

Battle in the Dirt:

Buell's Ulysses Vs. The Wild West

THE ULYSSES IS literally a ground-breaking model for Buell, with a split-focus of attributes designed to allow the machine to succeed in most "on" and some "off" road conditions. In making such a bargain, the Ulysses (like the BMW GS, Aprilia Capo Nord, Triumph Tiger and KTM Adventure), is the result of a series of careful compromises. Its engineers and designers had to decide what they wanted the bike to be able to do, while also predicting how it would most likely be used by consumers. You can't build a great tourer that is also a competitive sportbike. Nor can you build a great sportbike that is also a true dirt bike. And you can't really design a great dirt bike that can hold its own on the road against a true tourer. So the issue of how

these very different worlds are parsed by the various bike manufacturers is what, in fact, makes the two-wheeled world go 'round.

Buell chose to call its Ulysses an "Adventure Tourer" and built it to fit a usage ratio of 90% street to 10% dirt, with the caveat that by "dirt" one means graded fire and secondary roads, not single-track trails. Certainly, this is no motocrosser. Also, given that they chose to stick with the 17" front wheel, as on their pure street bikes, instead of opting for a more wilderness-friendly 19" or 21" hoop, it's pretty clear they wanted this to be a street bike with a slightly broader envelope, not a dirt bike that could function on the street.

So how does someone who comes from street-riding, safely make that first foray into the forest on their new Ulysses? Controlling a quarter ton of new motorcycle in a low-traction environment is especially daunting to those of us who don't have the advantage of having started our riding careers in the dirt. Things like body position, counter-leaning the bike, riding while standing, managing small wheelies to lift the front tire over little obstacles feel natural to experienced dirt riders, no matter what machine they are on. For them, it's a relatively simple matter of accommodating the mass, although there are specific techniques that can make this easier. But for pure street rats like this reporter, most dirt riding techniques feel about as weird as riding naked with eyes closed (strictly a theoretical analogy, you understand). The dirt sensation that there is something seriously wrong with the motorcycle because both ends are moving around weirdly is very hard to shake.

That's where Jim Hyde comes in. Jim's one of those "re-entry" riders who left motorcycling for a long time after college, then



Jim Hyde looks on as a student works on body position and keeping the eyes looking ahead, trusting the Buell Ulysses to follow the path.

returned to our great sport later in life. The difference for him is that when he jumped back in, it was straight into the deep end of the pool. Once he had a few thousand miles on a used UJM, he signed up for a European tour on a rented BMW, which is where he fell in love with the GS series. From there, he started looking for the next adventure, literally. Curious to test the limits of his GS, Jim went back to Europe and enrolled in pretty much every off-road riding school he could find. Over the next few years, he gained capability and confidence with running the big boxer machines off the beaten path. What he discovered along the way is that he had a lot to offer other riders who were trying to test these same waters. It wasn't a long stretch for him to open his Rawhyde Training School on the family's property

west of the I-5. All the theory is well and good, but the real reason his school is worth attending is that this particular Mr. Hyde is warm, affable and a naturally good teacher.

So even though Jim's background is mostly with BMW, it made perfect sense that Buell contacted him to lead a group of street-oriented motojournalists through a condensed version of his three-day program with the Ulysses.

We spent the first day at the ranch, beginning with basic drills like standing while modulating the throttle, threshold braking on dirt and learning how to counter-lean the bike for turns. Some riders found these fairly easy and moved up through the logically graduated steps, while others struggled mightily. A team of mechanics spent much of that first day replacing mirrors, turn signals and frame pucks from the numerous low speed tip-overs (we lost count at 15). One journalist made a painful mistake during the standing-on-the-pegs throttle drill—pitching himself onto the hardpacked surface and ending his day with a busted collarbone. Jim says this sort of thing is very rare, but it points out the value of learning these skills in a safe environment with people who watch your back (and a truck to take you to the hospital), as opposed to taking your chances in the boonies. Most off-road areas are by definition away from civilization, where you'll likely find a dearth of cell phone reception bars when you might most need them.

After the remainder of us mastered the first round of bike control drills, we moved to a series of what are essentially eye and balance-training exercises. You have to learn where to look, to trust your tires, and give the bike what it needs. Conceptually, this is all the