

CALIFORNIA SUPERBIKE SCHOOL



Level 1



How much can one day of on-track training improve your riding?
BJ and Andy S find out on a blistering day at Brands Hatch



BJ's Experience

Signing on for CSS at 7am means either a hotel or very little sleep. We went for the former but even still, I was knackered before we'd even started!

I was apprehensive. I attempted Level 1 a few years ago, which didn't quite go to plan, resulting in a broken collarbone. And we will never speak of the Rockingham incident ever again.

The CSS staff were wide awake and in a much better mood than me, which rubbed off on me instantly, making me far more comfortable. They've everything you'll need, including gallons of drinks and carb-ridden munchies, a kit shop, a mechanic, tyre and suspension technicians, excellent coaches, lots of smiles and even breasts. What more could a man want?

Didn't you just hate school? Nobody likes being told what to do. It's against our instincts; you know what's best for you, or at least you think you do.

As motorcyclists, we rely on instinct a lot. From predicting a car pulling out on you, to feeling when to overtake a mate on a Sunday thrash, instincts will save - or have saved - your arse at some point.

But those instincts can also be your enemy. They make you freeze when you should be making quick decisions. They stop you from riding to your true potential, and hold you back. There's only one way to combat them, and that's education. Which, like it or not, means a return to school.

“NOBODY LIKES BEING TOLD WHAT TO DO. YOU KNOW WHAT'S BEST”

Regular readers will know of our admiration for the work the California Superbike School has done to advance the skills and mindsets of bikers all over the world. The four levels of their curriculum are designed to retrain your mind a step at a time, then bring it all together. All of us at FB have done, or will be doing all four levels. Saunders and I are first up this year and our Level 1 day at Brands Hatch was a scorcher.

A quick introduction was followed by a safety briefing and our first tutorial with ex-FB scribe and Masterclass Riding expert Andy Ibbott. Andy's been preaching the CSS gospel for a decade now, and I doubt there's anyone in the UK who knows the subject better. He's flown around the world to advise GP racers, has coached multiple national and world champions, and now he's got our little group to contend with.



Above: Saunders hunkers down
Below: Saunders has lost his bike!



I won't spoil all the content of the tutorials, because they're filled with interesting moments of both confusion and clarity which we experienced at different times.

Ibbo starts by breaking down a corner, making you begin to think about it as a process which can be refined by making the bike more stable underneath you, with careful application of the throttle. So to test our wank-hand control, we were sent out using fourth gear only, and no brakes unless in an emergency. Gulp!

It's a startlingly revealing exercise and even the mega-slow sighting laps are a bit hairy. Brands Hatch is scary enough, but with no brakes, the first ten minutes were almost comical.

You can't help but dab the anchors at first, but I soon reached a comfortable pace where I was able to concentrate on regulating the throttle smoothly and not touching the brakes at all.

I've been practising gentle throttle control for years already, which was evident when my coach for the day came past and gave the thumbs up.

After each session, you have a debrief where you discuss your performance. He was happy with me so far, and my arsehole puckering subsided after Paddock Hill bend with no stoppers for 25 long minutes.

The next drill was turn-points, learning to turn-in far later than normal. No brakes again, but using third and fourth gears. It's hard to get



used to, and my tutor pulls me in mid-session for a bit of advice which works immediately. The fact they lay big markers on the track helps no end, too.

Then it's the Quick Turn - one of the biggest revelations for many. It utilizes counter-steering, which we all do - whether you know it, or not.

This exercise teaches you to push your concept of what safe steering is, but shit-me if it don't work a treat. Combine a bit of extra leverage with the turn points, and you'll be amazed how fast your bike will drop in. Applied on the road, it gives you an option other than just drilling into

Step Turning. This is where I learned where the whole day had been leading up to. Andy taught us to look into a bend early, not through, just earlier than usual. It's all about gathering as much information as possible before committing.

With all gears and brakes allowed, you mark your turn in point and look toward the apex, gently gripping the bars you apply extra counter-steer, the bike goes exactly where your eyes are looking, faster than ever before, and get on the throttle earlier and smoother for a satisfyingly pacy exit. I felt amazing. It's genius.

“I'M AN AWKWARD, GANGLY SOD, SO MY COACH CALLS ME IN”

some berk who's pulled out.

Andy generously gives us some brakes for the fourth session, as well as three gears. This one's all about relaxing both you and your grip on the bars, letting the bike do the work. As I'm an awkward, gangly-looking sod, my coach calls me in, only to eventually concede I'm some kind of freak who's relaxed even if I don't look it.

Again though, I'm stunned by the results this has as the bars gently danced in my hands. The Suzuki felt incredible right at that point.

The final lesson was called Two-

Andy's Experience

I'd never had any tuition on how to ride a bike fast, and knew full well that there were big holes in my ability. With this in mind, I went to learn and soak up everything that was on offer.

Starting things off slowly in the first session with a single gear and no brakes eases any tension about the day. But the real reason is to teach you throttle control, which in essence helps get the bike stable through a turn. Trailing my instructor, I gradually found myself turning into bends fluidly and confidently, all without the stoppers.

Below: Art Queen Saunders works out if his kit all matches well enough



Bottom: BJ takes a laid-back approach to protective riding equipment here



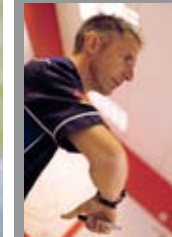
The theory sessions that happen prior to each time on track pinpoint what the next session is about, what's expected and what it will do for us. I found everything was handed over to us in such a fluent manner it was easily digested. Any sticking points were always broken down further until understood, which only improved my confidence, ready for the session ahead.

Each track period would bring a new drill, to which we'd work in the previous one too. I found myself focused to really nail the drills and learn as much as I could. I wanted to translate this new knowledge into my riding. Regular pointers along the way from my instructor worked well to keep me on track (no pun intended.)

With the day progressing, I was learning all the way. Proper use of the throttle to help get the bike into and out of a turn is powerful stuff. But prior to this day, it was a nervy affair. Understanding now how getting on the power as soon as you are on your line stabilises the bike, was a real eye opener. My last, and first, time at Brands Hatch resulted in an early Paddock Hill exit. I now know why; I had held a closed throttle for too long, resulting in me tucking the front. Paddock Hill is nowhere near as daunting for me now.



Above: off-track tuition means the on-track time makes more sense



Above: Andy Ibbott demonstrates how to make yourself wider on track

By getting us to identify our turn-in points, we could then use our newly-found corner entry speed. Big crosses taped down on the Tarmac helped with that. I was soon hitting these markers lap after lap, turning the bike quicker with each circuit completed.

Once again, all of this is accomplished in a free-flowing manner. Things are really starting to get moving now in terms of progression and understanding. It's amazing how much quicker you're capable of going, with a lot less effort, once you know how to implement key factors in your technique.

I've always known I should be light on the bars and let the bike talk, but practising this requires discipline and confidence. Learning to hold my weight with my legs and not my arms, I was rewarded with bags of feel, as the watchful eyes of my instructor were always upon me.

And so to the day's final lesson and with it, the last drill. Gathering my entry speed and hitting my quick turn-in was now about to be amalgamated with the Two-Step. This drill gets you to spot your turn-in point on approach, yet be able to turn your head and pick your apex prior to nailing your turn.

Doing this helped me turn as late as I wanted and still get to my apex quickly. Getting into the turn quicker meant I could also accelerate through to the exit sooner, increasing my pace.

I would say this, and the very first session of the day of understanding throttle control with entry speed, were my outstanding areas of progress. The Level 1 package is incredible. It offers so much for a single day of training.

If you're serious about wanting to improve, no matter what level your riding skill, then this school has the experience you can count on. I'm lucky enough to be going back for more, so I'll let you guys know how I get on with Level 2 next month.





Above: this has proven to be the only way you can get these boys to listen



Below: Big Man Saunders puts his training to the test, aboard his 675

THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING IS IN THE EATING; GO TASTE IT YOURSELF

Conclusion - BJ

Everything that Masterclass guru Andy said during the course proved itself to be right. Everything helped. It all made both me and Saunders better and more thoughtful riders, and each module can transform your road ability.

And all this from a man who, after getting a roasting with us and the Royal Marines last year, now trains with the armed forces on a regular basis as new-born masochist. That makes him a superb riding coach and mentalist in one package.

But that said, the drills that Andy has tutored me on in the past have saved my skin on no less than four occasions since. Each one of which would have otherwise ended in guaranteed agony, and these drills are covered in Level 1 alone. So when he talks, I'm all ears.

I'm not kidding when I say that this training can open your eyes to a whole new world, and this is just the beginning. You have to practice your new skills lest you fall back into old habits, but even if you only

truly absorb one discipline from the day, you'll be better off for it. Admittedly, it's not cheap, but quality comes at a price, and at what cost do you put your safety or the satisfaction of whupping all your mates at the next trackday? And it's all stuff you already do, just delivered to your brain in ways you never thought possible.

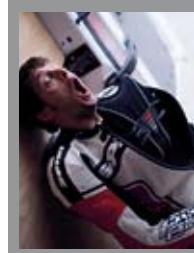
The coaches are fantastic, and not a single bit of advice was ineffectual or unheeded. They're there to help you, and very good at their jobs, God bless them.

The sense of value at the end of the experience is palpable and worth every penny. I can't urge you enough to scrimp and save and give this a try. Everybody I've pushed in their direction has raved about their experiences, and for proof of that, look no further than the guest book on their website, or the inches thick piles of printed emails of thanks Andy has received, when a CSS drill has saved someone's bacon.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating; go taste it for yourself.



Bottom: BJ recovers from a girl's response when he asked for her number



HOW MUCH FOR HOW MUCH?

TAILOR THE CSS EXPERIENCE TO SUIT YOUR POCKET

Cost all depends upon where, when and what options you'd like. Everything from leathers to bikes can be hired if you don't want to risk binning your own. A day will cost between £340-£415, going up to £2,000 for the rather exclusive foreign school trips. Yamaha R6s are hired with a deposit of £500, which is all you'll pay if you write it off. But if you just break a lever, they'll only charge you for it on top of the £230 hire fee. Could be two ton well spent. Leathers are £35 per day with a £50 crash damage fee; which is pretty good value as they'd cost far more to replace your own. There are also books and DVDs for sale written by Keith Code, CSS' founder, for brushing up your skills. But there's nothing like actually attending one of the four levels listed below.

Level 1: It's all about stability, via throttle control, steering and vision. This is the level that impacts most on the majority of attendees.

Level 2: Two concentrates on vision and awareness, with a nice treat thrown in at the end of the day. This level makes your riding world a whole lot bigger.

Level 3: Body position is the key to this exercise, using knees and the upper body to greater effect when attacking corners.

Level 4: The final step highlights any weak points in your programme. No classrooms, just intense focus on where you can improve further with a senior coach. This is the most repeated level, according to CSS.