



MOTORCYCLE TRACK DAY



THREE PERSPECTIVES



Motorcycle Track Day: Three Perspectives

By J. Nardy, R. Dean and D. Rosi

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This e-book is dedicated to mommas who let their babies grow up to be cowboys.

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Entry One: An Advanced Explanation

By J. Nardy

Many riders think of track days as events for racers only. They don't see the need or advantages for street riding. Excuses run rampant. In our riding circle, "Next year, for sure!" is the most notable. Some people have used that phrase every year for over a decade.

As a rider with many years of experience, I have attended quite a few track days and would like to shed a different light on what they're about. I view them as several things, none of which pertain to racing or outright speed. First, they're the most fun riding experience I know of. Second, they're the best and safest way to improve riding skills. Third, race tracks are the **ONLY** safe place to ride at your limits.

Yes, track days are FUN! It's awesome to be in a race track environment, free to ride as fast and hard as you like. That's something every rider can appreciate.

A new track day attendee will probably be nervous, as is expected. There are a few ways to minimize this nervousness. For starters, it's very helpful to attend your first track day with someone who's been to one before. They can help you with bike and gear preparation as well as the track day routine which includes tech inspection, a rider's meeting, rules and scheduling. Knowing the routine and being around people who have gone through it before will help you keep calm.

Doing research ahead of time to find out which track day sponsors are the most novice-friendly will also help ease the nerves. From my experience, SportbikeTrackTime.com is a great introductory resource. They include mandatory

classes between on-track sessions which are very informative. Control riders are always willing to help on and off the track with the learning and understanding of concepts in sport riding.

A few years ago, one particular control rider spent about ten minutes with me off-track explaining body position during braking and corner entry. This transformed my riding instantly. He explained it in a way that made perfect sense and all of those terms and theories not only fell into place but really worked on the track. I wouldn't have learned these methods in a hundred years of street riding.

Bike preparation, which many riders use as an excuse to avoid track days, is minimal. You simply need to remove or tape your mirrors, tape every light, tape the speedometer, have good tires and brakes and have a leak free bike. It's possible to ride your street bike to the track, prepare it, participate in the event, unprepare it and ride home.

In my everyday world I'm an overweight, gray-haired, 50-something software support analyst. When I tell people that I ride in motorcycle track days they usually reply "You're crazy!" or "Why would you do something so dangerous?". The truth is that track days are the safest type of motorcycling you can do.

Picture your average street ride. There are countless unknowns just waiting to ruin your day (or life). On the street you must contend with oncoming traffic, drivers in general, unknown road conditions, blind corners, guard rails, trees and utility poles within feet of the road surface, cross streets, etc.

On a race track it's like riding the same stretch of familiar road over and over again. You can use the entire road surface without worrying about oncoming traffic or cross streets. You can expect the road surface to be clean lap after lap. If it isn't someone will be waving a big yellow flag to inform you. There are generous safe runoff areas at each corner and paramedics with an ambulance on site in case of an incident.

These factors make track days the perfect environment for safely honing your riding skills. With control-rider instruction and zero distractions you're free to concentrate on the task at hand, which is to become a smoother, safer and faster rider. After my first few track days I realized the track was the only place to ride at or near my limit.

I confess to have routinely ridden very hard on the street for many years. I'm lucky to have never had a serious incident. Once I took in and understood the track day environment, all of those nasty street hazards became magnified and it was easy to see that in most street situations a simple low-side could quickly turn into a major injury or worse.

I still ride twisty roads in a spirited manner. However, my street pace is never at or near my limit and I'm extra vigilant of roads with hazards (close guard rails, trees,

utility poles, ravines, etc). Rather than concentrating on outright speed, I concentrate on smoothness and form. My street pace is probably not much slower than my track pace but I know I'm safer with a greater margin of error and less likely to have a street incident.

So, there's no excuse for NOT getting out and participating in a track day. They're a world of fun, you'll learn a lot and become a much better rider for less than the cost of a speeding ticket. Be prepared, though, as your first track day will not likely be your last!



Entry Two: A Beginner's Experience

By R. Dean

Being a beginner at anything is a rush in and of itself. Whether you're trying something that you've always wanted to or feeling spontaneous about an unexpected opportunity, getting started can trigger euphoria intense enough to tie a knot in your gut. If you're familiar with this sensation, consider yourself lucky because that means you have an active lifestyle and your world is in motion.

For me, one experience at Gingerman Raceway perfectly encompasses that reality.

It's summer of 2013. I'm invited by a friend to attend what will be my very first track day. Being new to the idea, I have zero concept of what to expect so of course my preparatory gears start turning. How much does it cost? What are the requirements? Once all is said and done, will I be a professional racer, ready to run twenty laps around Nürburgring?

Calm down. Gather information. Follow through.

What I learn is that a typical track day requires you to wear a full-face helmet, spine protector, armored racing leathers/gloves and reinforced above-the-ankle boots. Your motorcycle must be in stellar working order, meaning that there are no leaks of any kind, all scatterable parts are fastened via safety wire and the tires, at most two years old, have at least 50% of their tread remaining. These demands are more than sensible because smaller, privately owned tracks pay in upwards of \$25k annually for insurance. In order to keep them running, we as riders must show our respect by taking precautions.

This particular track day, however, has milder stipulations. Populated with an even balance of novice, intermediate and advanced riders, Motoworks organizes everything to attract entry-level types such as myself. Textile riding suits are allowed (less expensive), safety wire isn't required and there are classroom instructors waiting to help us learn the ropes.

Having paid their signup fee online, I follow a link from my confirmation email which provides more detail as to what I need to do next. That means man shopping. I slow-cook an itemized list of tax-deductible purchases and demolish one month's pay without batting an eye.

Crammed into a one-car garage with all of my other bikes, I clean and polish, tighten and torque, balance and replace. She's ready. I'm ready.



Once Upon A Night Before Track Day

This event begs for arrival the night before, the reasons being too numerous to count.

For starters, there's a track walk. Everybody hops into the back of a pickup before slowly navigating the length of the course. Curves are explained, considerations are noted and techniques are given their first mention. I don't remember it being mandatory but as an introduction it provides a lot. The track run does have it's downside in that it makes getting to sleep difficult because you're amped to ride!

Another good thing about arriving one night ahead is that sometimes dinner is hosted. Everyone in attendance meets, eats and drinks while catching up with one another. If you know anything of the motorbike community, you know that you'll likely run into a familiar face.

Lastly, there's sleep. Never will the butt crack of dawn be more welcome in your life than on the morning of a track day. Be that as it may, it's better to have a full night's rest than otherwise. I don't want to wake up at 4am and travel two or more hours before attempting to piece my focus back together in time for bike inspection. Give yourself the ease of mind that comes with waking up, driving (or riding) a mile to the track and watching the sun rise.



Find Us At The Paddock

I don't know how other tracks operate as I'm still quite new but Gingerman has an entry gate. I get off my bike, show them my printed ticket and identification, put on my wrist band and ride in. Once through, I continue on to the (prepare for a new term) *primary paddock*. The primary paddock is a general-access area where riders can claim space to setup shop.

In finding my friends, I notice that they've rented an optional quick-build roof structure. That comes in really handy as there is a bit of rain. It also blocks out wind.

Rested and ready, it's time to park and pull my luggage from the bike. Most riders will haul their bikes on a trailer because it allows them to prepare everything at home. I don't have a trailer (yet) so I take pleasure in heading out on two wheels.

Now, let's talk tape. At a track day, anything on your motorcycle that can be shattered must be covered with tape. The only tape that is both strong enough to endure the event and easy to remove afterwards is painter's tape. You'll want to use it to jacket your turn signals, reflectors, headlight and speedometer. If it's easy to do so, consider the removal of these parts as an alternative.

It was explained to me that another reason we cover our speedometers is that they're a distraction. As a track rider, the speedometer is of no use. Even the tachometer is a bit of a moot point, depending on your bike. My Yamaha is designed to be railed on beyond the 9k rpm marking (as are many standard and sport bikes). I made sure to do so regularly throughout the afternoon. ;-)



You're Missing Some Bolts

Safety-minded and ready to ride, I coast into the inspection line where an elderly man of obvious understanding gives 'er a once-over. I'm simultaneously impressed and upset when he points out to me that one of my engine-mounting bolts is gone! It must have flown off during my commute from Chicago. This can make or break my trip but, continuing on, he suggests that the engine is held in place at five other locations and that I pass inspection. Words can't express.

At this point, I'm starting to get antsy. This is not the part where "everyone gets on the track and we all ride as fast as we want in whatever direction we like" but I figure you probably already know that. It's time to decide which group I'm going to ride in and which sub-group I prefer in terms of speed.

If you're a first-timer, you're riding in the novice group. This isn't open to discussion. At no point in the day will you be allowed to upgrade to intermediate (and certainly not advanced). No, for the novice track rider such as myself, a full third of the day is spent learning and the other two-thirds gaining experience. I'm totally fine with that and must state that anybody who isn't shouldn't step foot near a motorcycle.

All primary groups get divided in to five sub-groups. Group one is for those who want to ring out the throttle whereas group five belongs to the relaxed, slow-goers. Gauging my aggression, I feel group three is a decent starting point (you're allowed to change in between sessions).

The advanced riders line up on pit road, a small entryway that allows riders to gain enough speed to safely merge onto the track. Their engines warming, the tone is set. The intermediates join us in tower one where they attend only the first of what are many classes for novice riders.

Class Is In Session

A man who I can only describe as having the physical features of Joseph “Joe” Cabot from “Reservoir Dogs” politely welcomes us to the room and invites us to seat ourselves. He then continues on to explain the class itinerary while referencing the possibility of light rain. Lesson one kicks off almost immediately and I listen carefully to gather the basics.

We’re told not to pass (yet). Our first twenty-minute time slot will be mellow at most so that we get a feel for the track and learn what lines to target. Also, our designated instructor will make sure to point out where the corresponding towers are so that we can locate flags.

The flags (green, yellow and red) let us know the current safety conditions on the track. Green means “have at it”, yellow “proceed with caution” and red might as well mean “you don’t want to see this”. To the novice, a checkered flag means “get off the track so actual riders can do something” (kidding).

The intermediates are instructed to go ahead and prepare for their first twenty minutes as the initial advanced session is winding down. The novices, glued to the dry-erase board, continue processing terminology and policies. To observe all of that information and retain it on the track is going to require great discipline but I’m up to it.

We eventually get the okay to leave for a second cup of coffee while signing up and providing an address to receive photos that are being taken of each group. I can attest that not only are the photos of the highest quality, you can actually see yourself getting better as the day goes by. I’m not sure why but actually attaining these photos is a little bit difficult, so I think next time I’ll ask about that.



Start Your Engines

Twenty minutes later, our moment arrives! All of the sub-groups line up in their respective order and, flags green, one group enters the track every fifteen seconds. The delivery is quite a graceful process and actually very low stress. Everyone is instantly having fun and our instructors pay close attention to what we're doing, both right and wrong. I can tell this is going to be a life changing experience.

Our first twenty minutes is spent "finding the line" (the best route through each corner). Some curves at Gingerman will fool you by sharpening or expanding unexpectedly. What's more, if you're outside of the preferred line, you have to know how to find your way back in.

Next, we spend another twenty minutes in one gear. On my six-speed Seca, I opt to rail on third which works out nicely. I'm only just learning about my little bike being so responsive and durable!

Round three belongs to the bump shift. Our sessions are climbing in speed so much that group three (my group) overtakes group two. The bump shift only adds to that. Completely new to this, it's explained to me that if you don't do it correctly, you can damage your transmission. Hence, we're taught carefully how to do so without harming the bike.

A bump shift allows you to change gears without using your clutch. By applying light pressure to your shift pedal while maintaining acceleration, a rider can roll the throttle forward (decelerate) for a split second while continuing to shift as if the clutch weren't engaged. This technique makes racing much more efficient.

For our fourth session ... leaning through a turn. By placing your seat diagonally right into the crack of your @\$\$, you can control a bike without using your

handlebars at all whatsoever. This also happens to be what will in many cases bring a bike much lower to the ground but because you're gyroscopically balanced, the bike floats through as if all is normal.

One final group run takes place for individual observation only. After that we are critiqued in person, pros and cons included as well as suggestions to better ourselves. I learned more in these moments than I have in years, I must say.

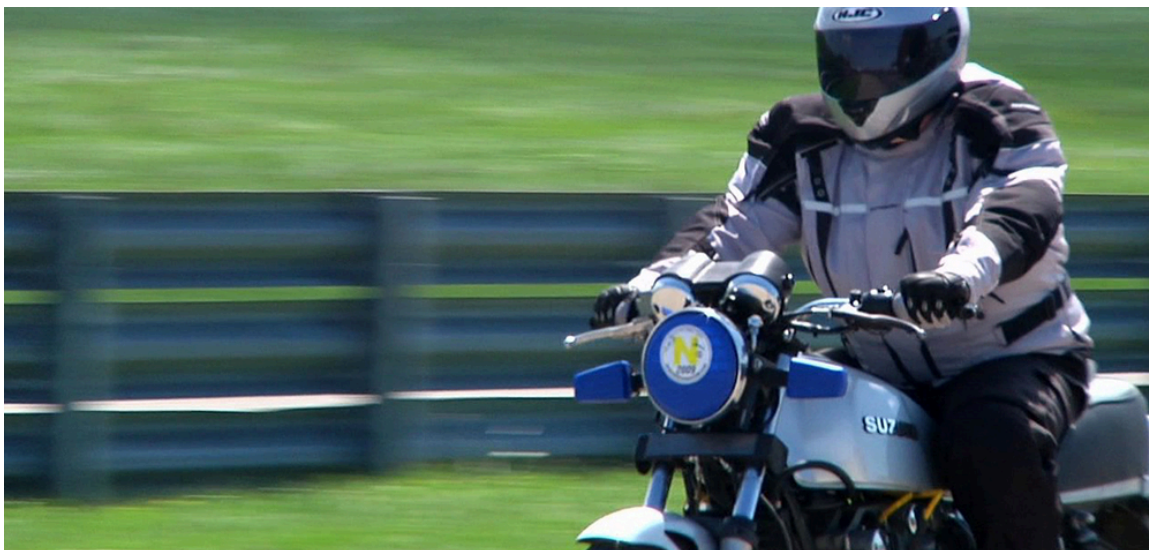


You're Free To Fly

From this point on, everyone is as familiar with the track as they need to be. The friend who invited me joins us for a couple of novice sessions with his wife two-up. At some point they overtake me on a straightaway. That's not the awkward part. What really gets me is that she's wearing pink.

Other surprise moments include the sudden appearance of Moto GP racer James Rispoli. Even with the fearlessly impressive performance of the advanced riders, this young racer stands out (way out). He runs laps around all of us and we're glad he's there to do so.

I got so much track time that day that the phrase "know your limit" finally makes sense. At the very last opportunity to ride, I confidently opted out. I'll never forget what it was like attending my first track day just as I'll never forget removing myself from it because I'd had my fill ... for now.



Entry Three: Facing The Unexpected

By D. Rosi

We're slabbing it home now. I'm bringing up the rear with two more advanced riders leading the way. Cars are passing like crazy but we're not in a rush. My right shoulder feels like it's on fire and I know the rest of my aches will be a hundred times worse tomorrow, yet somehow I can't stop smiling. We've just completed a track day at Autobahn Country Club ... my very first.

I'm listening for any out-of-place noises from the bike. I hear a small exhaust click coming from the header which must have come loose when I crashed. The right handlebar controls are slightly bent but everything else seems to be in working order.

There's not one scratch on my new paint! That's pretty gratifying, considering I just got this thirty-year-old bike sorted last week. Maybe I should've spent more money on an upgraded suspension.

I'm soaked to the bone and shivering pretty bad. The garden-hose bath that my mentor gave us after we slid off-track into the mud continues to linger. I alternate hands, grabbing at the engine block just long enough to avoid molten gloves. The warmth creeps up my arms. By the time we get home we should be dry.

This morning when I first woke, I was both excited and terrified about attending a track day. I was excited to get out and explore my limits and terrified that my ancient motorcycle might fail me. Even more troubling were thoughts that my lack of experience might hurt someone else.

Never on the street have I pushed my riding to it's limit. Sure, there have been occasions when I've flexed things a bit but not like today. Today was different.

Every word from the instructors was gospel. Each session grew my confidence as I did my best to apply their wisdom and learned to trust my bike more. I got faster, braked later, leaned lower in the turns ... it seemed as if the only limitations my Japanese iron had were the ones I placed on it!

I was thinking for myself, picking my own lines and felt as if I was riding, I mean really riding, for the first time.

Knowledge is power. Unfortunately, I applied too much of it simultaneously during the final session. I leaned deep, downshifted hard and absolutely hammered 'er coming out of a big sweeper.

The rear tire broke loose and I clipped my helmet on the pavement as we slid through the mud, sky and earth trading places repeatedly. Before I could react, I rolled to my feet and gave a double thumbs-up, indicating that I was alright. I had zero proof of this but didn't want to ruin the last session for everyone else. A moment passed and I began to laugh, thinking "we're still alive!".

The rain had softened the dirt and my protective gear did it's job. The old beast fired right up and we casually strolled into the pits through a sea of wide eyes. She grumbled, snorted and smoldered through the ocean of mud we were wearing.

I found my limit. It's mystery was behind me. Now, we could ride home.

Bibliography

J. Nardy is a seasoned motorcycle traveler with 40 years of experience who enjoys both street and off-road adventures. During his years of riding, he has explored 42 states and several Canadian provinces. Many of his riding miles were covered while participating in and leading organized group tours. He has taken training courses offered by MSF, Lee Parks and California Superbike, along with numerous days spent training on racetracks. Joe is also a self-taught “wrench” and performs all of his own maintenance and repair work.

R. Dean is a beginner enthusiast, intermediate rider, master eccentric, champion video gamer and unknown rock star. He’s also the founder and editor-in-chief for TheRidingObsession.com.

D. Rosi owns a 1980 Suzuki GS1000E with standard, old-school modifications and some new tech. He advises that everyone stay cloaked 24-7/365.