

Flat Tracking

“FASTER, FASTER, FASTER, UNTIL THE THRILL OF SPEED OVERCOMES THE FEAR OF DEATH.”

- HUNTER S. THOMPSON

Flat track racing is possibly the oldest form of motorcycle racing still in existence. For nearly a century as an organized event, one might argue it started long before that, more than likely when the first time someone took their motorcycle in their buddy's backyard and decided to have some good ol' fun. During that time, the discipline has seen its share of changes, shifts in popularity, ups and downs, but the grit is still there and its grassroots heart is the driving force for its newfound public interest.

Before we get into any more details, let's go over some Flat Track Basics for those of you who are unfamiliar with the sport. A typical AMA flat tracker is capable of speeds exceeding 130mph and their bikes are set up to lean hard. Rider footpads are non-symmetrical - the left peg is slightly higher and moved rearward where the right peg is in more of a standard position. Wide handlebars enable racers maximum control with better leverage and better balance when cornering. And brakes? Who needs them? Some bikes are equipped with a rear brake but they are rarely used. Throttle control is the most important in flat tracking. It's on the gas as early as possible and off the gas as late as possible. It's also about setting up for the corner, followed by a lot of technique to get the bike to make that corner as short as you can so you don't wear out early.

Up until Johnny Lewis' school, the time I had on a flat track bike was with the Superhooligan Racers at one of their practices at Perris Speedway in California, where the only advice I was given was from good friend Roland Sands who gave me the tip, "If you see the wall, turn left. If you still see the wall then curse a lot and brace yourself." After a speech like that I was nervous as hell but I still went out and did it, and by turn two I was addicted. Even after riding for four hours, crashing, losing the ability to pick up my left leg from exhaustion and suffering a small labrum tear, I still didn't want to get off the track. I spent the three hour ride back to Long Beach looking up places to practice, gear to buy and a new bike to race on.

Lucky for me I didn't have to wait long. Sasha Valentine, a close friend, who is a very accomplished motorcyclist and owner of the successful social site CaferacerXXX asked me if I wanted to go with her to Johnny Lewis' flat track school. I immediately said yes. When I found out that it was an hour away from my house and there was a class for just women, I was even more stoked at the opportunity.

I only had five hours track time up until that point so I started Googling videos, websites, articles and blogs to find out all I could to be better prepared. I even started doing yoga twice a day, push ups, and cut out all caffeine from my diet. I was feeling pretty good but still nervous. Not because I was worried about crashing, but because I was meeting other women I looked up to for the first time and I was hoping to live up to my online persona as an experienced female motorcyclist. I wasn't really out of my element, I grew up riding on the dirt, but that was a long time ago, when my bones and ego were more flexible.

Day one started with the basics - the painfully slow and super technical basics. Seat position, body position, arm position, throttle on, throttle off and turn left. We did small circles for hours. I'm impatient when it comes to riding. Every second left turn, I could see the half-mile track in the corner of my eye and I swear it was calling my name. I never doubted Johnny's method, but there had to be a reason for doing hundreds of small circles, and sure enough it clicked. I started noticing my bike was leaning lower and lower to the ground in each turn and my corners were becoming shorter. I also wasn't as tired as I thought I would be because I was riding more correctly.

We took a break for some fun with a lesson in wheelies and donuts and then headed to the middle of the race track where a half TT track / half motocross track was set up. Off we went and I was amazed at how all of those technical and monotonous skills became instinctual. I was throttling, breaking, and leaning and cornering the right way without even thinking about it; the repetition of earlier created muscle memory.

Our day was cut short due to rain. We rode until our bikes were basically stuck in mud and then retired to the converted container trailer to drink a bit of whiskey and talk about what we learned. By 8:30pm and only a couple shots in, we were all too tired to stay up any longer. Waking up the next day, the track was flooded so we found the driest patch of land we could and made our own mini track, which was a little disappointing but it actually worked to our favour. Learning how to control a motorcycle that is out of control in 3 feet deep mud is definitely a technique that is hard to master, but once you do, you feel like you can do anything. At the very end of the day, the big track dried up enough to ride on and that's what we did. We rode until it was time to head back. When I was driving the girls to the airport, all of us were tired, covered in dirt and sore, but we had the biggest smiles on our faces. We couldn't stop talking about what we had learned and what we can do with it. None of us have a goal of becoming a professional Flat Track racer and we had nothing to prove. We just the will and want to learn, and the love and passion to do it.

Flat Tracking



GETTING SIDEWAYS WITH Sasha Valentine



Leticia and friends had a great weekend learning how to get sideways in the dirt.

Sasha Valentine was the reason that I decided to take this riding school and further my education on Flat Track riding. Now that I've been logging many hours on the road, as well as this introduction to some dirt riding, the next discipline I want to try is motocross. So stay tuned MXP readers, because my next story will be about me learning to ride some good old fashioned moto. Here is an interview with Sasha after we completed our Flat Track Riding School:

LC: That was so much fun Sasha, what was your deciding factor to fly into FL and take Johnny's class?
SV: I have known Johnny personally for quite some time. I had previously taken training from him and

had just avoided a road accident using the dirt skills he previously taught to me. I wanted to return for further skill development. We talked about putting a women's training school together and promoting it through Cafe Racer XXX. The camp developed from there, then three women based training camps were pretty much filled within the first week.

LC: I know what you mean. Riding is obviously fun, but sometimes you need skills on the road that help you stay out of trouble. What did you take away from the two days of training?

SV: From a bird's eye view, it was amazing to see how each individual progressed over the two day camp and left a much better rider. Some of the girls had none or little dirt experience. I think it is important



to continue to set a good example and promote such trainings. Personally, I developed more confidence and skills that I will apply in everyday riding. I do think I will carry some of the positioning and tactics to the road where it makes sense, and I will definitely continue to develop myself on the dirt. When I left, I felt more in control of the bike and ready to push forward. I was already able to build upon Johnny's training three weeks later at a more advanced training held at BMW's US Rider's Academy.

LC: If you had to pick one thing, what was the most valuable lesson you learned from the weekend?

SV: As it parallels in life, sometimes you have to dive into corners, trust what you learned, trust yourself and throttle out.

LC: That is so true, there are definitely many parts of riding that mirror what we do in our everyday lives. Perhaps that's why we all love riding so much. What was the most challenging part of the two days?

SV: It took time to get some of the techniques, and sometimes it was a mental battle to both let go of bad habits and not overthink the drills. Sometimes you can't overthink things, you just have to react.

LC: This was such a great experience and I really appreciate you getting me involved. We'll definitely have to do this again sometime! Until then, ride safe and don't overthink.

SV: Exactly! Yes, it was a great experience, and the fact that it was just us girls made it even cooler. I'm counting the days until next time Leticia, thank you. **MXP**