

Why I Ride - Vincenzo Kopilow – Travis AFB

I've been incredibly fortunate in my motorcycling journey in that it started relatively early, and I haven't overdone it to the point of getting bored or frustrated with it. In fact, in over 20 years of riding within a 29-year lifespan (so far), I have found myself in various stages in terms of how I either contribute to, or take from, the motorcycling community. In those first 10 years I largely took from the motocross community, and I was allowed to cultivate something that has been a comfortable constant in an otherwise turbulent life that can be Active-Duty Military service. In these last 10+ years I've been afforded the opportunity to be an MSF Ridercoach and to do quite a bit of riding with Chapter 58 of the Green Knights at Shaw AFB, and more recently I've transitioned to being a regular volunteer at a local off-highway vehicle park as well as an MSR for a rather large squadron at Travis AFB, which has proven to be something of a Mecca for motorcyclists.

For those of us that have not had quite the same journey, this set of words is to stress to you how broad the world of motorcycling can be if you'll allow it to be. In motocross, there is a variety of challenges to be had in single track trails, steep hills, ever changing terrain and obstacles that the dirt bike will encourage you to wheelie up to jump over or swing around. The trails and the tracks will beg you to learn to lock up the rear brake of the motorcycle to maneuver the bike through corners.

The fact that a good Off-Highway Vehicle Park will likely not have GPS mapping to guide you around it will inspire you to get a little lost and maybe relearn a sense of direction and some primitive form of navigation. While the action is not as high-speed off road as it is on-road, life still comes at you quickly and you will adapt to overcoming obstacles better and better if you give it time. The most tremendous part of motocross is that it is family friendly. There are off-road machines available to ages as young as 3 years old at this point, and I've ridden with quite a few folks that are well into their 60's and 70's as well. Parents, if the motorcycle is something that you find yourself having to compromise personal time against family time with, this may be a solution to keep your journey going and to usher it in for your younger family members. Additionally, any skill to be learned off road very heavily transfers to on-road riding as well. Traction management, weight distribution, obstacle avoidance, rider radar, and overall familiarity with the motorcycle will better equip you for on-road motorcycling. A 250cc dirt bike will humble a rider in ways much less costly than that of a 600+cc street bike as well.

If you're someone from a motocross background who might've stumbled upon this and are thinking about riding street, do it. Know that there are still growing pains with riding a street bike even if you can already operate a motorcycle better than you can walk, though. The off-road experience does transfer, but few things equip a rider for the obstacle that is traffic, especially stateside traffic. Safety courses are one of those things that will help. While they cannot simulate real world traffic or obstacles perfectly, they do provide a place to practice quick maneuvers with a street bike underneath you instead of a dirt bike, and the curriculum will articulate specific movements that may be second nature, but defining these movements can help you become a much more effective rider in how you apply them. I've led quite a few classes and I've been a student in a small variety of what MSF offers from the basic course up to sport-bike specific courses and can tell you that I've pulled valuable lessons and techniques from each course.

Maintenance on your bike is still paramount. The last place you want to have a small nagging issue (or a catastrophic one) is in town when you're amongst all the others in your respective community where parents in the driver seat are feeding cheerios to their kid in the back seat of their almost soundproof crossover while still driving. The benefits to riding street, though, are that you can leave your driveway and still climb a mountain and be part of the elements. You can get to and from work in a much more personal way. You can have a practical and daily rush of serotonin. Ensure you take the time to get to know the road and know that you don't have to get the fastest bike on the market just because you can handle it. There is still value in pushing a slow bike fast.

The moral of this is to encourage you to broaden your horizons on a motorcycle. Each style of riding has something that can help develop you as an individual and satisfy you on a personal level. There's nothing wrong with knowing your limits if you only intend to be part of just one riding community, but if that ever gets old, there's a vast world of motorcycles and places to be that are calling your name.