

TROUBLE IN RIDER TRAINING

Part 2 by David L. Hough

IN PART 1 of this series, we provided a brief history of rider training in the USA, noting that training seemed to be accomplishing what it had been created to do: Reducing the motorcyclist fatality rate. By 1990 almost all states had a motorcycle safety program, administered by the state, using curricula developed by the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF), and MSF certified instructors. At the encouragement of the MSF, state rider training administrators began to hold annual conferences, and in 1989 formed the National Association of State Motorcycle Safety Administrators (SMSA). By 1994, more than 100,000 new motorcyclists were being trained every year, nationwide.

But in the mid 1990s, several things happened that threatened to change the rider training system, about the same time the MSF hired a new president, Tim Buche.

MSF Takeovers

Ominously, the MSF started to take over several state motorcycle safety programs. The first was Pennsylvania. The deal was, by most accounts, a little...uhh...“odd.” The MSF offered the Pennsylvania state motorcycle safety administrator a juicy staff position at MSF headquarters out in California. Then, with its administrator gone, Pennsylvania was relieved to have the MSF take over the administration of its motorcycle program. This was the first state where the MSF not only provided the training curricula, but also directly supervised the training sites. Why Pennsylvania? We’re not sure, but let’s note that at the time, Pennsylvania had one of the largest safety budgets of any state program, \$1.4 million back in 1993, and growing.

It was a little different when the MSF took over the rider training contract for New Mexico. The New Mexico program was in serious trouble, so the MSF was welcomed with open arms. And our contacts in New Mexico confirm that MSF management of their program was, and continues to be, an acceptable deal for everyone.

More recently, the MSF made a quiet bid for the West Virginia program, and got it. We hadn’t heard any rumors that West Virginia was in trouble, and apparently the

MSF just underbid the existing contract. Then, in late 2003, the MSF underbid California’s long-time training contractor. Rumors are that both Harley-Davidson and American Honda were unhappy that more riders weren’t being trained, even though the California program had been graduating more than 20,000 new riders each year.

If you’re wondering how a national corporation can underbid a state training organization, let’s note that the MSF gets all the records from state programs as part of the deal of licensing its curricula and certifying instructors. Once you know what the bids were for the last five years or so, it’s easy to underbid. Rumors have been spreading that the MSF is now interested in taking over the Florida, Georgia and Utah programs. The MSF doesn’t admit this, but their track record has been to do what they want, and then hire a “spin control” public relations firm to smooth out the ruffled feathers later.

The MSF Clams Up

The second big change in rider training was that the MSF and the Motorcycle Industry Council (MIC) started choking off communication. Prior to about 1993, even journalists could call up MSF staffers and have a nice dialogue about what was happening inside the system. The late Roger Hull, as editor of *Road Rider*, used to have long conversations with MSF Presidents, and some of us used to stop by the MSF offices just for a chat. The MSF was a member of SMSA, and participated in conference seminars. Then suddenly, in the 1990s, staffers at the MSF began to quit. Others were let out to pasture. Letters from state administrators sent to the MSF to clarify policies were often not answered. The MSF stopped informing state programs of what it was planning, and finally dropped its membership in SMSA altogether.

Communication between the MSF leadership and state administrators (not to mention the motorcycling press) began to slow to a trickle, and in many cases actually turned hostile. For instance, during the development and testing of the new Basic RiderCourse, state administrators were understandably curious about what the cur-

riculum would look like, and very interested in helping smooth out any administrative wrinkles. One state coordinator who attempted to get involved in the process was told, “We don’t want your input. We don’t care what you think, we’re going to cram it (the BRC) down your throat.”

Riders Edge

The third significant change in rider training was that Harley-Davidson began to offer its own training program, “Riders Edge,” independently of the existing state programs. That was an outgrowth of the concept that a student tends to buy the same brand of motorcycle he or she rode in training. The fly in the ointment was that up to the time of Riders Edge, the MSF had limited novice riders to no larger than 250cc training machines.

Harley-Davidson’s plan was to develop a 500cc single-cylinder machine they felt would be suitable for a novice. Okay, the Buell “Blast” was twice the size of the MSF limit, but Harley-Davidson had leverage. Remember the Golden Rule: “Whoever holds the gold gets to make the rules.” Harley-Davidson is a sponsor of the MSF and a member of the MIC. The current chairman of the MSF Board of Trustees is Lara Lee, who also happens to be an employee of Harley-Davidson. Harley-Davidson got its Riders Edge program approved, using Buell Blasts and a special curriculum, different from what the state programs were using.

New Curricula

During the late 1990s, there had been rumors of an update to the beginning-level MRC:RSS course, and most everyone in rider training was in favor of a revision. The old training style was more like that of a marine drill sergeant, and it needed to be loosened up. But no one outside of the MSF seemed to know *what* those revisions would be. And the MSF wasn’t talking.

What the MSF was doing was developing a new training course with an entirely different style, based more on the theories of adult learning, and less on the knowledge of skilled motorcyclists. The MSF didn’t let anyone in on the secret, even as it tested the new Basic Rider Course (BRC) in New

Mexico. Finally, the MSF announced that the BRC was ready, and issued a command for every state program to retrain its instructors and make the switch.

And, by the way, instructors wouldn’t be called “instructors” anymore. They would be “rider coaches.” The learning style was a lot better, and easier to teach, but there was considerable grass-roots concern that it was too “dumbed down.”

Some state coordinators and instructors liked the new BRC—some didn’t. One big sticking point was that the BRC just didn’t have the same level of information as the old MRC:RSS. Another problem was the cost of retraining instructors to make them into “rider coaches.” For instance, Idaho’s STAR program has a very modest budget,

their state motorcyclists’ money to create a one-off curriculum.”

The MIC Influence

Legally, the MSF, the Motorcycle Industry Council (MIC) and the Specialty Vehicle Institute of America (SVIA) are separate corporations, but the real-life situation is that MSF President Tim Buche wears three hats. He is also the MIC President and the SVIA President. And all three organizations operate out of a single building in Irvine, California.

This handy arrangement allows the MIC to do some lobbying to create state laws that just happen to be favorable to the MSF or SVIA, while the MSF and SVIA can claim they were not “officially” involved, or don’t

do find it curious that the MIC maintains professional lobbyists in a few, but not in all states. And we find it abhorrent that neither the MSF nor the MIC explains to motorcyclist organizations what they are doing.

The Murkowski Amendment

The simmering troubles between the MSF and state administrators finally boiled over in December 2003, during a hearing on the Murkowski amendment to the federal Transportation Equity Act (TEA). Alaska Senator Linda Murkowski had proposed an amendment that would potentially have provided funding directly to cash-starved state motorcycle safety programs. A hearing on the amendment was set for December 10 in Washington, D.C. Representatives of

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so they have to be as frugal as possible. It would take a big bite out of their resources to spend \$10,000 to \$15,000 on retraining, painting new range layouts, publishing new instructor guides, and so forth. After all, their programs have been running well using the “old” MRC:RSS. But, as the MSF cranked up the pressure, most state programs simply genuflected to President Buche and switched to the BRC.

Only two states had the nerve to challenge the MSF and its new BRC head-to-head. Idaho STAR is attempting to continue teaching the MRC:RSS. Team Oregon reviewed the BRC and decided it wasn’t appropriate for Oregon riders. They designed their own curriculum, despite warnings about the dire consequences of standing up to the MSF. Time will tell whether or not Team Oregon gets away with its bold plan. With considerable industry funding, the MSF and MIC have the financial power to be the “500 pound gorillas” in this scenario.

Administrators in other states have confidentially suggested to us that this is a bad trend. As one coordinator put it: “State Administrators are responsible for administering their state’s motorcycle safety program. We need to stay out of the curriculum development arena. State Administrators should be free to make constructive suggestions and comments to the MSF curriculum developers, but should not spend

know what’s happening. It works like this: SVIA wanted to start doing off-road motorcycle training in Texas, but didn’t want to have to deal with the Texas motorcycle safety program. So, the MIC hired some big gun lobbyists who quietly got the Texas laws changed to re-define off-road motorcycles and ATVs as something other than “motorcycles.” Then, when they weren’t “motorcycles” anymore, the SVIA could move into Texas without having to deal with the state’s motorcycle safety program.

Motorcycle activists have begun to notice that high-powered lobbying firms are quietly at work in various states. For instance, there are lobbyists operating in South Carolina, listing their address as “1235 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 600, Arlington, VA.” The big gun lobbying firm of Shea, Paige, & Rogal, Inc., are at work in Illinois, operating with that same Arlington address. The Advocacy Group (considered the collective genius in public affairs and government relations) also has its offices in Arlington. So, who is really at 1235 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 600? Well, that’s the address of the Government Relations Office of the Motorcycle Industry Council.

Now, understand that we have absolutely no proof the MIC is lobbying to discredit the various state motorcycle safety programs, reduce their funding, or otherwise prepare certain states for an MSF takeover. But we

MIC/MSF/SVIA informed the committee they would *not* be attending, but as everyone was being seated for the hearing, two MSF staff members arrived, followed shortly by MSF President Tim Buche. Buche asked to make a presentation, and then proceeded to launch into an *attack* on state rider training programs. According to shocked participants, Buche allegedly made it clear that he felt the rider education system in the USA was “broken,” and for the government to throw money at state programs would be a mistake.

Buche’s comments were a shock for participants who had hoped to demonstrate a united call for funding to make it possible for states to meet the increasing motorcyclist training demand. It was like being stabbed in the back by your own parents.

A few days after the hearing, the MSF was scrambling at damage control, attempting to explain away Buche’s negative comments with slick PR statements. “MSF remains steadfast in its commitment to rider education and training as evidenced by its 30-year commitment to America’s riders.” If you’d like a little different slant on this whole debacle, try www.solriders.com.

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