

IT'S ALL

WORDS by SIRISH CHANDRAN

PHOTOGRAPHY by ADITYA BEDRE & TEAM



IN THE HEAD

It isn't too big. It isn't impossible to turn. It's all in the head





Top: The coaches are always following you and keeping an eye on what you're doing. **Above:** Your correspondent (centre) along with his Level 4 batchmates, Cyres (riding the H2!) and Gautam riding a Daytona

THIS IS WHAT MY MID-LIFE CRISIS looks like. No, not me scrunching my face and banging my forehead. My mid-life crisis is big, green and goes like a bloody freaking missile. Nothing I've ever ridden or driven has accelerated as hard, as viciously, and as ferociously — and I've been fortunate to have had my paws on some devastatingly powerful machines over the past two decades of road testing. This... the 14R... is next level. I wanted a big bike; I ended up with the biggest bike there is. Insert *#GoBigOrGoHome* and every other cliché.

Now to ride it.

The Kawasaki ZX-14R is not a track bike. It's a sport tourer, a humongously quick tourer but a road bike nevertheless. Except the road is no place to poke at the limits of a superbike. The first time I rode it up the hills around Pune I was jittery as hell, gingerly poking at corners, refusing to tip it in, traction control on 3 and power on L. All the time I worried about the tyres, the suspension being set up correctly, the 200 horses biting me in the arse. Generally riding like a fool.

I had to learn to ride the monster. Time to head to the best riding school in the world.

OUR EYES LOOK FOR SEX AND DANGER. THERE'S NONE OF THE FORMER ON TRACK, PLENTY OF THE LATTER

"Hello TVS, can I borrow your Apache?"

As I pull into the pits that's all I can think of. It's the first session of the California Superbike School at the MMRT and I'm cursing myself for going through the headache of trucking the 14R down to Chennai. It's clearly not a track bike. It's way too big. Not for the first time I'm wondering why I bought it.

Good thing that the second we get off the bike we're ushered into debrief with our track coach and then into the classroom, mobile phones come later. I'm doing Level 4 at the CSS, not that I'm a knee down track junkie or anything like that but Level 4, I'm told, is focused, one-on-one tuition. I need that. Spyros, my obviously Greek classroom coach, asks me what I want to work on. Ummm, be able to ride this monstah?

I'm not the first nervous wreck Spyros has had to deal with. He works out that I know the MMRT, the lines, the reference points. Good start. Now to build confidence. He starts by working on my 2-step. Basically vision. Look ahead, focus the eyes, don't let them wander, or worse, look down and narrow the field of vision. Our eyes look for sex and danger. There's none of the former on the track, plenty of the latter if you look at armco, the run-off, the photographers, everything you should not be looking at. The drill then is to deal with the latter, look further ahead, look where you want to go, prepare in advance, slow things down in my head.

Lecture done, I reach for the phone but before that I bump into Vicky Jaisingh, the man behind Performance Racing in Mumbai and a trainee coach at the CSS. He asks me if I'll go back home and ride a TVS. "No man, I didn't buy the 14R to park in my bedroom," I reply. "Then ride your bike!" he hollers.

Back to basics

Level 4 is great because they ask you what you want to work on and then focus only on that. I've done levels 1, 2 and 3 twice already — I know you're supposed to counter steer. Do the quick turn. Rock the two step. Graduate to the three step. But there are some things I just don't have the strength to do, the hip flick being just one of them. Can we just focus on getting me to ride the 14R the right way?

That's what Level 4 is all about. The coaches work on what you want to work on, and of course the obvious rubbish that you just have to correct.



Top and centre: Steering drill where you learn to slalom the bike. Tip: Don't push on the inside 'bar and pull on the outside 'bar at the same time, leave your outside hand loose and just push on the inside. And once done, relax your arms and let the bike do the rest

Right: Confirm the entry, finish hanging off and positioning your body, turn your head towards the apex while keeping the entry point in your peripheral vision, quick turn and counter steer to tip the bike into the coner, marvel at the fact that even a 14R can go round corners

Turns out my body positioning is rubbish. “I hate your body,” says Nikous my obviously Greek on-track coach. But before he does anything to my body he’s got to get me to ride properly. Which just means more time in the saddle. Bit by bit I push, lean, hang off (to the absolute horror of Nikous who can’t bear to see my crossed up style) and I realise the 14R can be tipped into corners, the tyres are very good, the bike is only limited by the monkey astride it. The bigger the bike the more crucial it is to apply all the CSS techniques. My previous outings on the CSS have been with the Ninja 250 and Apache RR 310, very forgiving bikes. The 14R, it has the power to bite you hard. For the first time I start to apply the Smoothly, Evenly, Constantly drill with the throttle, and can feel the difference that it makes — how stable the bike is in the corners, how much lean angle you have to play with, the difference it makes to your own confidence.

Body position, sorted

Now I cannot run you through the entire three-day CSS drill; it wouldn’t be right to print out their course material honed over years of making riders better at the art of cornering. And in any case, if only theory made you a quick rider, I’d be Rossi.

What I can tell you is the CSS, especially on Level 4, gets into your head. My biggest problem? Fear. With vision drills and just chipping away from session to session that is not only sorted but it also has made me more comfortable with my own motorcycle. I know what it is capable of, and I know where the limits now are. C7, the long D at the back end of the MMRT, is now a joy — fast, smooth and quick. But I also know that there is nothing I can do about the well-ridden Daytonas passing me round the outside of C7. Okay, I did mess with some of them by passing them right back on the next straight but that’s definitely not what one should be doing at the school.

The biggest takeaway from the CSS was getting my body position sorted. For two days I tried to get it sorted, two days of Nikous shaking his head while following me around the track. And then sitting in the classroom Spyros and I discovered why my body was getting crossed up — I was counter-steering with my shoulders, pushing the bars with my shoulder. If I have to offer you just one reason why you should regularly do schools like the Callifornia Superbike School it is this. They work on your riding, identify problems,



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and figure out solutions. Turns out not only was I pushing with my shoulder but, while counter steering, I was both pushing the inside ’bar and pulling the outside ’bar and that never works. That sorted, I could finally steer the bike. Where earlier the bike felt big, heavy and cumbersome, like an oil tanker, this simple pointer literally lifted a weight off my shoulders. I even managed the steering drill, doing the slalom with my love boat as Spyros loved calling the 14R. Where on the first session I was contemplating selling the 14R and getting something more manageable, after 3 days at the CSS I love the bike even more; I’m able to use its immense power, I can go round corners, I am absolutely revelling in the ridiculously awesome turn of speed that only a big bike can deliver. Most of all I’m enjoying my mid-life crisis and that’s worth every penny you spend on the school. 🚀

