

Zen Riding

Jim Ford's Rider Workshop

by Moshe K. Levy

IF YOU'RE AN MCN reader, chances are you're a seasoned motorcyclist with an infatuation for riding that stretches far beyond the realm of weekend hobby. For you, motorcycling is less about practical transportation, and more about the one activity that is absolutely therapeutic in your life. Indeed, there is a spiritual aspect to riding that has been all but ignored in typical riding courses—until now.

After nine years and over 100,000 miles on two wheels, I'd taken the MSF's "Experienced RiderCourse" on an almost annual basis to shake off the cobwebs, but that's been the extent of my formal training. I wanted to participate in a more intricate level of education where I could develop skills beyond parking lot drills, and learn to play my BMW RT like the fine instrument it is.

My search led me to Jim Ford's Zen Motorcycling Rider's Workshop. Completing this three-day course was one of the most profound experiences of my entire riding career.

Jim Ford's reputation within the sport-touring community has grown by leaps and bounds, entirely by word of mouth. A highly trained aircraft pilot with over 16 years and 300,000 miles worth of motorcycling experience, Ford was top salesman at Bob's BMW in Maryland, where he began leading weekend rides with customers through the mountains of the mid-Atlantic.



Jim Ford leads the group on an "invisible" road.

These rides soon became the stuff of local legend, as much for their complex routing through serendipitous roads as for Ford's abilities to traverse them effortlessly. Ford later branched off on his own and created the Rider's Workshop to focus exclusively on teaching his unique style of "Zen Motorcycling."

My particular class was a three-day study of the stunning Appalachian Mountains between Maryland, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. The classes are geared toward intermediate level sport-tourers, with a maximum of five students per class. In my group, ages ranged from my youthful 32 to 68, but everyone had quality full-coverage protective gear, plenty of hours in the saddle, and an eagerness to learn that bonded us all.

After preliminary introductions, we began with a flight plan of what Jim dubbed "invisible roads"—local roads which are unnoticed by through traffic. It was on these serpentine roads, utterly free from congestion, that we would transform

ourselves from dull cleavers to sharp scalpels over the next three days.

Each student was given a set of Etymotic ear buds through which Jim would be speaking to us as we rode, and his first comment to us was to pay attention to how we were sitting on our bikes. Ford instructed us to position ourselves gracefully, like a typist's fingers lightly poised on home row, with the balls of our feet on the footpegs and our hands, wrists, elbows, and shoulders consciously relaxed at all times. From this fundamental, all of the subsequent lessons repeated the same mantra: Subtle, ultra-efficient inputs to the motorcycle with perfect smoothness as the ultimate goal.

To give the students something to aspire to, Jim took time to give each of us an individual "benchmarking" ride on the back of his BMW GS around picturesque Seneca Rocks State Park in West Virginia, and it was here that we all experienced firsthand what genuine smoothness feels like.



Jim Ford demonstrates high speed cornering with Terri on board.



Jim Ford and his GS, with Seneca Rocks in the background.



Jim Ford rides an invisible road.

As a Reg Pridmore scholar, Jim's mastery of shifting made the motorcycle feel as if it were powered with a turbine drivetrain, not by a conventional transmission with separate ratios. As he furiously raced the big boxer through the gears from first to overdrive and back down again, the shifts were completely imperceptible save for the sound of the motor. In fact, Jim's technique was so refined that as I closed my eyes, I could not determine if we were accelerating, decelerating, turning, or on a straightaway—even though we were doing all four with blazing speed.

Now that the bar was set, it was time for us to incorporate the various lessons we had learned, synergizing them into a higher level of performance on the twisty tarmac of the invisible roads.

Each of us had a chance to lead the group, with Jim following close behind the leader, guiding him/her via the ear



An invisible road: an uncongested sliver of tarmac in the back country.

buds. As motorcyclists, we've all discussed the theories of proper riding, but it was an authentic revelation to receive inspiring real time instruction by an expert following us through each curve.

Ford's instructions were so much more than "look where you want to go." Beyond the challenging physical aspects of learning to ride competently, we were being guided in the very personal process of tuning in to what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has termed "flow." Flow is an often elusive mental state in which a person is fully immersed in the moment with complete focus, free from all discursive thoughts. In this meditative state of "mushin," a person relies more on what they feel intuitively than on what they think rationally. Jim encouraged us to hone in on our own intuitions, sensing the unique rhythm of each surface we negotiated. The idea was to ride those roads the way a great musician approaches a solo, where each note is not only played precisely in and of itself, but also fits perfectly within the context of the overall song.

So we learned to ride, feeling with our hearts and anticipating with our instincts

as much as we were using our eyes to see and our bodies to react. Previously overlooked undulations in the blacktop now resulted in instantaneous gear changes, once ignored clues from surrounding landscapes now prompted polished lane positioning, throttle inputs were massaged from violent stabs to soothing caresses, clumsy braking went from routine to nonexistent, heart rates slowed from redline to idle, breathing calmed from shallow to deep, and space and time compressed with each passing mile.

We got out of our own ways, shattered our own self-imposed limitations, and just let the harmony play itself. We were each discovering our individual riding flow, a groove that was neither lazy nor hurried, but rather felt just like a natural high. And this was one addiction that made a full blown junkie out of each of us, now that we had a chance to sample it for ourselves!

As you may have guessed, the Rider's Workshop is not merely a riding course, though we did learn an invaluable amount about riding more safely and smoothly. It is not merely a grand tour, though we did travel some of the most magnificent rural mountainside scenery in the country. It is not merely a social gathering, though we all met fellow riders who became friends long after the bikes were parked. Rather, because all three of these components were in such exceptional abundance, the long weekend we spent learning from Jim Ford was nothing less than a complete rediscovery of what makes motorcycling such an incredibly cathartic experience. 🍓



Ford demonstrates proper entry to a sharp, banked turn.

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