

## TAKING IT TO THE TRACK DIRT-STYLE



words: Tony Lisanti • images: Tony Lisanti and Cornerspin

What kind of rider are you and what do you hope to learn? That was the question posed to us by Mike Dillon and Aaron Stevenson on October 10th at their Cornerspin, Dirt Training for Road Riding and Racing, school. My reply was simple - "I have many years of off-road and road experience, which I'm sure will mean absolutely nothing! I'm just here to learn!" I'm not a racetrack kind of guy, and have no desire to be. For many, mastering control of a motorcycle while leaned over as far as it can go seems to be the Holy Grail of riding.

Many years ago, I read about Kenny Roberts using XR100s on a flat track for training his sons and other up and coming road racing stars. King Kenny's accomplishments include AMA Dirt Track, Grand National and Road racing championships as well as three World Championships on 500cc two strokes. If this is what helped top-level road racers then there has to be many benefits for the rest of us. When I first learned that a school of this caliber exists today, I immediately contacted Cornerspeed and made a reservation.

Aaron and Mike are accomplished riders in every sense. They are both in excellent physical condition, they train hard, enjoy riding, have years of racing experience and provide various consulting services to top level racers and teams.

Aaron is a life long athlete and active in many sports. He coaches motorcycle riding techniques, nutrition, strength and endurance training as well. A life long motorcyclist, he began riding at the age of 7. He received his expert racing license in 1992 and since has raced in the Vintage (Open-Superbike), Modern Supersport, Superstock, Superbike and Endurance classes having won a national championship and finished second-over-all several times in the WERA National Vintage classes. He currently races vintage superbikes, competing against racers on modern machines.

During his schools (Cornerspeed and Cornerspin), Aaron takes complex riding theory and makes it easy to understand so that students can apply it to their own riding. His teaching style is relaxed and fun but he's very serious about the knowledge students gain and how they apply it. He also does great impressions of Rossi, Hayden, Edwards and many other riders.

Mike Dillon began his riding career off-road in the desert of New Mexico in 1979. In the mid 1980's he raced amateur motorcross in New Mexico and Texas and participated in enduro, cross-country desert races, and hare scrambles. He also began racing dirt-track throughout the Southwest and in Mexico. In 1989 he became Texas State Flat Track Open Amateur Class Champion and Mexican National Flat Track Champion (Open Professional division). Mike began his professional racing career in 1990 in AMA Pro-AM achieving over 40 national race victories. Over the next few years he finished 10th overall in American



Motorcyclist Association Junior National Dirt-track Championship and was top points earning rookie on American Motorcyclists Association Camel Pro Dirt-track series. By 1993 he was awarded National Number 20 by American Motorcyclists Association Pro Racing Division and earned an AMA Professional Superbike racing license. Over the last few years Mike competed in both the WERA and CCS/FUSA road racing series earning 32 race victories and two WERA National Championships in A Superstock and Formula 1 and one regional championship.

Mike currently works with Aaron as an instructor and helped develop the school with him. They carved out a small, tight and well-manicured dirt-road race course in the countryside about an hour north of Charlotte, NC. They included a perfectly groomed short track there as well where they like to let loose with their dirt track skills. Humbling to say the least. Needless to say we were in good hands.





And hands are where the training begins. There are certain times when I've learned something about motorcycling that have changed forever the way I ride. My first MSF course was one and this hand position lesson was another. Mike and Aaron took us through the proper hand position for precise throttle control. For the next two hours they demonstrated properly gripping the handlebars like a screwdriver handle rather than the usual "beer can" grip we all use. Keeping the elbows out and up was also emphasized for more leverage. Next was proper body position. Sitting as far forward as possible, being careful not to lean forward. Gripping the tank with our knees and weighting the outside peg in the turns. Lastly was rolling your butt onto the outside edge of the seat when cornering, and pushing the bike into the turn with the outside leg and



turning your inside foot toward where you want to go. Keep centered, look through the turn and push the bike into it.

In short order we were putting the theory to practice. First some braking drills to get us warmed up. Rear brake control then front brake, then both. Next braking into a turn. Soon we were out on the track practicing cornering technique. Getting up on the outside of the seat with the proper positioning we made circles to the left and then to the right, inside foot down, then both feet on the pegs. Next it was one handed. We placed our left hand on the gas cap and rode in circles to the right, then to the left, inside foot down, then both feet on the pegs.

This was taking the basic elements of turning a motorcycle and practicing each and every one. The main focus was throttle control with the new "screwdriver grip" and the XR's are excellent bikes for this. Nice mellow power but responsive. The bikes also made it easy to maneuver with a low seat, slim profile and neutral handling.

As the day progressed, we practiced late braking and turning harder, leaning the bike as far as you could. Of course, there were more than a few tip-overs, but nothing too painful. After each exercise, we were given pointers on what we did right and what we did wrong. The day culminated with a mini version of a superpole where they set up a tight "road race" course on the track and let us loose. By the end of the day we were trail braking getting the back end of the bike out (at least a little bit) and were gaining confidence and speed in the corners. When we finished I was excited about what I learned but was also exhausted.

Day two started with a review of the previous lessons and hand and body positioning was re-emphasized. Traction and track conditions were perfect with a nice tacky surface, Aaron and Mike let loose for a couple of laps on the short track actually laying down a rubber groove on the clay.

In short order we were back on track practicing how to late brake and turn the bikes on the extreme outside of the turn. This was tough as most of us would tend to run on the inside "hugging the rail" as Aaron put it. Mike was awesome at demonstrating how to drive into the outside of the turn and stuff the bike over and exit with a controlled drive. Mike was able to show us that the short way around the track was not necessarily the fastest. He showed us how to choose a line to properly set where the bike should be for the next turn. We were given the opportunity to see for ourselves on the short track going right then left, braking late and turning hard leaning the bike as far as we could. The motorcycle goes fastest when it's upright and you are on the throttle. The faster you can turn the bike, then the sooner you get back up and on the gas. That's why a football shaped line around the short track was actually faster than riding a line dead center in the groove or even inside all the way around. We were shown by Aaron and Mike just how this was done. The guys got to show their stuff in a masterful demonstration, Mike and Aaron alternating taking the football line and hugging the rail.

The two of them burned off about ten hard laps, each one passing the other and at times were close enough to elbow one another. The lean angles they achieved looked impossible.

We were back on the "road" course practicing with flat turns, down hill and off camber turns. We also completed an exercise executing a sharp right hand turn in loose conditions immediately following a small rise. This was to demonstrate how the suspension unloads and how to settle the bike with the brakes prior to turning. By the end of the day another superpole was run and we ran lap after lap dicing with one another and taking the occasional spill. I ended my day after ten laps or so of my own on the short track and one big smile.

This was one truly amazing experience. The drills demonstrated and practiced will no doubt be put to good use. I have no delusions of my going road racing, but the advice and techniques taught at this school will help any rider, young, old, dirt, street, tourer, racer, newbie or experienced. It is an amazing fun way to hone your turning skills that you can use immediately. In the end, when given the opportunity to review photos from the two days, I realized I had improved but there is still a long way to go. A few more old habits need to be broken. Perhaps making a return visit at some point in the near future is in order.

The Cornerspin School is \$500, including use of their bikes. They offer riding gear rentals. I recommend renting or bringing dirt riding gear rather than using your own street gear. A dirt helmet and dirt gear isn't as bulky and breathes better as it is a work out. Street gear can work, but don't bring your "Sunday best". Also remember the temperature there is much warmer.

The Cornerspin school is located one hour north of Charlotte, North Carolina right off I-85 in Spencer. You can contact them at:

**WEB:** [www.cornerspeed.net/spin.html](http://www.cornerspeed.net/spin.html) • **PHONE:** 704-332-3147

**EMAIL:** [cornerspeed@carolina.rr.com](mailto:cornerspeed@carolina.rr.com)

