HAVING JUST ENTERED the world of trials riding, I wanted some expert instruction to get off to a good start, before I developed or transferred bad habits—and before I wasted a lot of time trying in vain to figure out stuff on my own. It turns out that, while trials techniques transfer to virtually all other types of motorcycling, decades of street and dirt riding may do little to prepare one for riding trials. Speed makes up for lots of poor technique, and there’s nowhere to hide those weaknesses at a slower-than-walking pace on a bike that responds to every miniscule input at the bars, pegs and levers.

Trials Training Days (March 29–30, 2014), an annual event at the Trials Training Center in Sequatchie, Tennessee (30 minutes west of Chattanooga), are comprised of two very full days of close, personalized coaching by an extremely knowledgeable and friendly staff at the gorgeous 650 acres of mountainous wilderness that is the TTC campus. After a brief riders’ meeting each morning, participants head out to their chosen technique-specific classes, each about 75 minutes long, scattered around the grounds where the local topography provides an optimal learning environment for each particular skill. Two morning classes are followed by a lengthy lunch break, with simple, inexpensive food available at the on-site pavilion, and allow plenty of time to query staff and other students about the finer points of technique or bike setup. Two more classes follow in the afternoon. Casual trick competitions provide entertainment during breaks, or you can spend the spare time practicing on your own, using a handy assortment of logs, rocks, and man-made obstacles in the central playground—if you have the stamina to do such extra riding!

That’s a big “if.” Not only are there many more classes offered than any one person can take in a single weekend, but the riding time is plentiful enough that physical exhaustion may set in before the end of each day. Having spent little time on a trials bike prior to this experience, my quads weren’t conditioned for maintaining the half-squat position usually required—often with almost all my weight supported by one leg at a time! Remember, these bikes have no seats. This doesn’t mean a person has to possess superhuman fitness to ride trials. But, as with many endeavors, initial efforts are often terribly inefficient and drain energy much, much faster than do the proper techniques that eventually come with practice.

Physical exertion aside, there’s also the matter of information overload. As a total newbie, the sponge between my ears was fully saturated before lunch on Saturday. I continued to learn throughout the rest of the event, but I felt that every new bit I took in probably displaced something else I’d learned earlier. And it was completely impossible to monitor all aspects of my technique at once. If I focused on clutch control, my feet would wander into the wrong position. If I focused on keeping my feet straight, I’d drop my outside elbow. If I kept my elbow up, my knees wouldn’t stay wide, etc. Nevertheless, my instructors (two or three for each class of 10-15 students) were always patient and encouraging, and helped me target the most important elements to work on in each situation.

Class instruction usually consisted of 20–30 minutes of verbal explanation and demonstration of a particular technique, followed by a period of closely supervised practice. There might be a group discussion part-way through to address issues that were common among participants. In every case, the instructors proved sharply observant, clearly articulate and unwaveringly supportive. All of them had many years of competition experience, though their ages ranged from barely adult to well into middle age. And each had a slightly different way of communicating, so any student could find someone who put things in a way that was readily digestible to him or her.

Classes focused on such specifics as climbing hills, crossing rocky creeks, popping over logs, making traction, and managing cambers. Ambitious students could sign up for the more dramatic moves: hopping each end of the bike, “zapping” (lightly punching an obstacle with a slightly raised front wheel in preparation for climbing over it), “floaters” (turning the bike with the front wheel airborne), and “splatters” (show-stopping ascents wherein the bike is launched vertically at a tall/undercut obstacle so that the rear wheel makes contact first). Six-time national champion Ryan Young taught a class on section strategy, and there was a

Left: Log Class—This log-jumping class, like all the classes offered, started with verbal descriptions and explanations of the techniques to be used. Right: While many students were content to crawl over firewood-sized logs, we figured you’d want to see pictures of the big stuff.
trail ride option to tour the waterfalls and scenic overlooks on the property. Brand-new trials riders got instruction on basic bike setup and started with the fundamentals of clutch work, tight/low-speed turning, and lofting the front wheel. So, riders of any skill level could find plenty from which to choose.

Three manufacturers—Sherco, Beta and Gas Gas—had areas set up for consultation and mechanical assistance with whatever machinery you might have brought, and TTC is a full-service dealership for all the major brands, with many parts on hand. A lodge, campsites, RV hookups and a handful of small cabins are also available for rent on-site (familiar hotels are 20 minutes away), and instruction takes place in different formats year-round, including private sessions for individuals or small groups. Trials Training Days is no doubt a loss-leader for TTC, given how amazingly cheap it is to attend: a mere $100 per person for the entire weekend! There really couldn’t be a more cost-effective way to enter the world of trials, or advance within it, whether riding just for fun or as a serious competitor.

Those new to the sport should prepare for a unique vibe. Because trials riding involves tremendous precision, concentration and an extraordinarily thoughtful and disciplined approach, it doesn’t attract the rowdy, macho crowd commonly found at motorsport events. While it’s certainly apparent that many participants take this endeavor very seriously, the interpersonal feel is very relaxed and, for lack of a better word, mellow. These people understand and prize subtlety and balance and have little interest in brute force—although watching one of them launch a successful splatter or giant hill climb makes it clear they can employ explosive power when necessary. (It’s a bit like remembering that Tai Chi isn’t only about slow-motion grace; it’s also a highly effective marital art.)

Most of all, everyone is intent on having fun, and happy to help others do the same. Trials Training Days is a very family-friendly affair. Participants range in age from elementary school kids to retirees. Actually, because the likelihood of severe injury is much lower in trials than in motocross or enduro riding, parents are often more comfortable allowing their children to start young (which will greatly improve any other forms of riding they take up later). And some middle-aged dirt riders, tired of getting beat up by high-speed off-road work, find trials a safer, lower stress—and even more engaging—endeavor as they grow increasingly concerned about injury. Of course, riders at the peak of their physical prowess can exploit their coordination and endurance in the service of amazing acrobatics that appear to defy the laws of physics.

This past year, the weather was sublime: sunny with temps in the low 70’s. Early spring isn’t always so mild in East Tennessee and can range from driving sleet to sticky, breathless heat and usually includes rain. However, because trials riding is largely about making traction in difficult conditions, having some slippery mud and wet roots and rocks to practice on is actually an asset. (As someone who was struggling to just get his feet and body in the correct positions, I was glad to do without the added challenge of wet ground, thank you very much!)

Trials Training Days exceeded my expectations and definitely met my goal of correcting fundamental errors at the start of this new pursuit. I’ve been very pleased to find that many instructional details that I couldn’t spontaneously recall have come back to me while I’m actually riding. I still have to work hard to overcome several stubbornly reflexive tendencies, but the magical ease with which the bike moves over treacherous terrain on those occasions when I get it right makes all the effort worthwhile. And I can already tell that these revisions in my approach are benefiting me while riding street bikes and more traditional dirt bikes.

Visit www.trialstrainingcenter.com or go to TTC’s Facebook page to learn more about what they have to offer, and to see lots of pictures of the facility, events and numerous enthusiastic students. You’ll even find an assortment of short videos and text descriptions of many trials techniques. Note that instruction in conventional off-road and dual-sport riding is also available at TTC, and that they have some bikes for rent if you want to sample trials before investing in machinery, or if you’d simply like to travel there without a bike in tow. Also, the U.S. round of the FIM Trials World Championship is regularly held at TTC, along with other high-level competitive events (both trials and enduro). Not only do these provide jaw-dropping experiences for spectators, but they’re often coupled with opportunities to get instruction from top competitors.

The “splatter” is probably the single most impressive move in trials. The bike is launched from a standing start at close range, explodes vertically, then pivots back down when the rear wheel makes first contact with the obstacle. Of course, some riders could do pretty impressive things, even on the smaller logs.