



The IPMBA Course is a “Smoker” How to Prepare More and Hurt Less

by Richard Hecht

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I consider myself to be in pretty decent shape. I'm 44, eat decently, run about three days a week, try to lift three days a week, and walk the dog 3-4 miles at least a couple days a week. I used to ride regularly as cross-training for my running, but haven't ridden much for the past two years. When I signed up for the IPMBA Police Cyclist Course hosted by the Tacoma Police Department, April 28-May 1, 2009, I began riding several times a month prior to the class, so I thought I was prepared.

The class was a smoker, period. Every single person in the class, no matter how fit they were, was hurting at some point. There was an officer from Woodinville (KCSO) who had some very, very good riding skills and even he was grumbling about things hurting.

Here's my short list of things that hurt: Bump next to left eye from hitting a metal guardrail while riding downstairs. Strained right shoulder (twice) from aggressive bar handling. Lower back pain from twisting around when I went through the bike, over the bars, into the abovementioned guardrail. Bruise on left thigh and knee from hitting the abovementioned bike. Road rash on right leg from falling off the bike and down the stairs, for the second time. Cuts on left leg from hitting the bike while riding up stairs. Blackened big toenails from toe clips rubbing on them. Hands, wrists, arms, quads and knees hurting to one degree or another. Did I mention how badly my right shoulder hurts?

We spent at least a couple hours each day doing slow skills riding. I already knew some of the techniques, but I had never spent so much time working them. They are very useful skills, as most of our police riding will be just that. We went on a long ride each day. This is where your bike fitness skills come in. You simply cannot be prepared enough for this. Riding the Orting Trail with your kids won't cut it. You really must get out on the bike for a couple of hours, at least a couple days a week. This will help get your butt numb to the saddle, your legs used to pedaling, and familiarize you with correct shifting.

You should do a lot of hill riding as well; the Tacoma area has nothing *but* hills. Even if you do this, though, you will be riding with your armor and gear during the class, which really changes a lot. However, the better riding shape you are in going into the class, the better you will be able to absorb the skills that are taught because you won't have to concern yourself as much with the pain and discomfort issues.

There were a number of people in the class who were obviously not in decent shape, but they still made it. There were also a couple of smokers who made it through. I don't know if they got as much out of the class as I did, simply because they had to first concern themselves with overcoming their lack of fitness.



DAY BY DAY

Even though I am writing this the weekend after the class and have a class outline, I'm pretty sure that I'm mixing up some of the exact details, but regardless, this will give you a sense of the class.

Each day we rode from TPD HQ to a vacant parking lot near Tacoma Mall to work the slow skills. From there, we would split into smaller groups and ride to other locations. The first day we rode to downtown Tacoma, practiced some skills and rode back. On the second day, we rode first to Wright Park for some dismount drills and then to downtown Tacoma, where we spent most of the time riding (or falling) down the stairs around UW. This is a lot of fun and can be done safely, once you learn the correct technique. There are some fairly easy requirements for the class; the more challenging stairs are optional. The only set of stairs I chose not to tackle were the ones on the north side of the federal courthouse, as there are several flights that turn back and forth. This was after smacking my head and having thoughts about being LEOFF 2. We then rode back to TPD HQ.

Day three was the slow skills test day, which was both fun and challenging. It involved lots of riding around in small circles and trying not to run over any cones. From the mall, we had a good ride to Pt. Defiance Park. By this time in the class, things were feeling very sore and beat up. We rode Five Mile Drive, back to TPD via Ruston Way, and then through downtown. I tried to MapQuest the route, but my computer was not playing well, so I haven't figured the exact mileage for that ride. It was somewhere around 25 miles.

Day four, we went to the mall for some formation riding, after which our group rode to Freighthouse Square for lunch. After eating a LIGHT lunch, it was back to UW for more stairs, both up and down, before riding back to TPD for the written final.

The instructors in the class are all very experienced bike officers and were very helpful in teaching the techniques. There was no yelling or belittling; just some good-natured ribbing.

If you are going to attend this course, you *must* ride, ride, and ride some more!

RANDOM THOUGHTS ON GEAR, FOOD, AND FITNESS

If you are not comfortable with your level of fitness or riding skills, try to ride near the front of your group. It is easier to ride there than to play catch-up from the back.

Learn how to dress correctly *before* the class starts.

No cotton. Go buy some performance material t-shirts, socks and yes, underwear. Get one long-sleeved shirt. I'm a big fan of REI because they have lots of styles from which to choose.

Your bike jacket is nice for taking the chill out of the air in the morning, but you probably can do without it unless it is really raining. You will warm up quickly once you are on the bike.

Consider removing the zipper from your bike shirt and re-sewing the buttons on. I am going to do this with mine, as it will help with ventilation. I may also have pit-zips added.



I P M B A

If you wear your department-issued bike shorts or pants, you can wear padded bike shorts as a next-to-skin, base layer. At REI, I found a pair of black, cycling cargo shorts with a built-in, padded gel cushion. These were the best things going. The receipt for them, along with the energy bars, will be going in my tax file for next year.

You will probably need to wash all of your clothing each night, if you don't have extras.

Off-duty work: I know some of you are off-duty whores who work anytime, anywhere. Do not schedule any off-duty during the class period. You will truly pay for the lack of sleep during the class.

Water: Bring at least two, full water bottles for the day. Bring another bottle to drink on the way to class and a sports drink for late afternoon.

Food: Eat a hearty but easy-to-digest breakfast. If you don't normally eat, and just have coffee, you will pay for it later. I brought food for lunch and ate just enough to fuel me for the afternoon, then supplemented it later in the afternoon with the energy bars and fruit.

Buy a dozen or so energy bars and gels. Eat one bar mid-morning and another late afternoon. There is no break for dinner and you will need the energy. I ate consistently through the day, including lunch, and was still hungry when I got home.

I knew one guy in the class who works for PPD. He was in the Rangers with me and later made it through the selection process for Delta Force. He was really suffering after Day 2. I don't think he was eating enough during the day to keep his energy level where it should have been.

Stretching: Learn how to warm up and stretch both before riding and afterwards. I tried to keep moving around the house for a couple hours after I got home and before going to bed. This will help your muscles recover by speeding the removal of lactic acid, which causes the pain and stiffness.

Painkillers: These are your best buddies, as long as you do not overuse them. However, you should try to stay ahead of the pain.

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