

MSF INTERVIEW

What They Said & What We Found Out

by Wendy Moon & Fred Rau

On Monday, August 30, MCN representatives David Searle, Fred Rau and Wendy Moon met with Tim Buche, President of MSF (and MIC), and key members of the MSF staff for a four-hour interview resulting in a 40+ page transcript. Following are what we felt were the most important points to bring to our readers, in the MSF's own words as far as possible.

After the interview, MCN investigated what the MSF had told us, and found what seemed to be a remarkable number of inconsistencies. Those findings are included.

Sales-Driven?

Lately, we have heard a number of people involved in rider education jokingly refer to the MSF as the "Motorcycle Sales Foundation." The inference being that the Foundation's main focus has shifted to streamlining and speeding up the training process to license as many new riders as possible, with less emphasis on the actual quality of the training. The MSF emphatically denies this allegation.

"The MSF is market-driven," said Tim Buche. Recently, he said, a market survey of American households revealed 4% of American households were very interested and another 12% were somewhat interested in motorcycling if the course cost no more than \$150, lasted no more than 15 hours, and was offered close to their home. However, training is a bottleneck, and that motivates the MSF to find ways to increase training availability. Thus, it's a far cry, Buche says from "training drives sales." In fact, he says, "sales drives training."

Yet he also said, later in the interview, that "they" (unspecified) consider the MSF's role to "be a marketing arm of the MIC."

Whose Program Is It?

A large part of the controversy about the MSF of late revolves around the basic question of who owns the training programs, or has the right to administer them. As many of the programs receive state funding, whether from fees assessed on motorcyclists or not, many seem to feel the states, or their appointed or contracted independent agents, should be the only ones administering them, as has been the case in most states in the past. The MSF does not agree.

"There aren't any state-funded programs," said Buche. "Motorcyclists fund them and motorcyclists own them." MSF sees the recent controversy over this "as rather petty arguments," said Buche. "Who gets to do this or that—when it ought to be 'what's our investment giving us? What's the return on investment?'"

Despite that statement, MCN has found that in the MSF's own

publication, *Cycle Safety Information*, Hawaii, Maryland, Missouri, South Carolina and Wisconsin are listed as states which do not fund the program from fees assessed on motorcycle registration or licensing.

Buche seemed concerned it wouldn't be clear that it was the motorcyclist's investment he was talking about. But we feel it should be pointed out that motorcyclists are not "investing" so much as paying state-required licensing fees. And just to put "investment" into perspective: Motorcyclists' "investment" per year, according to MSF's *Cycle Safety Information*, averages out to \$5.40 per year for each rider. The manufacturers and distributors, as of 1998, according to *Safe Cycling's 25th Anniversary Edition*, had invested over \$44 million in MSF. They currently, according to Buche, "invest" over \$4 million a year.

In regards to MSF taking over state programs, Buche said the MSF has only, "return(ed) to the very earliest of roots," when MSF used to conduct training. And he noted that they'll administer more state programs whenever and wherever they feel it becomes necessary.

However, our own research has revealed only that the MSF once acted as administrators for a very small number of sites in limited areas, for an interim period, and even then, only to allow the states time to "try out" the programs before adopting them. Instructors and site managers who were involved back in those days tell us the MSF never actually administered state programs or conducted training as site operators—which is a direct contradiction to what Buche told us.

A Problem With Communication?

Another often-heard complaint is that communication between MSF headquarters and the state administrators, chief instructors and other field personnel has almost ceased to exist. Those involved in administering the programs and conducting the actual training feel that they are no longer allowed input into important decisions such as changes in curricula, and that when they have a problem, they cannot receive help from "the home office."

"We're not trying to be secretive," Buche said, in response. "We're so busy doing the things, we can't communicate with every individual or every time," and he also stated that he feels they're, "very responsive to direct e-mails."

And yet, according to site managers in programs the MSF administers, they have to write and call up to 15 times before they get a response. And according to those in charge of non-MSF administered state programs, Buche and others either do not respond at all, or take months to do so.

Ray Ochs, Director of Rider Training Systems, said that their own "RiderCoach Survey" doesn't echo the complaints and concerns arriving at MCN. "There's resistance there (in MCN) that seems to get more vehement, but that's not what we hear."

The survey he refers to was conducted by Hydeman & Associates (AHA), an MIC member company that specializes in "short circuit(ing) the squeaky wheel syndrome." And, in fact, MSF Quality Assurance and Research Director, Sherry Williams, was employed by AHA at the time, and directly involved in the survey before she was hired by the MSF. And, despite interviewing dozens of instructors, MCN was unable to find a single one who had been contacted by or involved in the survey, or even knew of its existence.

As far as state administrators go, they are “a spoke in the wheel,” Buche said. “*We are* (his emphasis) state administrators.” He says they don’t ignore them or “put them in any different role than we see ourselves.” “The reality is, it isn’t at all about their ego, our ego—we don’t have one,” he said. He says MSF is simply trying to serve the consumer and, “if we’re beat up for that, then just bring it on, because we’ll take those hits.” He says, “it’s not to disparage them (state administrators), I haven’t said anything bad about them, right? It’s just recognizing that all this exists simply for the rider. And we get beat up pretty badly for keeping this too simple, because it really is.”

The Rider’s Edge Program

A number of the rider education professionals we spoke to were also concerned about the MSF’s decision to certify the Harley-Davidson Rider’s Edge Program as an official MSF training program. The Rider’s Edge allows the use of training bikes twice the size of those previously allowed in MSF training, so as to make the Buell Blast a “legal” training bike, and allows concessions in range layout and size so that the training may be done on the Harley dealers’ available lots. There is also concern that some H-D dealerships are including in the training program a walk-through of their Motor-Clothes display, to sell their branded jackets, helmets, gloves, boots, etc., to the students.

Regarding the Rider’s Edge Training Program, Buche says, “We’re happy that they’re meeting their customers’ demand.” If the state training programs were able to meet demand, he noted, “you probably wouldn’t see a Rider’s Edge program.” Nor do they have a problem with the marketing angle that Rider’s Edge has been accused of. “We approve everything related to that curriculum,” Buche said.

Money

“The board has said money can’t get in the way of training,” Buche said. “So if we need more money to develop something, we get it. In the end it takes some unique creative approaches to make this available, we, like others, look for a way to make that happen.”

Buche went on to say that MSF has paid for “the very best RiderCoach Trainer available” for cash-strapped state programs. “But you don’t hear that. Some of the same people who blast us in e-mails do so the day after we’ve given them \$5000 or \$10,000 in value. And you know what? We’re just going to be big boys and girls about it and do the right thing. If they want to sit home at night and blast us with e-mails, that’s fine.” He said, “We just invest the money to make the things happen.” Also, “We welcome someone to attack MSF for running state programs, because we’ll hold up California in total saved tuition and administrative costs: The state and motorcyclists saved \$1.6 million this year.”

What he fails to note is that all too often that money “saved” is not then spent on motorcyclists’ interests. In many states, monies collected from motorcyclists and not spent on rider education are then released to the general fund—meaning the motorcyclist’s money goes to support any program the state desires.

The BRC vs. The RSS

Most of the dissension within the ranks of the MSF really came to a head with the changeover from the standard MSF new rider training course, the MRC:RSS (Motorcycle RiderCourse: Riding and Street Skills), to the new BRC (Basic RiderCourse). Many instructors and site managers felt that they weren’t allowed any input on the development of the new curricula, and that the new program was a “dumbed down” version of what they had been teaching for so many years. Several states have gone so far as to flat-out refuse to adopt the new program, opting to remain with the MRC:RSS.

Ray Ochs, Director of Rider Training Systems for the MSF, said

he would put the BRC up against the RSS “anytime.” He says knowledge tests scores “are about what they were before,” though he later said they were “up a little better than they were before.” Skills test scores are about the same and the same percentage failed as before, he says, and there’s been a 50–70% reduction in crashes on the range—according to him. “Now is that ‘dumbing it down,’ or is that improvement?”

Virtually all of the instructors we contacted noted that while Ochs is probably correct about the test scores, it is only because the test has been made so much easier to pass. In their opinion, they are turning out riders with considerably less “street skills” than they were under the former training program.

And in direct contrast to Ochs’ statement about range safety, Margie Barnett of USIS, the insurance company that covers almost all training programs, says that, “there’s a ton of crash reports, flying out of the fax all the time.” Actual loss reports will not be available until after this story goes to print, but Barnett says the majority of crash reports involve locking up the brakes. This was verified by numerous site managers, instructors and state administrators.



Before being hired as the MSF’s Executive Director of Quality Assurance and Research, Sherry Williams was employed by AHA, the company that handled the “independent” RiderCoach Survey that told the MSF that the vast majority of instructors were very happy with the recent curriculum changes.

Who Owns The Curriculum?

As noted before, some states and individual training sites are resisting changing over to the new BRC. Since they had a hand in developing the “old” curricula, and paid the MSF for the training materials and the right to use them, they feel that they should have the option to continue with what has worked for them so well, for so long. The MSF does not agree.

“It’s the training community’s curriculum,” Buche said, “because they helped develop it.” But, he stressed, the copyrights belong to the MSF and they can take it elsewhere. “If those manufacturers invested something in the US and there’s some value elsewhere, why should they pay again? So if they want it, they own it collectively through MSF.”

For those states who refuse to change to the BRC, Buche says the board feels, “we’ve given them more than adequate time to change to a superior product. If they don’t want to, that’s fine.” But the RSS is “off the table,” because, “our new curriculum is found to be as effective by tests both in the knowledge and the skills side; it’s been found to be safer; it’s been found to be more responsive to the student’s needs; because it’s more comprehensive...” He concluded, “People don’t have to use MSF curricular products.” However, if they don’t, “they have chosen to end their relationship with the MSF.”

If you can make sense of these seemingly disparate answers about who “owns” the curriculum, you’re smarter than we are.

As to the statement that, “People don’t have to use MSF curricular products,” we have been told that the MSF feels such expressions as “rolling on the throttle” and “slow, look, lean and roll,” were created by them, and so belong to them, rather than being descriptions of physical actions necessary to operate a motorcycle, and despite the fact that such expressions were used by riders prior to their incorporation into MSF curricula. In addition, we have received verification that the MSF contacted the highly regarded Canadian program, and asked for an agreement from Canada to *not* sell their program to anyone intending to use it in the US. So, though

they say they have no problem with someone using training curricula other than theirs, the MSF seems bent on making sure that no other program is available.

Would they recognize other curricula with test waivers for licensing, such as are given by the MSF? "We aren't even going to respond to that," Buche said. "Whatever some other state does, that's their call." But, "Who paid for the development of that curriculum (in Oregon)?" he asked. "That's a question you should ask of the motorcyclists." He pointed out that manufacturers only offer the dealership loan program and only reimburse course attendance to MSF-curriculum courses. The problem, he felt, is that there's "a good product available," and so, "to duplicate what already existed, that was inefficient."

When asked if the Oregon curriculum only duplicated the MSF's programs, Buche answered: "They could've adopted ours. It's been the program they've used for years and years and now it's not, so they spent money developing another one. Is that efficient? I don't know." He suggested to us, "I would follow the money."

All of which tends to contradict their insistence that all they want is to see riders trained safely and effectively. Rather, it seems, it's to *only* have riders trained by MSF criteria. Oregon had used the RSS for years, and with great success—not the BRC. Had the MSF allowed Oregon to continue to use the RSS, they wouldn't have had any need to develop their own. The MSF, quite simply, forced them into it, and is now damning them for doing it.

Much of the research and curriculum development for the RSS was paid for by public funds and done by volunteers, not the MSF or MIC. As Buche said himself earlier in the interview, "It's the training community's curriculum, because they helped develop it." Also, at the MRF's "Meeting of the Minds," Buche said, in response to a question whether those parts that were paid for by public funds would be released into public domain—he said, "Yes." If you're a bit confused by all this, join the club.

Why Is The MSF Taking Over State Programs?

MSF gets involved with individual states for various reasons. "In the case of tuition, Illinois was a state that I had in mind. They charge no tuition." He said he feels that, "if you take the course, you should pay for it. The issue here—Illinois—I don't know if there's a conflict of interest there, but the training in Illinois costs \$236 a student. At \$2 a year fee, then 118 people have to pay their registration fee before one person gets trained. If Illinois charged students, the money could increase capacity and purchase new motorcycles and helmets."

In Georgia, Buche said, the cost of the program was high, and the students were not allowed to keep the handbook. "The student is paying \$250 and you don't even get a \$1.60 handbook."

Honda had allowed the state to use their training center but, "here's a multi-million dollar facility in Atlanta-Alpharetta that's sitting there unused at times. You bet we're going to act. But who are we acting on behalf of? What's in it for us? Nothing. We've got students who want training and they can't get it because the state isn't being responsive to the needs. The motorcyclist pays for a program and doesn't get served."

As far as Oregon went, he said, "I'm not going to talk about Oregon, obviously, because there's a legal proceeding there. And that's simple for us; we've said all along that we'd protect our intellectual properties."

Buche's comments about Illinois, where riders pay no fees for training because the costs are paid from fees assessed on motorcycle licensing and registration, seem to run in direct contradiction to his earlier statements that money was never a concern for the MSF.

And in Georgia, it should be noted that in an effort to reduce costs, the state program had quit issuing handbooks because they

knew that the MSF had a downloadable version of the handbook available on their web site, and so instructed their students to get it from there. When the MSF found out, they changed the handbook to a "read-only" format. So it would seem they created the very situation they are now blaming the Georgia program for.

As to the statements about the under-use of the Alpharetta facility, the Georgia program previously conducted, and still conducts, only 30% of their training at Alpharetta, because Georgia is a big state and it would inconvenience the customers the MSF is so concerned about to offer more there, and less in other parts of the state. Buche's justification doesn't seem to hold water.

Is There A Conflict Of Interest?

Some people think there is an inherent conflict of interest in having the Motorcycle Industry Council (MIC) and the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) so closely tied. All MSF funding comes from the MIC, and they share the same offices, telephones, and many of the same personnel. Buche himself is the president of both at the same time, but sees no conflict.

"It is irrelevant," Buche said, that the manufacturers and distributors are part of the MIC. "MSF is a separate organization with separate bylaws, a separate board—it doesn't have anything to do with

BUCHE: "I would implore you: If you find we're doing something that's inconsistent, we need to be called out, because we might have missed it."

MIC. That's a different company and those are different people." He said that they were able to "keep their hats straight," and that the concerns of the one business don't even enter into their thoughts as they attend to the concerns of the other.

And yet it was often difficult to tell, when Buche used "they" or "we," which corporation or staff he was referring to.

What Troubles Them

"These troubling questions, they aren't really troubling *us*, except we're concerned over the people's frustration," said Buche. MCN, he suggests, has "become the forum for people to complain." It wasn't our (MCN's) job to investigate this, he said. "You can choose to do that, but it's not your job, and frankly, we don't want to play it out in MCN."

"We're not going to be driven by loud people," Buche said. "Sometimes providing leadership means you're not going to win a popularity contest. We're not trying to. We're simply trying to look out for the safety of current and prospective motorcyclists. If we get in trouble for that, then we're just going to have to deal with those repercussions."

Quite frankly, we were a bit surprised to find that Buche felt qualified to tell us what was or wasn't our job. And if they "don't want to play it out in MCN," then why request this meeting and regale us for over four hours in defense of their actions? Finally, it begs the question, if not in MCN, then where *would* they like to play it out?

Their Desire

"We're customer-driven—what best serves the current prospective motorcyclist? We're going to be consistent on that," Buche said. "I would implore you: If you find we're doing something that's inconsistent, we need to be called out, because we might have missed it."

Seems to us, that is exactly what we're doing. 