

# Mature Age Skills Training for Experienced Motorcycle Riders

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes why, and how, following a report by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) (Monograph 12 *Motorcycle Safety*, October 2002) which showed an increase in fatalities among riders over 40 years of age, the Motorcycle Riders Association of the Australian Capital Territory (MRA ACT) developed a program specifically targeting mature age riders returning to riding after a break of some years. The nature of the course and how it was developed is outlined together with how the program was funded. As well, details are provided of how the marketing strategy was developed to attract what was perceived as being a target group not particularly interested in formal training. Finally, the paper reports on an evaluation of a program which exceeded the expectations of MRA ACT.

## INTRODUCTION

A social revolution has been taking place quietly among Australia's motorcyclists over the past few years. Not surprisingly many young people began their driving experience on two wheels but, with marriage, parenthood, career changes and other lifestyle occurrences, two wheels became four and the motorcycle was sold or either gathered dust in a garage or rust in a field.

But once a rider, always a rider. So with the mortgage reduced and the kids grown up, or with career progression producing a little extra in the bank, many former riders have been, and continue to be, attracted back to the wind in the helmet and the freedom of the open road.

The Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) in its 2002 Monograph 12, *Motorcycle Safety*, reported that the popularity of motorcycle riding in Australia appeared to be increasing with motorcycle registrations growing from 284,177 in 1991 to 350,930 in 2001.

More recent figures published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 2004 record an increase in Australian motor cycle registrations from 333,782 in 1999 to 396,309 in 2004, an increase of 18.7%, the largest increase in registrations of any category of motor vehicle.

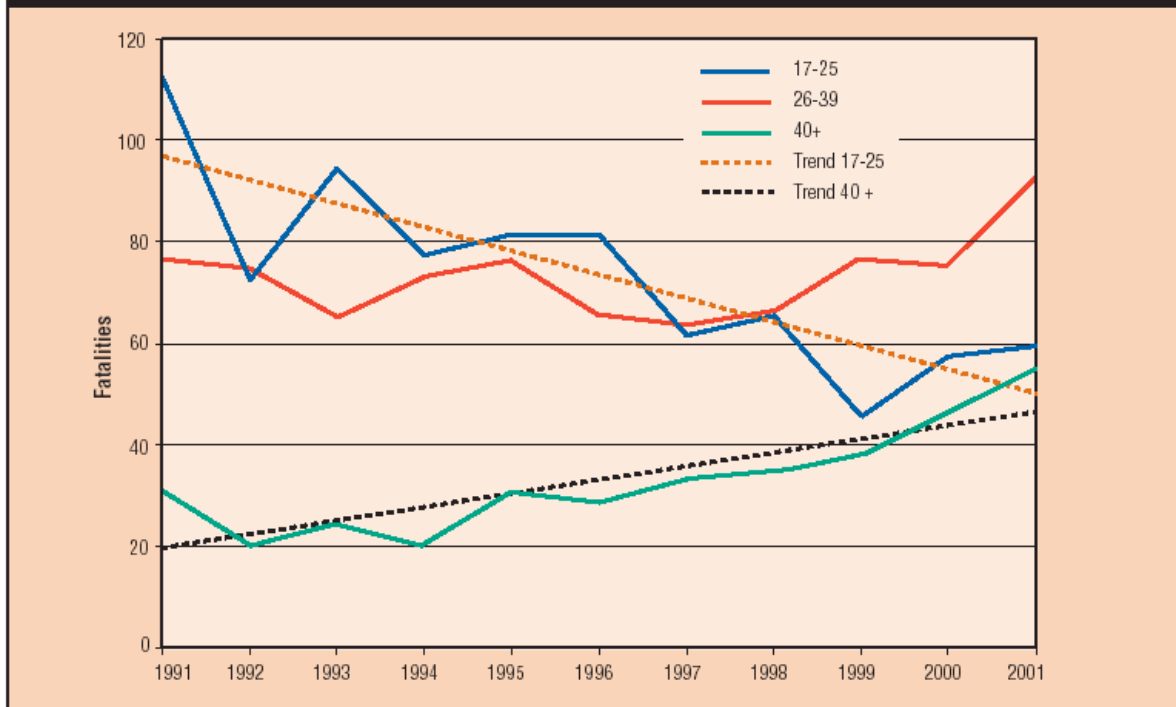
Not only that, but ATSB quoted from surveys by the ABS (*Motor Vehicle Census Australia, 30 September 1991, and 31 March 2001*) to indicate that the increase in motorcycle riding is strongest among the 40 years and over age group, while motorcycle use among younger riders decreased over the same period.

But the return of older motorcyclists to the open road sometimes had tragic results.

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**Figure 1: Motorcycle rider fatalities by age group, Australia 1991 to 2001**



<sup>1</sup> Calculated by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau using data from the International Road Traffic Accident Database.

In their October 2002 report the Australian Transport Safety Bureau revealed that the death rate among riders aged over 40 years had increased by 77 per cent in the previous ten years (Figure 1). The *Canberra Times* in reporting these findings under the heading *Easy Riding Turns Deadly for the Older Wild Ones* (1 November 2002) suggested that many older riders who were returning to riding after a break of some years, needed to relearn the basics before returning to the open road.

MRA ACT decided to do something about it.

## THE PROBLEM

The trend identified by the ATSB in 2002 is not confined to Australia. In the United States from 1983 to 2003 mortality rates for age groups under 30 declined whereas rates for age groups over 40 increased (*Medical News Today*, 03 December 2004, [www.medicalnewstoday.com](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com)).

Similarly, although fatalities among Australian riders over 40 years increased by 77% from 1991 to 2001, fatalities among younger Australian riders 17 years and over decreased by around six per cent over the same period.

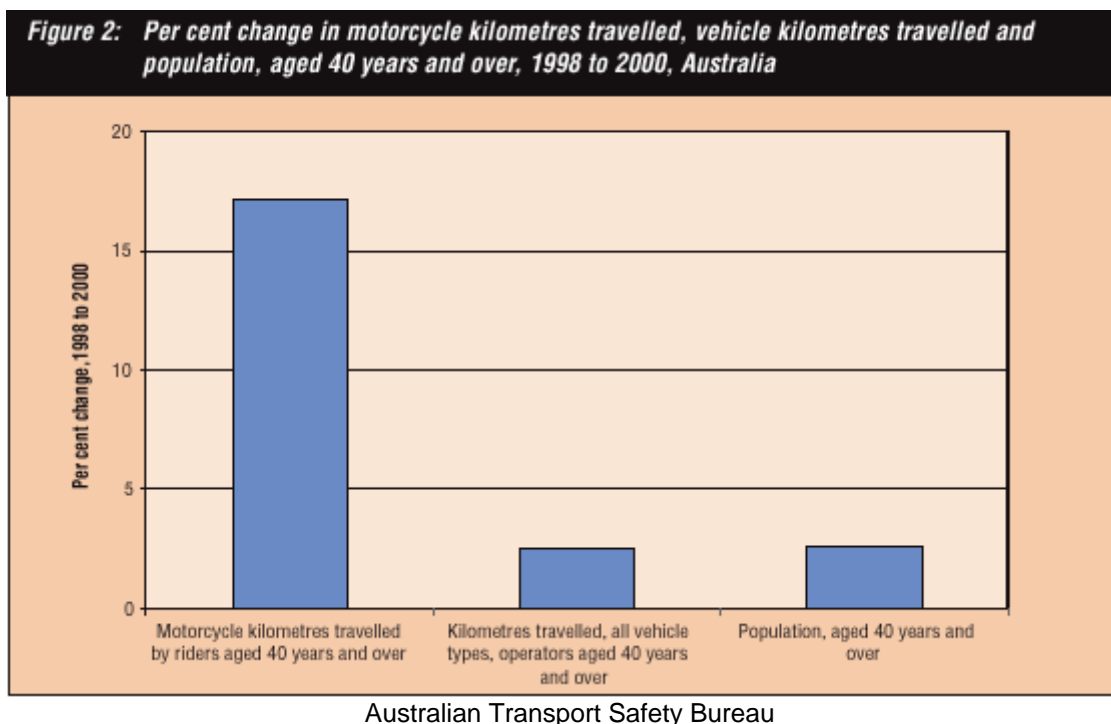
Fatalities among Australian riders 40 years and over as a proportion of all rider fatalities increased from 14% in 1991 to 27% in 2001 (ATSB, 2002) the outcome, perhaps, of an increase in the number of older riders who ride further distances than their younger colleagues (Figure 2).

In the UK although the number of licensed motorcycles has declined since the early 1980s, there has been something of a recovery in recent years. In 1995, the number of new motorcycles registered in a calendar year reached 69,000 for the first time. In the year 2000 the number of new registrations had grown to 183,000.

Estimates for the 1990s suggest that motorcycle ownership in the UK is highest among men aged 30 to 39. (Department for Transport, UK, 2004). This appears to be a worldwide phenomenon (Haworth, N, 2005).

In commenting on the problem in Australia, the Manager of the *Stay Upright* rider training school in the Australian Capital Territory, stated that he believed more older riders were dying on the road because their skills had deteriorated during the years away from their bikes.

He went on to say that after the mortgages and children, middle aged, or approaching middle age, people are returning to riding but finding that things have changed.



One of the biggest changes, of course, quite apart from an increase in traffic density, is that increasingly it is no longer possible for anyone who wants to ride simply to purchase a motorbike, acquire a learners licence and speed off over the horizon. In the ACT and some other Australian jurisdictions, compulsory off road training now precedes the issue of a learner's licence. So it is quite likely that a mature age rider returning to riding after a break of some years may have never received any formal training.

It is reasonable to argue that perhaps motorcycle-training courses already available may be suitable for returning riders. But mature age returning riders are unlikely to attend courses featuring young riders with better reflexes and greater familiarity with modern production bikes. Any skill enhancement for the older rider is more likely to occur in an environment of mutual support and understanding.

## THE APPROACH

The MRA ACT was concerned at how best to approach a target group who were, potentially, at risk road users, were comfortable financially, and were experienced car drivers.

Following discussions between MRA ACT and *Stay Upright* it was agreed that blanket advertising, quite apart from being expensive, was unlikely to catch the eye of returning riders. To ensure that the target group was reached, it was agreed that advertising the course should be restricted to retail outlets and motorcycle clubs.

Providing incentives to attend the course were also a consideration. In March 2003 an application was made to the NRMA-ACT Road Safety Trust for a grant which would enable the course to be offered without charge.

The application was partly successful. A grant was approved for a two year period but at only fifty per cent of what was requested on the basis that mature age riders with their new machines should be able to afford to pay an amount likely to be about the cost of a pair of gloves.

This was good advice and with fees for the course being required at the time of application, ensured commitment by the participants.

The grant was also provided on the proviso that as the course was, in effect, a pilot then if it did not succeed in the first year then funds for the second year would not be forthcoming.

The name of the course was of vital importance. Acknowledgement had to be made that participants were neither new to riding nor were inexperienced road users. The intent of the course had to be expressed in the title in such a way that it conveyed that existing skills were being enhanced.

Although the actual title given to the course may not have met that intent fully, the title finally decided on, namely, *Mature Age Skills Training for Experienced Riders* (MASTERS), provided an acronym that went some way towards identifying and reassuring the target group that their past experience and present maturity were acknowledged.

## THE COURSE

As in all the approaches made in developing the course, the ages and backgrounds of likely participants were paramount in creating the course content. In particular, as mentioned previously, a major factor was that mature age motorcyclists returning to riding might not have received any formal training at the time they obtained their motorcycle licence.

MRA ACT and *Stay Upright* agreed that the course would be an education and skills based development programme and should consist of two parts, an evening theoretical revision followed by a practical, off road, day. All courses would have to be conducted at weekends, with the classroom element conducted on a Saturday evening and the practical taking a full day on the following day, Sunday.

Because riding a motorcycle is so fundamentally different to driving a car, the theoretical part of the course included a revision of motorcycle control and roadcraft skills. Also included was an examination of the skills required riding with a pillion and a comprehensive revision of braking techniques. The likely effect of medication on a rider's ability was another topic also included.

The practical day welcomed pillions in an intensive programme which focused on the use of systems to minimise human error, and the use of demonstrations, exercises, both individual and group, and the analysis of faults. It was planned that in order to ensure personal attention each course would consist of only about twelve participants with an instructor/participant ratio of not more than one to six.

## **IMPLEMENTATION - YEAR ONE 2003/04**

The ACT Minister for Urban Services, Secretary/Manager of the NRMA-ACT Road Safety Trust, and MRA ACT President launched the MASTERS programme on 22 October 2003. Also supporting the launch was Canberran and former Olympian, Rob De Castella who, although better known for his athletic prowess, is also a motorcycling enthusiast and representative of the demographic target group. Support for the programme also came from the Australian Federal Police and the Canberra Hospital.

A pamphlet advertising the course was developed, printed and hand delivered to all major motorcycle outlets in the region. The pamphlet emphasised that the course was intended for licensed riders returning to motorcycling after a lengthy break, that no testing was involved and that its participants governed the pace of the course.

All retail outlets approached were prepared to display the pamphlets and to draw the attention of the MASTERS programme to likely customers. Some outlets expressed relief that a course of this kind was being offered to returning riders. "I'm always relieved to see them ride safely out of sight", said a Harley retailer of his born again clients. Another highly supportive retailer was quick to display the pamphlets on the desk in his show room where a small, excited, elderly grey-haired man sat astride an enormous Moto Guzzi on its centre stand.

Pamphlets were also sent to clubs in the area accompanied by some visits and briefings by MRA ACT members.

Three courses were planned for 2003-2004. The first was conducted on 29/30 November 2003 and attended by ten participants. There appeared to be some doubt by some participants as to who the target group was. To make sure that it was clear for whom the course was intended, a questionnaire was developed to accompany existing pamphlets and a new pamphlet was printed in which the questionnaire was included.

The questionnaire, which is still in use, begins with the question 'Do you qualify for attendance?' The questions which follow include age, when a rider's licence was first obtained, when they stopped riding, when they began riding again and whether they had received any formal training previously.

The second course was run in December 2003 and attracted 14 participants. Demand appeared strong. When the third course in February also attracted 14 participants and with enquiries about the course still coming in, it was obvious that the modest plan of three courses for the year was unable to meet demand.

Our sponsors, NRMA-ACT Road Safety Trust were delighted, of course, and allowed us to bring forward a portion of the next year's grant in order to run a fourth course in April 2004.

Forty-nine riders attended MASTERS courses in 2003/04.

## EVALUATION

Continuation of the grant for a second year depended upon the success of the course. In the grant submission it was claimed that success of the course could be evaluated in two ways:

- first, by monitoring motorcycle crashes and reported incidents within the ACT to determine the extent to which they involved mature age riders who had received MASTERS training and,
- second, by monitoring demand from mature age riders to participate in the programme.

Unfortunately, the Privacy Act made it difficult to implement the first evaluation proposal, although close monitoring of crashes reported in the media and ACT motorcycle network failed to reveal the involvement of any riders who had attended the MASTERS courses.

Relatively low crash rates in the ACT, as shown in Table 1 below, mean that available data makes it difficult to evaluate across any criterion ie fatalities, serious injuries and/or minor injuries.

**ACT Trends in casualties 1994- 2003**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Received Medical Treatment</b>	<b>Admitted to Hospital</b>	<b>Fatality</b>	<b>Total Casualties</b>
<b>1994</b>	445	186	18	649
<b>1995</b>	481	172	13*	666
<b>1996</b>	480	245	23	748
<b>1997</b>	494	222	17	733
<b>1998</b>	586	203	22	811
<b>1999</b>	550	182	18	750
<b>2000</b>	469	174	18	661
<b>2001</b>	416	176	16	608
<b>2002</b>	245	150	10	405
<b>2003</b>	238	138	11	387

\* One 'off road' fatal accident occurred in Jervis Bay causing two fatalities. This has not been included in above records nor in the analysis of 1995 data. (ACT Department of Urban Services)

**Table 1**

Demand for the courses was strong and at the end of the first year a waiting list for courses for the following year was already being compiled. But it was felt that we needed to know what it was about the course which had created the demand. It might also be that the course could be improved. We were also required to provide an evaluation to the NRMA-ACT road Safety Trust.

A questionnaire was developed (Attachment A) and, after a break of five months to ensure that any euphoria associated with the course had evaporated, was circulated to all 49 participants. Surprisingly, 32 responses were received.

The only adverse comment was that the intensity of the practical day was testing for older riders whose fitness might not have been up to it. On the other hand, the intensity of the practical day may highlight the need for riders to maintain a

reasonable level of fitness if they are to withstand the challenge of riding a motorcycle.

One of the principal perceptions on which the course was based, namely, that riders returning after a break of some years might never have received formal training, was strongly endorsed. In answering 'yes' to the question 'Did you learn anything new on the course?' participants identified emergency braking and cornering as something newly learnt. As one respondent remarked:

*".....(the course) just showed how lucky some of us have been to survive on the road without this type of skills acquisition course in the past."*

Another premise on which the MASTERS was based, namely, that a course for mature people must be conducted with that maturity in mind, was also strongly endorsed. As a respondent wrote:

*"A great opportunity to learn and share experiences with others, plus be 'corrected' in a mature and understanding environment".*

Nearly all respondents stated that they would recommend the course to friends and colleagues.

Details of the evaluation were included in the 2003-04 MASTERS report to the NRMA ACT Road Safety Trust. A subsidy was provided for a second year.

## **IMPLEMENTATION – YEAR TWO-2004/05**

Evaluation of the MASTERS course took longer than anticipated, and as continued funding was dependent on its outcome the first MASTERS course for 2004/05 did not take place until January 2005. There was concern that a gap of six months between courses might have lost the successful momentum of the previous year. To overcome this and for the first time an advertisement was placed in the Canberra Times. Our worst fears appeared to have been confirmed when only six riders registered for the first 2004/05 MASTERS but dissipated when 14 riders registered for the second.

As in the first year, demand for the course became steady and a fourth, unplanned course had to be run. A total of 47 riders were trained in 2004/05.

## **THE FUTURE**

The NRMA-ACT Road Safety Trust has provided a grant to subsidise MASTERS courses for the next two years, 2005/06 and 2006/07. Based on demand, five courses per year have been scheduled.

Although inflation has meant a slight increase in the cost of attending a MASTERS course, for the next two years at least the cost will remain no more than that of a pair of riding gloves.

## **WHY SUCCESS?**

MRA ACT, working with *Stay Upright*, correctly identified a statistic as a group of motorcyclists that required special attention, namely, the mature age returning rider.

Not only that, but the Association recognised that people in that category may have missed out on training which is now taken for granted.

The success of the MASTERS course is not so much its content, although comments obtained in the evaluation indicated that much was learned by participants, but rather the way it was presented and how participants were treated. As well, participants were with their own kind. There is no pressure to perform on a MASTERS course, or to prove that one is a much better rider than one's colleagues. There is no fear of ridicule by being the oldest rider in a course of youngsters. On a MASTERS course instructors are more like counsellors, demonstrating, advising and assisting.

Word of mouth about the MASTERS has proven to be the most effective advertising medium. MRA ACT continues to visit clubs and to promote the course through motorcycling websites and email network, but word of mouth among the target group gets to the ears of those who need to know. It is hard to beat the recommendation of a previous participant.

ATSB states in Monograph 12:

*'If the number of people 40 years and over taking up motorcycle riding continues to rise, the problem of motorcycle safety among this age group is likely to become an increasingly important issue.'*

MRA ACT believes it has taken an important step towards addressing this issue.

## References

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## MASTERS QUESTIONNAIRE

**Please feel free to elaborate on any of the answers if a simple 'Yes/No' answer is insufficient. Please use the back of the page if necessary.**

1. Did the course meet your expectations? Yes/No
2. Did the course increased your confidence? Yes/No
3. Were you better prepared for emergencies after attending the course?  
Yes/No.
4. Do you think the training may have assisted you in avoiding a serious crash?  
Yes/No.
5. Do you think that refreshing skills previously gained but not exercised for  
some time, was both useful and reassuring? Yes/No
6. Do you believe that having the opportunity to practise in a controlled  
environment assisted in the development of your confidence? Yes/No
7. Was the instruction of a standard appropriate for a person of your maturity and  
experience? Yes/No
8. Would you recommend the course to others returning to riding after a break of  
some years? Yes/No
9. Did you learn anything new on the course? Yes/No
10. If the answer to the above question is 'Yes', please outline what was new to  
you.
11. Do you think you might be a better rider for attending the course? Yes/No
12. Please add any comments about the MASTERS course not covered by the  
above questions, particularly if you think the course could be improved