

The Skinny On:

by Pedro Gregorio

Alpha Training Center – Ride Like A Pro

How many of you have dropped your bike while doing a U-turn? C'mon, don't be shy, raise those hands high. I bet a lot of you have your hands up. It happened to me back in the early nineties on a Suzuki GXS1100G somewhere in West Virginia on a dark country road with a passenger on the back. It wasn't a good feeling and to this day I get nervous every time I have to make a tight U-turn, especially on a fully loaded bike. My motorcycle resume includes the MSF Basic Rider Course, Experienced Rider Course, multiple Reg Pridmore CLASS track schools and a couple of years of amateur road racing with the late GLRRA (Great Lakes Roadracing Association). The MSF courses are a good start for learning the basics and track schools are ideal environments for learning medium to high-speed cornering and braking but there is one essential street riding skill that doesn't get much attention: low-speed handling.

A low-speed handling class may not rate as high on the testosterone meter as a track school but unless you live in an area with a lot twisty roads (i.e., nowhere near Southern Michigan), you're going to use your low-speed handling skills a lot more than your high-speed cornering skills. The sad part is that most of us, regardless of riding experience, are woefully inadequate at maneuvering out bikes at very low speeds. It is this deficiency that Alpha Training Center's (2200 South Washington Ave., Lansing, MI 48910, 517-896-9551) new Ride Like A Pro (RLAP) class is intended to fix. RLAP is based on material developed by Jerry "Motorman" Palladino, a police motor officer in Florida. The basic concept is that any size bike is easily controllable in very tight, slow turns with balanced use of the throttle, clutch, and rear brake. If you're a regular reader you probably saw ATC's press releases in the August and September issues announcing their new 7-acre training facility in Lansing. I won't go into details on all of the courses that they offer and prices because the information is easily available on their well laid out web site (www.alphatrainingcenter.com).

Jim Kraus, a police motor officer with 24 years of duty under his belt, and his wife Amy, a City of Lansing employee who loves to ride her Moto Guzzi, own and teach at ATC and they invited me to take the RLAP class on a sunny Saturday morning in August. Finding the location was easy since ATC's new building is only about a mile south of I-496. The class started promptly at 8:30 am with me on my 2005 Triumph Sprint ST, George from Grand Ledge, MI, on his 2005 H-D Sportster 1200, and Don from Brighton, MI, on his 2005 Gold Wing. George rode for 4 years in the 60's, took 40 years off, and last year took the Beginning Rider Class and decided to get back on two wheels. Don had a similar story. He rode for 10 years, then took a 25 year break, and came back to the fold 6 years ago. Jim Kraus mentioned that the RLAP class normally averages 8 to 10 students so the three of us were lucky in that we would benefit from the personal attention of a smaller class.

Over the next four hours, Jim and Amy guided us through nine different exercises using cones and painted lines laid out over about half of the range's area. The other half was being used for a Basic Rider Course. Amy mentioned that they had the space to run three different classes simultaneously which is a feat that not many other training facilities in Michigan can accomplish. Our exercises ranged from a slow race, where you try to ride as slowly as possible across the range without putting your foot down, to two sets of offset cones, to my personal favorites: circles, U-turns, and the iron cross; all three in both directions. Jim would demonstrate each exercise on his BMW R1200GS Adventure before letting us try it. The 28'-diameter circles was where I had my epiphany for the day. I have always had more trouble in tight, slow right-hand turns than in left-hand ones. Don't know why, that's just the way it's always been. This directional impairment was obvious in my first circles to the right. Whereas to the left I could keep my front wheel on or inside the painted line all the way around, to the right I was all over the place. I almost dropped my bike a few times when I let it slow down too much and had to stab at the ground with my foot. Then Amy came to my rescue. She told me to increase my speed just a bit and trust the bike. She also told me to turn my head as far over my shoulder as I could and the bike would follow my eyes. Wouldn't you know it, it worked like a charm. I have tried to practice the "look where you want to go" technique for years but I had never really used it correctly in tight turns. It was amazing to feel the effect of cranking my head around as far as it would go. By the end of the circle exercise I was turning to the right almost as well as to the left.

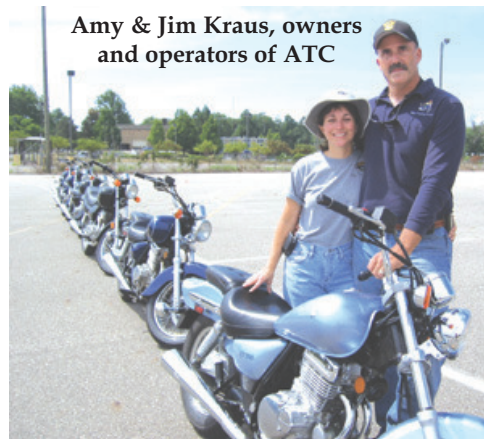
The 24' wide U-turn box was where Jim introduced us to the teardrop turn technique. This technique involves momentarily swerving away from the edge of the box and then back right before beginning the turn. It's hard to explain in writing but it works. 24 feet is about the

width of the average two-lane road so this exercise has an immediate impact on your everyday riding. The iron cross was like a multiple U-turn exercise mixed with tight turns. Imagine a cross with 24 foot wide and 34 foot deep arms. Your mission is to ride around the whole inside perimeter of the cross. For me this was the hardest exercise but it brought together all of the elements that we had practiced during the day. At this point I feel obligated to talk about our old friend gravity. Without gravity our tires wouldn't have any grip but we also wouldn't plop over at the merest provocation. A lot of the exercises involved tight turns at low speed. That's a lot of opportunities to stall your bike while at full lock causing it to drop to the ground. If that scares you away from this class let me ask you a question. Would you rather drop your bike while U-turning on a busy road with your wife on the back or on an empty asphalt lot?

Our four hours of training went by quickly aided by various water breaks and Jim even brought out the obligatory doughnuts (insert favorite cop joke here). Sometimes these types of classes can feel like Bataan death marches without breaks and with an overwhelming pace. The comfortable temperature definitely helped our comfort level but the number of exercises was also right. If your bike puts out a lot of engine heat you may want to take the class in the cooler months. This would also help your clutch and rear brake. By the end of the class my rear brake had faded away because of excessive heat in the fluid. It worked fine after I let it cool off but it emphasized Jim's instructions to drag the rear brake lightly during the exercises. I'm sure I was more aggressive with my rear brake than I should have been. Even though a wet clutch will have an easier time than a dry one, police departments all over the country use Harley-Davidson's and BMW's with dry clutches and they train much, much harder than we did.

Jim and Amy's enthusiastic guidance combined with the right amount of exercises and breaks makes this a class that every rider should take. I'm not saying this just because I got to take the \$125 class for free. For that I'd like to thank the Krauses. I'm saying it because I believe that if you can't handle your bike at low speeds in tight turns you pose a significant danger to yourself

Amy & Jim Kraus, owners and operators of ATC



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