anything funny as speeds increase. That's a big deal.

Right, to CSS then. Students are split into three groups with 15-20 riders in each group. There are 15-20-minute classroom sessions where the lesson is explained, the theory behind each drill broken down, and then we hit the track for 10-odd laps where we put the drills into practice under the eye of a riding coach shadowing us. Each coach is assigned three riders per session so the training is quite personalised and he points out the exact drill we should be focusing on, what we are doing right, what we are doing wrong and if we are really messing things up, pulling us off track for a talking to. After each riding session we sit down to debrief with the riding coach before heading back to the classroom.

The training begins with familiar modules, no brakes and no gears to get us focused on the correct line and build up our concentration, after which we progress to two gears and light brakes, all the while repeating the mantra 'smoothly, evenly, constantly'. We all know that a



Top and above: One-on-one feedback from the coach means you are told exactly what you're doing wrong and how you can get it right

motorcycle works best when given smooth inputs but it's surprising how jerky we really are. Smoothly, evenly and constantly makes sure you use the physics of a motorcycle to extract the best from it. Turn-in on a closed throttle (always on a closed throttle, on the gas the bike will want to push straight); crack open the throttle (not whack it open upsetting the suspension) which brings weight transfer into play and opens up the suspension so that it is now operating in its sweet spot; and then open up the throttle in a consistent and deliberate manner to transfer weight to the rear-wheel to get better drive. The opening up of the suspension benefits you in two ways: it gives you more ground clearance which means more cornering lean and the suspension now has more travel to ride the bumps without transferring it to the chassis.

The next lesson is letting the bike work for you and that



FOR THE BRAIN, SPEED IS DANGER,
RUNNING PACE IS THE FASTEST IT IS
PROGRAMMED FOR



means letting go of your death grip. We all do it. Grip the handlebars with all our might, gripping even harder when the 'bars start to move. Wrong! We are messing with the bike! Through a corner, as the bike rides over bumps, the wheelbase as well as the geometry is constantly changing as the suspension moves up and down and when the handlebars move that's the bike's in-built countersteer coming into play to account for the geometry changes. It takes time to build the trust to let the 'bars move, I admit that, and the coach flapping his arms in front of me kept reminding me to stay loose on the bike. One firm push on the inside handlebar – countersteer basically – and then relax.

So how do you grip the bike? That's what your outside leg is for. The inside knee slider is hunting for the apex and you lock yourself on the bike by pushing your outside knee into the tank recess. Here you need strength in your thighs and (after market) storm grips help immensely because the leather around the knees and the smooth tank always find it difficult to generate grip. It also demands you sort out your body position – my outside knee was always pointed uselessly at the sky and that's where the coach comes in, constantly reminding me to focus on what the knee is doing.

And then we focus on the quick turn.

At 100kmph you're travelling 27 metres every second.

If you take 3 seconds to turn the bike into the corner you've travelled 81 metres from turn-in to apex. If you quick-turn in 1 second you've shaved 51 metres off this phase. What have you done? Tightened your line so you can now use a late turn-in point which means you've been on the throttle for that fraction longer on the straight. The full-lean, closed-throttle phase is also reduced so you can pick up the bike earlier and get to full throttle earlier. Technique works wonders in all kinds of corners including the switchbacks, like the entry onto the bridge at the back end of the MMRT, where you can go from full lean on the left to full lean on the right over a shorter distance.

I can't say I've mastered the quick turn but I've finally got the hang of it. And credit for that must also go to the RR 310 that does not do anything funny allowing me to try out all these techniques without spooking myself. It also forgives your mistakes – too hot into a corner, too high a gear, brake a tad too late – it wags a finger but doesn't spit you out of the saddle.

At the end of three days the biggest takeaway wasn't the quick turn though – it was vision. We all know about target fixation, we also know to look where we want to go. To this add, we need to look as far ahead as possible. Our eyes, they're conditioned to look for danger, like a bear charging down at us. For the brain, speed is danger, running pace is the fastest it is programmed for. To go faster on a motorcycle we need to calm our brain down and the trick is to look far ahead as possible. Everything becomes slower. Try it on the road, look down at the painted lines and it seems you're going damn fast; shift



Above: Sirish has a quick chat with T T Varadarajan, the man who got CSS to India.
Facing page, bottom: Your head should be exactly where that mirror ought to be



your vision to the trees in the distance and it doesn't seem that fast anymore. It's all perspective. On the track this works by deliberately moving your head, the three-step as the coaches put it. As you get to the braking point your eyes are on the turn-in marker. Before the actual turn-in you shift your focus to the apex while applying a deliberate head-turn motion and keeping the turn-in point in your peripheral vision. And then before hitting the apex you turn your neck and shift focus to the exit, also lifting your neck so you are looking far ahead and thus calming the inputs going to the brain. It's not that complicated and a little practice does wonders. I didn't need the RR 310's lap timer to confirm that I'd become quicker, but crucially I was putting in less effort to ride faster. It all feels easier. My riding isn't ragged and on edge. I'm not scaring myself. And of course, I know there is more pace – in both myself and the motorcycle.

Next goal? More track time! There's no point in doing a riding school without putting in track time to apply all the lessons. And luckily for me there's the RR 310 with the race kit that's round the corner. ☒

Big shout out to Vidiem Racing for bringing the CSS to India and pioneering the concept of riding schools that have now mushroomed across the country. Thanks also to TVS Racing for the RR 310 and the support at the MMRT.