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## Keeping it Alive

### *Stayin' Safe Motorcycle Training rolls on*

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Riding along a two-lane draped over the rolling hills of eastern Ohio, I could be thinking about the dinner to come at the historic Stockport Mill Inn, admiring the pinkish-purple fuzz of the spring blooms on the redbud trees, or pondering the business model of the bison farm we just passed. We've all ridden in that carefree (a word very close to "careless") state of mind.

Instead, here's what I'm thinking:

Approaching yet another blind crest, I move the motorcycle to the center of the lane, equidistant from potential hazards on both sides. The angle of the barn roof beyond the rise suggests a left curve and as I top the rise I see that, sure enough, the road makes a quick left. I shift to the right wheel track to lengthen my sight distance through the curve, set my entry speed, then roll on throttle, gliding back into the left wheel track.

Ahead on the right, partially obscured by the trees and beyond yet another small rise, I glimpse a stop sign. In this rural area, the side road is probably unpaved. I'm preparing for gravel on the road and the possibility of an oncoming car, obscured by the rise, about to turn left in front of me.

Approaching two oncoming cars on a straight stretch, I "present myself," moving right so the second driver can see me, in case he's anxious to pass.

One of the reasons I'm so aware of all these potential hazards is because Eric Trow of Stayin' Safe Motorcycle Training is pointing them out to me, speaking to me through the earpiece in my helmet.

We're on Stayin' Safe's West Virginia/Switzerland of Ohio training tour, a two-day ride along Appalachian back roads



with an overnight stay at an old mill converted to an inn. It's a lot like any weekend sport-touring excursion you might plan on your own. But imagine, on top of that, taking your awareness to an entirely new level. Imagine not just a good ride, but also making yourself a better rider.

Those are the goals of Stayin' Safe Motorcycle Training tours.

The spectrum of formal motorcycle instruction runs from Motorcycle Safety Foundation courses in a parking lot to track-based schools taught by professional racers. What's rarer is training in the setting where you ride most: on the street. There's no question that MSF and track schools are valuable, but they unavoidably leave it up to the rider to apply their lessons correctly to the more complex environment of the street.

Stayin' Safe Motorcycle Training, created by the late Lawrence Grodsky and now run by Trow (see sidebar below), bridges that gap. Like an MSF Experienced Rider Course or a track-based school, there's an emphasis on technique: smooth transitions, visual awareness, body position, and more. But, thanks to the steady commentary from the instructors over the radio, a student on a Stayin' Safe training tour leaves with a higher level of street-riding awareness, as well as tuned-up riding skills.



The Ohio tour actually starts in western Pennsylvania, where we assemble for breakfast and introductions. Stayin' Safe tours run with two instructors and six students. After introducing ourselves and meeting Trow and fellow veteran instructor Pete Tamblyn, we fit earpieces into our helmets and Trow runs us through some warm-up drills in a nearby parking lot.

Then, we're off on tour, learning the three-part Stayin' Safe method as we ride:

- 1) Put the bike where they can't touch you. Cars are locked into a lane. The biggest safety advantage we motorcyclists have is being able to adjust our lane position to maximize the cushion between us and hazards both seen and not yet seen.
- 2) Maintain 360-degree awareness. Know what's happening around you, including behind you, at all times.
- 3) No surprises. Point Number 1 plus Point Number 2 equals no surprises. That's the goal.

As we ride, each student takes a turn leading with an instructor right behind, evaluating risks and strategies. During rest stops, Trow draws chalk diagrams on the asphalt (above) and we discuss lines through corners, lane positioning and sight distances. Stayin' Safe is a thinking rider's training course. Students are not expected to follow rigid rules. We're not even expected to follow the instructor's line through the corner, necessarily. We are expected to think for ourselves and ride our own ride, but with lots of guidance over the radio.

If the street setting makes Stayin' Safe unique, it's the real-time feedback through the radio that makes the instruction effective. The critique is instantaneous, while the memory is fresh.

But along with the lessons, Stayin' Safe training tours really are tours. After a morning of riding, we stop for lunch in the tiny town of Beallsville, Ohio, where the family-run diner is distinguished by photos on the walls commemorating local color (like the farmer who not only had "Mail Pouch Tobacco" painted on his barn, but also engraved on his gravestone) and the most courteous and efficient teen-age waitress in the history of American adolescence.



We pass the night at the historic Stockport Mill Inn (above right), where the river powers turbines that provide electricity and every room offers its guest the sleep-inducing hum of water rushing over the dam on the Muskingum River. Massive belts and pulleys from the old mill machinery still hang the ceiling. Beneath those relics, Trow connects his laptop computer to a TV and we view videos of our ride so far (right), witnessing errors (a wobbly mid-corner correction) and successes (decisively executed pass) alike.

Day 2, we explore more back roads before ending our ride in the town square of McConnellsville, Ohio. Riders disperse for home. But if history is a guide, some will return.



"The best compliment we get is when people come back to take our tours again," said Trow. One of the repeat customers on this tour is Paul Shlanta, a 15-year rider from Atlanta.

"I was at the point where I said, 'I need to get better at this or hang it up,'" said Shlanta. He loved riding, but he would make a mistake, dwell on the potential consequences, and the enjoyment would fade. "I got tired of that death-defying feeling."

As a Christmas gift, his wife signed him up for a Stayin' Safe training tour in the Smoky Mountains in May, 2007.

"It completely changed the sport for me," he said of the confidence he gained. "If I'm not enjoying it, it's not worth the risk. Now, I feel I'm managing the risks."

Like Shlanta, I was a repeat customer, too. I first took the Stayin' Safe Ohio tour in 2003, led by Grodsky himself and Leon Winfrey, who's still an instructor today. The surprise, for me, was how Grodsky rode with a higher level of awareness than I had ever achieved. I started that 2003 tour believing I was an observant motorcyclist. I finished it realizing I had ample room to improve.

Five years later, I rode the same roads, fell asleep to the same roar of the Muskingum, and heard much of the same instruction through my earpiece, but from two different instructors, Trow and Tamblyn. Like the other return students, I was there for a refresher course. But I also had a second motive: to see how the Stayin' Safe course had evolved in new hands.

This time, the surprise was how faithful Trow and Tamblyn were to the letter and spirit of the original Stayin' Safe training.

In a better world, Larry Grodsky would still be with us, still leading his tours and imparting his lessons himself. He wouldn't need a legacy.

But since that's not the world we have, it's good to know his

### ***The future of Stayin' Safe***

Long-time readers know that Stayin' Safe, both the column that ran in these pages for 18 years and the training tours of the same name, were the very personal creations of one intelligent, somewhat idiosyncratic man with a passion for motorcycles and a knack for making friends wherever he went: Lawrence Grodsky. You may also know he died two years ago when a deer burst into his path in the dark on a lonely Texas road.

Larry personally led every Stayin' Safe tour, so although his fellow instructors and his long-time partner, MaryAnn Puglisi, wanted to carry on his teaching, they wondered how. Now, two years later, a structure is in place. We asked Eric Trow about Stayin' Safe's future.

**Rider:** Who owns Stayin' Safe Motorcycle Training now?

**Trow:** That's me, as of March. It was a bit of a gray area for a while, because Larry was Stayin' Safe and will always remain Stayin' Safe, because we can't even begin to hope that we'll just replace him. But we still have the same team, the people who assisted Larry, and MaryAnn is still involved.



**Rider:** Tell us about your expansion plans.

**Trow:** We're reintroducing the Wisconsin tour this year and we floated the idea of a West Virginia tour, and the response has been great. We're talking about adding a tour in Colorado, at least one a year. The idea being to build geographically so people don't

legacy is alive, with his old friends still teaching riders that they can have fun riding motorcycles while stayin' safe.

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have to travel to Pittsburgh or Atlanta to participate in these tours.

**Rider:** How do you turn one person's ideas into something broader and lasting?

**Trow:** That's the first thing I asked myself. It was at Larry's funeral that we all came together and we were talking about how we could continue this, because we really believe in it. What made us think we could do it was that we had very few cancellations and a lot of encouragement from people who said, "Now more than ever, please keep it going."

I'm not God's gift to motorcycling. There's no attempt – and I want to make that absolutely clear – there's no attempt whatsoever to replace Larry Grodsky. We're just trying to do the best we can to continue what he was doing.

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