

Rush Hour



Rush hour traffic can be fun, thanks to AZ Track Day, Inc. A very good friend of mine, Jerry Whitmore, has been trying for months to get me to go to this event called AZ Track Days. This is where you race around a road track on a sport bike. I told Jerry that it sounded interesting, but never committed to doing it. It did not seem like a thing I would be good at, nor did I have a lot of interest in it. Each time that he came back from one of these events, it was all he could talk about. Finally I committed. August 5th, 2007 was the day. Firebird International Raceway was the location. West test track was the place. The track is a 1.2-mile road course, incorporating 11 tight turns and a 3/8-mile straightaway. I am not sure I am ready for this.

I grew up playing with and racing dirt bikes back in the Midwest. Now I have a Harley. There is nothing in my past that has prepared me for road racing. Besides I do not know very much about metric street bikes or road racing.

It was early Sunday morning when I got to the track. I arrived about 5:20 am and the first thing that we (the neophytes) had to do was attend the "New Riders Meet-



ing” with an introduction to track safety rules that included learning how to enter and exit the track safely; use of the flags and their meanings; learn proper use of the throttle, braking, gear changes and selection; as well as basic cornering techniques and body positioning

Body position? In the past the only concern I had about body position was if I wanted my feet on the regular pegs or the road pegs. They also told us that we were never to use the rear brake on the racetrack. This is going to take some serious rewiring! The reason for this is because during breaking, 95% of the stopping power is in the front wheel and there is very little traction on the rear. It will break loose very easily and if it does, it will not follow the front tire, making it very difficult to start your turn. This is of course if you recover from the skid without going off the track. In the old days, while in the dirt, I often used the rear brake to setup a corner. More inappropriate programming from the past on my part.

Another thing that they told us was that you are never to look over your shoulder to see if there is anyone there. You are to focus on the track and the riders ahead of you at all times. It is your responsibility to make sure you do not hit the person in front you and focus on the track and your line. In the beginner’s class, you are not allowed to pass on the corners. I think I am wired wrong for this sport. It was hard at first not to look over my shoulder. I used a rented bike for this adventure. How smart was that! No, not one from a local Harley-Davidson dealer or some metric shop. They have their own rental bikes that you can race. If you prefer, you can ride your own bike, provided you have it properly prepared for the track. They did have a lot of riders with their own street bikes and some with their own race bikes. I was quite impressed with all of the motorcycles, trailers and tents that were setup. It looked like the pits area at the NHRA drags. There must have been 100 people racing in three groups that day. I, of course, was in the beginner’s group and was very glad about that. The three groups were beginners, Super Street, and advanced. Each group runs for fifteen minutes then you return to the pits and talk about what you did.

Well, we finished our class and as I put on all the leathers, boots, helmet and gloves, I again questioned my intelligence. Now all I have to do is go out on the track that I have never been on, with a bike that I have never ridden and race around that track. Right. My only concern was that I might set a new track record, that being the slowest lap. Do I really want to do this, I ask myself?

With all honesty, my biggest concern was the thought of trying to outdrive my ability. The idea of rushing up to a corner and apply just enough brake to slow to the fastest speed possible to still negotiate the curve was a big concern. Why would anyone do that?

Besides, this is not a race. It is just track time for riders to practice their skills and have a safe place without speed limits and stupid people in cages creating terrifying situations. Oh, and one more important thing. You get nice clean pavement. In the real world, you never know where the next sand or grease spot is going to be.

As we enter the track, there are about 15 of us in the beginners group and on the first few corners, we were just a pack. It was like riding in single file formation. There were a few of the guys that broke away. But the first few laps, you want to ride around the track and see what it is

like and you also want to warm up the cold tires so they will stick better. That was the least of my concerns. I knew that with my limited ability, I would not approach the limits of the tires traction at my greatly reduced speed. In fact, after several laps around the track, I was feeling much better about the whole thing. I found that everyone slowed up well before the corners and entered at a very safe speed. I wanted to go faster. But, just to be safe, I stayed in position and played with the bike to become more familiar with this strange new motorcycle. This included finding the rev limiter for shift points (this 400 Suzuki does not have a tach) and getting a feel for turning and braking. I found that resting the ball of my right foot on the foot peg took away the tendency to use the rear brake.

After about 10 minutes of riding, I found myself very comfortable with the track. This little Suzuki corners great. It’s not nearly as fast as my turbo Sportster. It must weigh about half as much, making it very maneuverable and easy to stop or slow down. I wanted to go faster and faster. The next thing I knew, they had the checkered flag out. That meant that our first session was over and we had to return to the pits. Bummer.

The instructors were very informative and helpful. They are on the track at all the times while you are practicing. If you are lucky, they will come by you and tap their rear fender. This means that you can follow them around the track so they can show you the proper lines through the corners. How cool is that?

Well session two is about to begin and I am now more excited than ever to get more track time in. After a few warm up laps, I wanted to start pushing the bike a little. But, I find that most of the people are still slow on the corners. Remember, you cannot pass on the corners. So I found that if I set up the corner with a steeper entry point and plan for a straighter exit, I can get on the throttle faster, passing on the exit. This was how I was able to get by some of the people and I am now having a ball. I found that this little 400 Suzuki was very slow and most of the people on the track had 600 cc bikes and I would get passed on the straights. Bummer. But never fear; there is always another corner just ahead.

The absolute fun of screaming down a clean track, with only your ability as the limit, was totally consuming. It is not long before there is nothing in the world but you, the bike and the track. Every corner and every person became the conquest. Working with the bike and the limits of your comfort zone, you disappear into the moment. That is a fun place to be.

It was not long before the total of four sessions was over. I could not get over how much fun this track day was. I have more confidence in the bike and myself and wanted more track time. Ted and Terry Rich setup six more track days for the rest of the year with the next on September 30th. Check out their web site for more information and classes that they offer. Their web site is www.aztrackday.com. They are really great people. Get out and have some fun and increase your confidence and ability to handle those radical situations that get thrown at you from time to time.

Go fast and ride safe,

Kirk

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