



BACK TO SCHOOL

Discovering the art

OUR MAN DEVESH SHOBHA HEADS TO CSS WITH AN AIM TO GET THE RIGHT LESSONS FROM THE RIGHT PEOPLE. HE WENT THERE WITH HIS CUP HALF EMPTY, ONLY TO RETURN WISER, IF NOT A FASTER MAN

In the era of Internet, finding any sort of information is easier than finding your TV remote at home. But, there's nothing more important than finding the right information, from the right source, and at the right time, something I've realised after spending an interesting weekend at the Madras Motor Race Track. At 33, I may be a bit too old to learn the basics of riding a motorcycle, but that's what this distinctive school is renowned for – taking unpolished but passionate riders under their wing and helping them discover the art of riding a motorcycle around a racetrack. Yes, I'm talking about the famed California Superbike

School that accepted my pleas of having me as one of their students over the weekend at Chennai and what a revelation it has been.

For a very long time, I believed that I could ride any motorcycle on a racetrack thanks to all the riding I've done on the road. But a couple of years into my motoring journalism career, I realised the chances of me doing great on the track were similar to someone becoming India's next singing sensation owing to the great potential they've shown as a bathroom singer. Riding on a racetrack is a different ballgame altogether and if your basics aren't

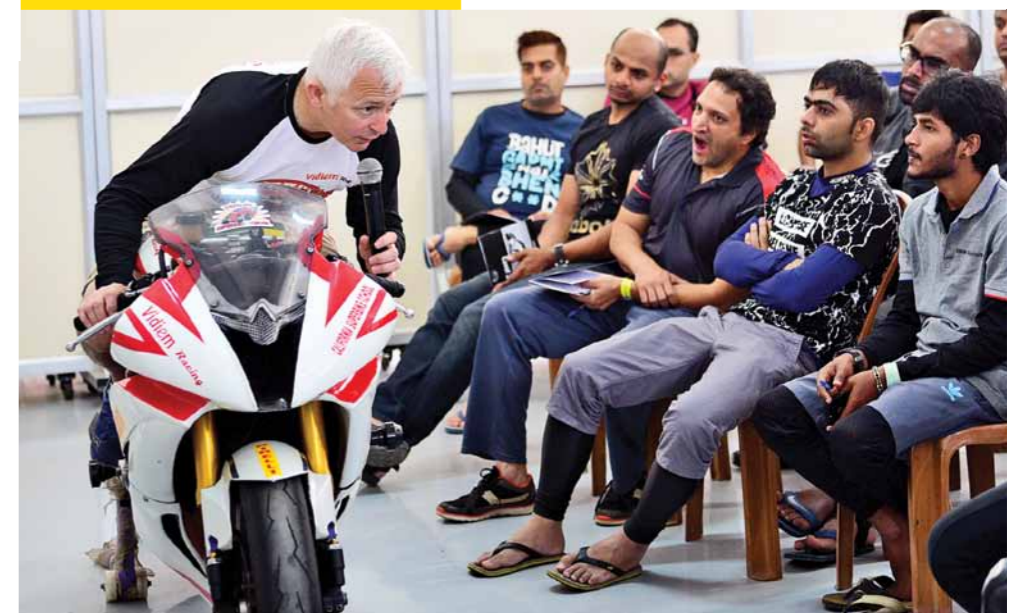


right, you aren't going to make any progress after a certain level. Point in case being tackling corners. How often have you gone faster than some of the slower motorcycles on a long straight but were overtaken mid-corner? Wait, what, is it just me then? Never mind, that's a thing of the past now as three days of classrooms followed by track sessions have made me a confident rider, if not faster. And confidence counts for a lot.

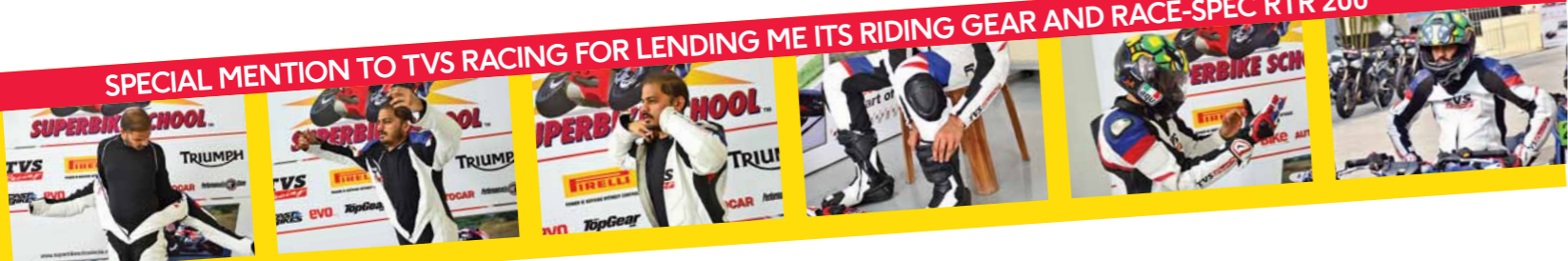
I can say that because unlike in the past, where I would be all stressed, panicking and panting while trying to go faster around a racetrack, after three days, 30 hours, 15 classroom sessions, 15 track outings and 15 rider briefings, I now know exactly what needs to be done and how. It may sound like a lot for someone who's never been to a racetrack before, but once it kick starts with the basic understanding of how to make a motorcycle go faster, things start falling in place.

CSS is a time-tested institution that believes in getting the technique right before anything else. After all, it's better to be slow and careful in the right direction than to be fast and careless on the wrong path, isn't it? So then, the day begins with the basic throttle control and stability exercise, which sounds easy-peasy, but it's not. Try going fast around a racetrack in one single gear, without tapping the brakes. Yes, it's tricky. I did find myself going wide around corners at first, but with every lap, I found my lines and rhythm, giving me the confidence to start pushing myself. But even that turned out to be a bad move. A common, CSS rookie mistake.

As the day progressed, there was a lot of information on the table, which my tiny brain ►



SPECIAL MENTION TO TVS RACING FOR LENDING ME ITS RIDING GEAR AND RACE-SPEC RTR 200





That's coach Martin telling me what I did wrong on track and how to mend my ways



One of the instructors marking out ideal turning points around the corners

PHOTOGRAPHY: ADITYA BEDRE

would find difficult to comprehend at times. That, coupled with the urge to try out different techniques at once, meant that I was a disaster on the track, a hazard even. Thankfully, that's where our personal coaches came to the rescue, analysing each and every move on the racetrack, closely following the riders without letting them know they're being watched at all times. It was only during the rider briefings post the track sessions that I was told of being hopelessly bad at executing the drills expected of me. That hit me real hard. It also made me realise that riding a motorcycle faster isn't magic. It's physics. And that's what Gary Adshead, our chief riding coach at CSS, would try and make us understand on Day 1.

I'm easily distracted. It's been like this since I was a child and things haven't changed much now. However, after a few poor track outings and a couple of stern feedback sessions, I pulled up my socks, made mental notes of all the drills thereafter, didn't get intimidated by the faster riders on the track and played within my limited skillset. It was only then that things began to come together for me and I regained confidence, now completely aware of what's happening on the track and the things I've got to do to get a certain thumbs-up from my coach.

It's only when I got to learn the right technique from the right teachers that I understood the basic mistakes I've been making all my life as a motorcyclist. At most times, I would find myself fighting with the bike to try and go faster, completely unaware that I wasn't doing any good by making the motorcycle do what I wanted it to do with a firm grip on the handlebar. Gary made me and my batchmates realise that the bike doesn't wish to follow our commands, but simply follows the laws of physics and our sole purpose as a rider is to let the motorcycle do what it's meant to do – stay straight. That's interesting.

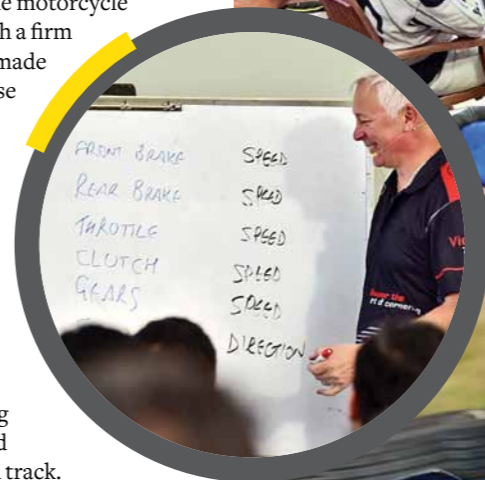
With every new session, our chief coach would introduce a new riding technique and all that we had to do was implement that on track. Successfully, that is. I mastered some and struggled with a few. But the ones that I needed help with, my personal coach Martin Plunkett, or Gary would always be available for a quick chat. Slowly but steadily, I got my body positions right, started working on turning in faster, and finally letting the bike do its bits. As the sessions progressed, I now had my own reference points on the track, understood the track limits, realised what to do with my arms, knees and hips while riding a motorcycle on a racetrack, and finally started looking at where I wanted to go. At the end, I could combine different techniques and form a unified skillset, which not only made me go faster around corners but look good too.

In the end, we were a class of 70-odd students, but not all landed at CSS with the same purpose. The experienced riders simply wanted to find some more pace, while a few wanted to get their riding positions right. However, my sole purpose to be in that classroom was to get my basics right. I sat there with an empty cup, almost, ready to absorb as much as my tiny brains could comprehend. Yes, after riding motorcycles for the past fifteen years, it's a little late in the day to be doing that, but that wasn't the difficult part. To unlearn my past, mostly flawed, riding technique was the most challenging bit. Despite making mental notes in the classroom and trying to apply them, I kept making the same basic mistakes. Old habits die hard.

For sure, it was frustrating and my discontent during rider briefings was visible. But my ever-so-encouraging coach told me he saw a huge improvement in my riding over the three days and the only way to keep getting better is to incorporate the lessons learnt at the CSS into my



Gary's classroom sessions were immensely helpful for understanding each drill



“Tell me and I'll forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I will learn”

daily motorcycle regime, transforming that into my natural style of riding rather than the antics I displayed on the first day. What this school made me realise is that, regardless of your skill levels, all that you need is passion, the urge to learn something new and a teacher who would not tell you what to do but give you the knowledge with which you can decide what would be best for you. To sum it up, Benjamin Franklin once said, “Tell

me and I'll forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I'll learn.” And by being a part of the CSS 2018, I've not just learnt a few tricks, but also evolved as a rider. I know, three days sounds like too little to make any sort of difference to your riding technique, but that's the best thing about this school, it starts with getting the basics right and once that's taken care of, every other piece in the jigsaw puzzle falls into place. The only thing I couldn't do is get my knee down, to which Martin points at his shiny, unscathed knee guards and confirms neither does he. The only difference being he is three times faster around corners than I am. Now that gives me some hope. **TB**

A shout-out to Maya Appliances, the event organisers, to consider my last minute application and getting me a seat at the 2018 edition of the California Superbike School.