

SEVEN STEPS TO RIDING HEAVEN

We follow a relative riding novice as he morphs from nervous wobbler to expert carver in just eight days...

Riding behind MCN reader Martin Brennan on the way to his first day of coaching with Rapid Training is like watching a textbook novice. He potters along in the middle of his lane, except in corners where he changes lines multiple times. And overtaking? Not so much. It's all safe enough, but the pace is glacial and Martin admits afterwards that he's not really enjoying himself. He's a relatively new rider – but the way he rides can be witnessed on any British B-road on any sunny summer's day. Brit bikers have some of the best training schools in the world waiting to help them get more from their riding – and yet most of us stop training the moment we pass our test.

It's hard to imagine that after just eight days of coaching this novice will be whistling along at a cracking pace looking for all the world like a naturally fast, smooth rider with 20 years of experience under his tyres. But, amazingly, that's what happens – his riding after the course is unrecognisable from his first day. We asked Martin, who won the Rapid Training Bikemaster course in an MCN competition, to explain the lightbulb moments that let him go from wobbler to carver, from dawdler to slicer, and from gritted teeth to beaming grin.

1 Things are looking up

“When I started I was really worried what was two feet in front of me – the road surface, the verge, whether there was diesel... It meant I was hardly looking ahead at all and wasn't spotting things like upcoming corners, junctions or traffic. It sounds obvious now, but knowing what's up the road makes a massive difference.

“When I started looking across fields to see where the road went, or noticing junctions half a mile away, I could start deciding what to do rather than being surprised. Even things like road signs can be really useful, but I wasn't noticing them at the start. You have an intercom earpiece, so Clive



Martin (right) with his Rapid Training instructor Clive

‘At the start I was riding like I was taught to for my test’

[Martin's Rapid Training coach] was saying things like ‘did you see the van half a mile up the road?’ and I hadn't.

“It took me a while to get into this and it was only later in the course that I was doing it all the time. The trick is to look ahead and use peripheral vision to see what's just in front.”

2 Seeing into the future

“At the start I was riding like I was taught for my test [which Martin passed two years ago], so I was sticking in the middle of the lane and not going anywhere near the edges. But by staying on the left for right-hand corners and moving to the right for left-handers you get a much earlier view of the road. I'd read about the technique but wasn't convinced it would make that much difference, but it definitely does. It makes a massive difference.

“Also, it means others can see you earlier too – there were a couple of instances in town where a car could

see me, but if I was positioned where I used to be, they wouldn't have.

“I found it easy to use the technique on left-hand turns because it feels like there's plenty of room for error. But on right-handers, when I needed to be closer to the verge, I found it difficult – I couldn't help focusing on the verge rather than looking ahead. But as I grew in confidence about what the bike could do, I realised it was ok to stay there round the corner.”

3 Positioning for progress

“I was just overtaking like I do in a car: Come up behind, peer round the vehicle in front and then overtake. But on a straight, if it's clear you can move out to the right far earlier and see what's coming, and if it's still clear you can overtake. There's no need to get close to the vehicle in front, and if you do then you can't see if it's safe.

“Also, I wasn't using right-hand

Continued over

‘I didn't think that the technique would make such a massive difference’



Clive gets Martin to scan into the distance so he can make a better plan of action

WORDS: JOHN WEST/LAKE PICTURES; CHIPPI WOOD/IMG PHOTOGRAPHY



Martin riding under Clive's watchful eye



Using more of the road paid dividends

What does the Bikemaster super-course cover?

Martin won a place on Rapid Training's premier course, Bikemaster. This takes all levels of riders through two days of track coaching and six on road with the aim of making them the best rider they could possibly be. More information at rapidtraining.co.uk

Martin was faster, smoother and having fun too

'I didn't realise that I could lean the bike over so far...'

corners as a chance to overtake. If you hang back as you go round the corner, then close in on the rear right-hand corner of the car as the bend starts to open up, you can get a view down the next stretch of road. If there's nothing coming you can just be off. It took me a while to get that – it was easy to understand but I found it hard to put into practice because you need to recognise when the right-hand bend is going to open up. I was hanging back too much, which made it hard work."

4 Trusting your tyres

"The days on track were brilliant at getting me to trust the bike and the tyres [the Bikemaster course incorporates two trackdays]. Obviously I've seen pictures of riders really leaning their machines over, so I knew it was possible but until I'd experienced it on track I didn't believe it was possible for me to do the same. My confidence went up a lot, knowing that the bike and tyres can do it – and probably with plenty in reserve."

"On the second trackday, I progressed even further – my cornering improved massively. I felt like I was more active on the bike, giving it a shove on the bars to get it to turn quicker, and then getting on the throttle harder out of the corner. Before I was worried that the rear tyre would lose grip, but the track taught me that there is a lot of grip there."

"Back on the road, I felt much more confident in corners, particularly driving out of them using the slow in, fast out method. And I had more confidence in the wet, too. I loved my time on track so much. It was brilliant fun and I am definitely going to do another trackday before long."

5 Steering your success

"I was a bit lazy with steering and not very active with the way I turned the bike into corners, and then I was fidgeting with the steering, correcting and adjusting all the

way round – I was never sure what I was meant to be doing. It was really useful on the track practising giving the inside bar a single push to get the bike onto the line you want, and then just leaving it. You can then relax because it just stays there, going round, doing its thing."

"On the second trackday, I learned about giving the inside bar a quicker push to get the bike to lean faster, and that was brilliant. It meant I could give it a shove, get the bike turned quickly and then blast out. I loved that."

6 Moving your body

"I know I've always tended to fight the lean of the bike by leaning out of corners with my upper body. Just concentrating on leaning left when I turned left helped my confidence a lot. It meant that I felt more comfortable on the bike."

7 Practising braking

"One of my bad traits was braking several times approaching a corner. I'd brake, realise I hadn't braked enough, then do a bit more. I learned that if I came off the throttle at the right place, I went into the corner at the right speed, so usually I didn't need any braking at all unless I planned to."

"I also used to do a lot of comfort braking in corners whenever I didn't feel happy with my speed. As my cornering confidence grew, all that stopped."

"Also, to start with I was using front and back brakes together, sometimes locking up the back. But using just the front brake for everything above a walking pace makes things so much simpler. And on track I realised how fast the front brakes can stop you, which gave me a lot of confidence." **MCN**

Martin's track riding was 100% transformed



MCN's Saffron Wilson joined Martin and Clive on track



Martin learns the dark art of counter-steering



'YOU LEARN, BUT IT'S NOT LIKE SCHOOL...'



Clive Shepherd, Rapid Training instructor

'Martin is proof that coaching works'

Clive Shepherd, 62, from Rapid Training was Martin's riding coach. Like all Rapid coaches, he's a lifelong biker who was a Class 1 police motorcyclist for many years (Clive was also an Advanced Police Instructor). Here is his verdict:

"The moment when it all came together for Martin was on day five after he'd ridden really well for an hour or so and he said 'I think this is the first time I've really looked far ahead.' That's when it seemed to have clicked, and I could see it in his riding."

"Reading the road, planning, machine control, cornering and overtaking are the big areas for better riding and he's not only grasped the basic principles he's taken them up a level or three. His confidence, focus and smoothness have dramatically

improved, he's a lot more precise than he was thanks to the track training, and he's now impressively progressive, safe and smooth."

"To have turned his level of riding round from post-test novice to fast, flowing and fluid during eight days coaching over the course of three months is a real achievement. He's living proof that it's not miles in the saddle that make us better riders, it's skills development and supportive coaching that will do it every time."

'He's taken his riding up a level or three'



It's big smiles all round as everything falls into place