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AUTHOR AND BILL AND BARBARA

RAWHYD ADVENTURE C

LEARNING TO RIDE BIG BIKES IN



Y B Y T H E
L A N G F O R D

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What would you do if you owned 120 acres of rolling hills in Southern California and had reached a midlife crisis? In the case of Jim Hyde, it wasn't so much a crisis as it was a reassessment: He was bored with his career, and in his words, "I wanted to try something new before I was too old to start again if it didn't work out!" As luck—and hard work—would have it, Hyde has

Left: One of the skills you learn at RawHyde's Adventure class is to ride figure eights around these oak trees.

Above: Practice makes perfect; after riding over the "whoops" several times, I got it right.

successfully taken his passion for motorcycling and created an adventure camp where he teaches riders how to handle big bikes in an offroad environment.

This is no lightweight dirt-bike riding school; this is for those who want to comfortably navigate bikes like a BMW GS or KTM Adventure through gravel and mud,

and to keep going without getting choked up when the pavement ends.

Hyde was trained by BMW's corporate school in Germany and in turn has trained approximately 2,000 riders. His programs include classes for beginning and experienced offroaders. You can show up on any bike you'd like, though he estimates that about 70 percent are BMW riders. The courses are three days long and consist of two days training and an optional trail ride on the last day to practice your newfound skills. For this particular class last March, I was one of nine women in the first Ladies Only Adventure Rider Training course, though we were put through the same curriculum as the guys. Hyde decided to add a female-only riding class to his program because some women are intimidated by a class filled with bigger and stronger men.

From the moment we arrived at his ranch we felt right at home among friends. Around the campfire that evening, Hyde asked each of us to talk about what we wanted to gain from the class. Most of us were looking for a general improvement in our offroad skills, but then there was Catherine from Pennsylvania, who was



Above: Jim Hyde, owner and founder of RawHyde Adventures, and motorcycle rider extraordinaire.

Right: Packed up and ready to head out for an adventuresome weekend. Far right: MSF instructor Cheryl Westfall, aka Gunny, demonstrates correct body position before we ride down the hill on our bikes.



taking the course in preparation for a 2010 motorcycle ride from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, to Tierra del Fuego. We then filed off to “The Dakar Bar” and main dining room for drinks and appetizers and to watch Harley-riding chef Bruce Payne in action, whipping up the first of his culinary delights for the weekend.

At the next morning’s briefing, Hyde explained the exercises we’d be doing and talked about the “rules” of offroad riding and the five biggest mistakes

riders make. Hyde and MSF instructor Cheryl “Gunny” Westfall, who has been teaching motorcycle safety classes for more than 20 years for street and dirt riding, demonstrated correct body position. And then, with his 550-pound ’03 BMW R1150GS on its centerstand, Hyde stood up on the pegs while Gunny kicked the front tire hard to show us how a bike responds to a rider clinging tight to the bars. “Relax” is the key, as tension creates a loss of balance. Throughout the course Hyde would explain an exercise, and then either he or Gunny would demonstrate the maneuver. It’s impressive to watch 5-foot, 2-inch Gunny take off on the BMW Xchallenge with its 36.6-inch seat height, as she starts off with one foot on the peg, then swings her other leg over while underway.



Above: Hyde talks to Heidi about the fish that got away while I feverishly take notes. Right: In this exercise, Heather must ride slow enough that she does not pass Hyde as he walks alongside.

Far right: Michele limbers up before hopping back on her bike.

Bottom right: Gunny and Hyde support the bike as Theresa practices counterbalancing.



Outfitted in my Cortech FSX Jacket, Sidi boots and Shift-brand MX helmet and riding gear—including knee, shin and elbow guards—just in case—I swung a leg over my loaner 2008 Kawasaki KLR650 and headed out for our first exercise, which was standing on the footpegs and practicing throttle control. Standing was how we spent all our time on the bikes over the next several days. This stabilizes the bike because you’ve

now moved your point of influence off the seat and placed it well below the center of gravity. This took some getting used to because as Hyde explained, “Street riders are used to sitting like a sack of potatoes on the seat!” How true! We practiced balance by lifting one foot off a peg and riding with one foot on the seat (and then all the way over to the other side if you felt comfortable), and practiced finding the friction zone. Balance and appropriate use of the clutch, those are the key things you want to nail. And

always, always, look up and ahead; never look down because that’s where you’ll go.

All of these exercises are done in an oval arena that goes up a hill into an orchard. For each exercise, we’d take

five or six laps around, with Jim and Gunny watching every move and giving feedback. Next, the duo demonstrated rear-wheel skids, and showed us the steps: clutch in, brake, look up and keep your weight back, and foot down. First, we started off slow, locking the rear brake at 7 mph, then 10, 12 and so on. Did I mention that you might fall over in this class? Jim and Gunny are really good at either keeping bikes upright when riders go sideways or, as is the case more often, jumping out of the way of a falling bike. Clutch and brake levers got bent, and some were broken off. As with most of us, I was timid about stomping on that rear brake, especially after watching some





Above: Hyde shows us how to get a bike re-started when stalled on a hill.

Right: First I'll try riding down this hill sitting down before trying it standing up on the footpegs.

Below: Gunny talks to Brienne about always looking ahead. And yes, we rode over the series of logs shown by Gunny's feet.

Bottom right: Hyde demonstrates how to hang your butt off the seat while going around a turn.



makes him an excellent instructor. And he doesn't just teach the class and then take off for the evening; he's there for the duration making sure you're getting what you want from the class.

Sunday we moved up into the orchard where a series of figure eights meander around oak trees. Gunny's favorite phrase was, "I want to see more butt!" She was referring to counterbalancing, which as she explained, is counterintuitive to street riding because you're leaning opposite of what you do when riding on the street. "You don't have any traction in the dirt, so you're creating traction," she explained to us, followed by Jim's input: "And if you don't do it right, you'll fall flat on your face." This was the hardest thing for me to grasp: We had to shift our weight to the left peg and hang our butts off the left side when making a right turn, and vice versa, all the while standing up on the pegs. Ah, this was so unnatural! First we walked uphill through a banked turn while Jim explained where your weight should be through each phase of the turn and how you should be using the clutch. Then Jim rode through the turn as Gunny narrated his every move.

Next it was our turn to tackle the figure eights. There were multiple spills here, including one by ever-enthusiastic Heidi who exclaimed, "Bad brake!" and laughed and laughed as she rolled down the hill. Jim looked over at those of us standing by, with a twinkle in his eyes, "I love it when people laugh when they hit the ground!" And then we watched with admiration as 5-foot, 3-inch Rachael, who stood with one foot on the ground and her other foot resting *atop* the seat of her Kawi

tipovers. "Wimpy stop," Gunny told me when I daintily came to a stop next to her.

After the rear braking drill, we moved on to the front brake, which is a whole new experience in the dirt, especially for those used to anti-lock brakes. Again, we started off at a slow pace and then gradually got faster each lap, learning to gently apply pressure to the brake lever. After we'd mastered the front brake, we had to stop between two cones that were an imaginary cliff using—you guessed it—the front and rear brakes together. Fortunately, none of us "tumbled over the cliff."

Our biggest thrill for the day was when we left the arena and rode up a long, fairly steep hill with sections that were banked off, carefully picking a path around ruts and other obstacles. When we got to the top there was a round of high-fives and ear-to-ear smiles. I remember looking over at Michele and thinking her helmet was going to pop off the top of her head from the enormous grin on her face. And then there was Brienne, an experienced offroad rider, who looked like she could ride another 50 miles uphill in the dirt. Of course, now we had to ride back down, which was another challenge in itself. Several of us got down that hill by repeating our mantra, "Breathe, and stay focused," courtesy of GS rider Heather, who'd led us in a yoga session that morning. The incentive for getting down the hill in one piece was the drinks and appetizers waiting for us at The Dakar Bar.

And yes, it was way worth it, as was the gourmet dinner. What made this adventure camp experience even better was that Jim and Gunny were at the dinner table with us, getting to know each person and asking questions, such as what your highs and lows of the day were. Jim is articulate and very good at explaining his ideas, which





Above, left to right: Wow, these “whoops” are fun! Looking good, got the hang of it, piece o’ cake, and—whoops! I’m O-K!

Right: Falling over is pretty common, but injuries are rare.

Middle: Catherine hugs Jim when she makes it over the “whoops” successfully.

Below: Sitting on fence, left to right: Heather Linn, Theresa Botello, Catherine Phoenix. Standing: Barbara Langford, Jim Hyde, Rachael Westfall, Brienne Thomson, Cheryl “Gunny” Westfall, Michele Blackwell. Kneeling: The author and Heidi Still.

KLX250, ride through as nonchalantly as if she were simply signing her name.

This time around, we rode back up the hill and headed for the “whoops,” a series of five dirt mounds that we had to ride up and over. Again, we started off slowly: Ride to the top of the first whoop and stop, then do the same on the next one. Eventually we got comfortable enough to ride over all of them. Again, there were some falls, including one by me when I hit the last whoop at an angle because yep, I was looking down and that’s where I went, just like they told me!



Later that day our group stood peering over what appeared to be the side of a cliff, though in actuality it was just a semi-steep hill, which we were apparently supposed to ride down. “Who’s first?” Jim asked as he looked around the group of us who were doing our best not to make eye contact with him. Again, the RawHyde crew broke it down in steps for us. The first time we crept down the hill with engines off, using the clutch as a

brake. A few riders opted out of riding down the hill, and those of us who did ride down successfully were met with cheers and claps on the back. It was wonderful to be part of this group that was supportive and truly thrilled for each other when we accomplished something.

At the bottom of the hill I spotted yet another piece of a lever on the ground. Falling over is pretty common, though there have only been a handful of injuries, such as a twisted ankle, in six years. Hyde is equipped to handle these should something happen. If you’re worried about damaging your

own bike, you can always rent a BMW from his stable and lop off one of his clutch levers instead.

The last night when our completion certificates were presented to us, each of us was given a nickname (which is also your user ID in the RawHyde chatroom). We laughed and hooted for each other because now we were part of the elite RawHyde alumnae. This was a tough class, and we’d earned our nicknames. As BMW rider Barbara said, “I was intrigued with Jim’s creativity to develop a person’s nickname, to share his observations with us and express positive things about each of us.”

I heard nothing but favorable feedback from my comrades. Barbara described Jim as “a phenomenal instructor.” And Theresa said she felt like she was at a motorcycle resort surrounded by people who made sure she was comfortable. I climbed up into my tent the last night feeling exhausted and content. I was also going to miss these unusual sleeping quarters, which consisted of a safari trailer holding eight individual tents about 8 feet off the ground. It was all part of the unique experience. Each of us left there a better rider thanks to the RawHyde crew’s instruction, upbeat personalities and positive energy. This truly was an adventure. As for mud and gravel, throw it my way because now I can handle it all...while standing on the footpegs.



Above: The accommodations for the weekend: Our own 5½ x 6½-foot tent perched 8 feet off the ground on a safari trailer.



The Intro to Adventure class includes three nights’ accommodations and all food and beverages for \$1,295 (with your own bike). Daily rental fee for a selection of BMWs is \$135 a day. For information check out www.rawhyde-offroad.com or call (213) 713-5652. 34