

# YOU GOTTA HAVE FAITH

RawHyde Intro to Adventure Riding  
and Base Camp Alpha

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**A**dventure motorcycling is an exercise in faith. I don't mean, "Dear, sweet baby Jesus, I swear I'll never sin again if you keep me from dropping my bike in front of my friends!" but rather the incredible belief that a 600-pound machine is going to swing safely through a rocky, rutted, cliffside hairpin turn just because you shift your weight onto your left foot and point your eyes vaguely in the right direction. This demands faith because, in the instant that you approach the turn, if you question the technique, the

capabilities of the bike, or yourself, you ain't gonna make it.

For some people, this unquestioning confidence comes swiftly and naturally. These are the riders in front of me on the trail. These are the people who float over the sand and slalom around the rocks and charge the hill without knowing what they'll meet at the top. They are the clouds of dust disappearing in the distance while I fall behind, dragging my gaze back up to the horizon, willing my hands to stay loose on the bars, coaxing my ass cheeks to unclench, and reminding myself to keep breathing.

For ten years, I worked to narrow that gap between my bike and those puffs of dust ripping around the corner

ahead of me. I studied, learning the best set-up for going off-road, and could explain with instructor-like authority the importance of weight transfer, correct tire pressure, and body position. I watched videos online. I practiced drills. Yet despite all of this studious effort, I wasn't getting faster, I wasn't getting braver, and I certainly wasn't dropping my bike less often.

When I asked experienced riders for advice, they all offered a variation of the same counsel: "Just relax!"; "Don't forget to have fun!"; "Get out of your head!"; "Take more risks!" I understood this — conceptually anyway — but this wasn't something that I could just resolve to do because I was told to do it. How could I let go when my brain was screaming for me to hold on tighter? After a decade of practicing, studying, taking classes, and running over road cones in my backyard, I still had not found the answer to this question.



Which is why, if I'm being honest, I wasn't expecting to get much closer to it when I arrived in southern California for the RawHyde BMW Off-Road Academy's two-day Intro to Adventure class. What I expected was to play hard, make friends, and come home with a few new bruises and the stories that went with them. I also thought there was a better than average chance that I would break a motorcycle or, more likely, a bone, and I braced myself to hear a lot of well-meaning, but futile guidance about ignoring that risk and "relaxing" on the bike.

I did hear that advice, too, and the coaches led us through all the things that my best instructors had done in the past. They explained the skills and demonstrated them, then watched us practice and

gave us plenty of corrective and affirming feedback. Balancing their critiques with large helpings of reassurance, they insisted, repeatedly, that we did not, in fact, suck as much as we thought we did. And, as unlikely as this seemed to us, they even promised that one day we could be lofting over tires and ascending near-vertical walls like the group of Next Step students practicing on the other side of the RawHyde property.

We worked hard but our coaches worked harder, helping us pick up our enormous toppled bikes and dusting off our egos after every fall. Then, after disentangling our bodies and machines from fences, caution tape, and assorted shrubbery all day, they poured us our drinks in the evening, served us gourmet dinners, and sat by the camp-

fire with us. They showed us their scars and shared their best and worst moments of the day. And when they had answered every one of our tiresome questions and listened to all our hackneyed riding stories, they watched us each limp off to swallow our ibuprofen and climb into our bunks.

On day three, I rode down the twisting RawHyde driveway for the Base Camp Alpha trip, not with teachers and classmates, but among new friends. We were nine trepidatious Intro to Adventure comrades and three bold Next Step riders led by two coaches. For the next two days, the coaches would judiciously offer details about the road ahead and deplete their supply of steel-reinforced repair epoxy as we moved across the desert in spurts of adrena-



line-pumping trials and stunning-vista rest stops.

As it turns out, my two days of pre-trip training didn't save me from tucking the front wheel in the sand, bouncing my helmet off a rock, or slamming my pubic bone — yet again — into the gas tank hard enough to bruise...all within the first six hours of the trip. It did condition me, though, to those frustrations, and prepared me for the unlikely celebration ritual that follows a fall. I did gradually learn to leave some of my fear in the dirt when I stood back up onto the pegs and kept riding forward.

As we pitched our tents at Base Camp during the sunset of our first day, I reflected upon the complex responsibilities of our coaches. They had to read each rider, our

abilities, and our moods to know when we needed to be nudged towards a new challenge, when it was okay to make fun of us for dropping our bikes in a parking lot, and when, we — okay mostly me — just needed a quick hug and a moment to cry before moving on towards the next deep sand wash, rutted hill climb, or rocky descent. They needed to know our story and we needed to know theirs, so that when they told us, "You can do this," we would believe them.

Eventually, that belief did begin to overtake my vain compulsion to identify and anticipate every soft spot in the road. I stopped trying to prepare myself for every possible tire slip and I learned that I couldn't avoid a rock by staring directly at it.

I started to trust that even if I didn't see the impediments on the road, my bike would bounce easily over them nonetheless, and my body would respond intuitively to keep me upright and steady on the throttle.

By the last big climb of the ride, I was close enough to the riders in front of me to charge straight through their dusty plumes and I joined them at the top just as they were shutting off their engines. Our coach already had one foot planted on the ground and the other leg slung over the seat to watch the rest of us crest the hill. Although he still had his helmet on, I could see in his eyes a smile that said, "Yeah, I knew you'd make it," and I realized that, at last, I knew it, too.

