

THE FUSS ABOUT RIDER TRAINING

MCN has published so many articles and letters and bulletins about the ongoing controversies involving the Motorcycle Safety Foundation, that a lot of our readers seem to be getting confused about what the issues are. And a lot of them came in late on the conversation, and need to "get up to speed." Because of that, we've had David Hough, our resident rider education expert, write this shorthand synopsis of where we are, and how we got here. We hope it helps. —Ed.

by David L. Hough

WHEN I WROTE the two-part series on "Trouble In Rider Training" for *Motorcycle Consumer News*, I didn't predict the high degree of interest by riders that would result. Normally, at the "Coffee with Dave" sessions at the BMWMOA International rallies, we focus on riding skills. But this year at Spokane, and again at the BMWRA national rally in Canaan Valley, WV, there was much more interest in the rider training situation in the USA than I had expected. Back at the magazine offices, Dave and Fred tell me the same thing—reader interest was running exceptionally high. So, let's recap what's been going on.

Most of us have been supportive of the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) as the one organization in the USA that works diligently to make motorcycling safer. The MSF gets its funding from the major motorcycle manufacturers/importers, and does business out of an office in Irvine, CA, in company with the Motorcycle Industry Council (MIC) and Specialty Vehicle Institute of America (SVIA). The MSF develops rider training curricula, certifies instructors, and makes course materials available to state motorcycle safety programs.

It makes a lot of sense for one national organization to do all this, using money that filters down from motorcycle sales. And I also think it makes sense for each state to manage its own training, even if it uses the same national curriculum materials as everyone else. That's the way it's been functioning for years and years.

But last year, MCN started receiving questions about rider training that indicated something was amiss. Had we heard anything about the MSF attempting to take over administration of training programs in Florida or Georgia? Were we aware that Team Oregon had rejected the latest novice training course by the MSF, and was developing its own course? Did we know that the MSF had made a deal with the California Highway Patrol late in 2003 to take over administration of all rider training in California? Had we

heard anything about MSF lobbyists meeting privately with state representatives in Georgia, Indiana and Illinois? Had we seen the reports on MSF president Tim Buche arriving unannounced at a federal hearing in December 2003 to badmouth the state rider training programs?

Well, frankly, we hadn't been paying much attention. Like most motorcyclists, we'd rather be out riding, not digging into controversial issues. But, there were just too many questions to ignore. So, *Motorcycle Consumer News* asked me to look into the situation and do a report. Why me? Most riders probably know me as the guy who has been writing the "Proficient Motorcycling" and "Street Strategies" columns for MCN for years and years, plus being the author of the books of the same names. I am also one of the very few motorcycle journalists who has been a certified motorcycle safety instructor. I'm not bringing all this up to fluff my feathers, but to make it clear that I've "paid my dues," and know what I'm talking about.

And, why should MCN be the magazine to break the story? Well, MCN is the only commercial motorcycle magazine that doesn't carry advertisements. It's supported entirely by subscriptions. What that means is that advertisers can't apply a strongarm to get an editor or writer to say or not say something. Magazines that carry ads have to be very careful about what they say, lest an important ad be pulled, and the ad money disappear. And, as it so happens, most commercial motorcycle magazines are members of the Motorcycle Industry Council (MIC), so they are understandably resistant to saying anything against the MIC or its sister, the MSF.

MCN Special Report: Trouble In Rider Training

After numerous phone calls and e-mails to see what was happening in the industry, I put together a two-part special report for MCN with the title "Trouble in Rider Training." When Part 1 was completed, but before it was published, the MSF caught wind of it, and contacted MCN Editor Dave Searle. MSF wanted to know if they could review it prior to publication. Searle's answer was "no," and it appeared in the May, 2004 issue. Part 1 generally explained how the MSF had come into being, how it had developed, and how the nationwide training system was humming along nicely up to the mid-1990s.

Part 1 wasn't particularly inflammatory, but the MSF could sense the direction it was headed. So, when Part 2 was sent to MCN, the MSF leaned on Searle to at least hold publication until the MSF could have a meeting to discuss things. Again, since MSF had no axe to hold over MCN, Searle said "no," and Part 2 was published in June, 2004. MSF didn't have anything to bother me with, either, since I was no longer teaching, and didn't contribute to any publications that belonged to the MIC.

Part 2 caused a stir in the motorcycle training industry, because it pointed out clearly what was happening: That the MSF was taking over administration of state programs, shutting off communications, and developing courses without coordinating with the state administrators who were expected to use them. That they were hiring big gun lobbyists, making threats, and initiating lawsuits. There