

What's All The Fuss About Sidecars?

By David L. Hough

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Based on what we see in the movies, or in motorcycle museums, sidecars are just throwbacks to a bygone era. Participants at the August, 1999 SMSA Conference were awed by a beautiful 20's vintage Harley-Davidson sidecar outfit at H-D's waterfront get-together. It would have been a real eye-opener if there had also been a contemporary sidecar rig parked alongside. That would have made it obvious that sidecars aren't just museum pieces, but serious machines in use on today's highways.

Motorcycle safety professionals have always known there have been a few sidecars around somewhere, but sidecarists seemed to "do their own thing" and seldom asked for training. And when the motorcycle-based trikes first appeared on the scene a few years ago, most of us just gaped and guffawed. But trike sales have been booming over the past five years, and those who snickered are now beginning to realize we may be missing the boat. Except for Harley-Davidson, the motorcycle industry is dragging its collective feet on three-wheelers, but motorcycle enthusiasts are building them anyway, like it or not.

Novices

One of the big surprises for grizzled old sidecarists is that many of today's beginning sidecar and trike drivers have little or no motorcycle experience. It used to be that a rider gravitated to a sidecar only after years of riding two-wheelers, after the legs gave out, or the grandkids kept pestering for a motorcycle ride. But Ural America, importers of a Russian shaft-drive motorcycle/sidecar outfit, discovered that roughly one third of purchasers had no prior motorcycle experience. And many new trike drivers are family members with lots of motorcycle experience—but all from the back of the saddle. So, there is a special need for *novice* three-wheeler training. The problem is, the novice doesn't know where to find training,

and the veteran motorcyclist doesn't realize he needs it.

But No One Asks

Few motorcycle training sites get requests for sidecar or trike training. And if no one asks you for a course, you don't offer one, right? If you aren't teaching courses, you don't need any instructors, or training outfits, or range space. Consider how many requests you had for the MRC/RSS before you offered the first one. It takes a few years for riders to learn that courses are available, and gain some confidence that what you are offering is truly useful.

Three-wheeler Training

The only state rider training program currently offering *novice* sidecar training is Virginia. Three-wheeler novice training applicable to both sidecars and trikes is included as part of the state program, through the Motorcycle Safety League of Virginia, Inc.

Previous to Virginia's inclusion of sidecar training, the "old" SSP sidecar course had been offered by independent sponsors at rallies and a few training sites around the country. The state of Missouri has sponsored sidecar courses for experienced sidecarists over the years, and some sidecar courses were offered at Northern Illinois University and at Northern Virginia Community College, as well as at motorcycle and sidecar rallies. The "old" SSP sidecar curriculum was also offered at Gold Wing Road Riders Association events, through agreement with the Sidecar Safety Program.

The Sidecar Safety Program, Inc.

So, who is this "Sidecar Safety Program" (SSP), we keep mentioning? It's a group of volunteers who have, over the years, organized as a non-profit corporation, and developed and

refined two courses specific to three-wheeled motorcycles. The staff is all volunteers. The SSP started in Illinois a decade ago, and was managed originally by sidecar enthusiast Ed Johnson. In 1995, motojournalist David Hough started work on a more comprehensive curriculum, and subsequently took over management as SSP President.

Effective July, 1999, the "old" sidecar safety course was discontinued, replaced by a course which can be taught as either a two-day novice course similar to the MSF's MRC/RSS, or as a one-day "advanced" course similar to the MSF's ERC. The SSP also markets a textbook, *Driving A Sidecar Outfit*, which has been available through Whitehorse Press and Motorbooks International, and is provided to each student as part of a course. The SSP even arranged for national liability insurance coverage, accessible at a very reasonable cost to certified sidecar instructors. There are currently three sidecar chief instructors in the USA.

If you've been aware of the "old" Sidecar Safety Program, but not seen the new curricula in action, you're in for a pleasant surprise. Not only does the novice course teach the skills starting with motorcycle controls, but by the end of the course both instructors and students are obviously having fun, cheering each other on as they master progressively more difficult exercises. The big advantage of teaching a novice on a sidecar rig rather than a two-wheeler, is that the student doesn't have to unlearn any two-wheeler skills while learning to drive a three-wheeler.

The SSP's *Driving A Sidecar* course has been in constant refinement over the past five years. It includes an instructor guide, and recently added a complete set of classroom graphics. Trikes have been included with sidecars in this course, and our consensus is that the "sidecar" course works equally well for trike novices. In fact, sidecars and trikes have been combined in the same class. The basic difference is not in operation, but in names and definitions.

As you may imagine, running a nationwide training organization entirely with volunteers, and without support from the motorcycle industry has been a daunting task. The good news is that (as this is being written) the SSP is in the pro-

cess of turning over national administration of three-wheeler training to a professional organization. Contracts should be signed by the time you read this. For information about sidecar instructor certification, review of the curriculum, or copies of the book *Driving A Sidecar Outfit*, contact Evergreen Safety Council, 401 Pontius Ave. N. Seattle, WA 98109 206-382-4090 or 800-521-0778. ESC has a web site at www.esc.org. ESC's motorcycle and sidecar coordinator is David Wendell: dave@esc.org.

The USCA Sidecar Safety Program, Inc. will continue as a volunteer organization, serving as subject matter experts to the course developers. SSP President David L. Hough can be reached at 93 Thunder Road, Port Angeles, WA 98362. e-mail: pmdave@tenforward.com.

What do you say to the trike owner who asks for training?

As a state administrator or course site coordinator, what do you say to the novice sidecarist or trike driver who asks about training? You're already up to your ears just meeting the demand for novice motorcycle courses, trying to keep your instructors enthused and updated, haggling for suitable range sites, developing advertising, maintaining a fleet of training bikes, and struggling for funding and insurance. Do you really have enough spare time and energy to think about specialty courses for motorcycling minorities such as sidecarists and trike drivers?

Can You Duck The Issue?

More to the point, can you safely duck the issue of three-wheeler training, or is it part of your obligation to the motorcyclists in your state? The answer may depend upon state law. If your state defines "motorcycle" to include three-wheelers, and there is no specific exclusion of *three-wheeled* motorcycles from the safety program, you probably shouldn't be ducking the issue. And if your state collects a licensing surcharge on all motorcyclists to support motorcycle safety, that pretty much seals the deal. If you are collecting a fee from sidecarists and trike drivers, when are you going to start giving them something for their money?

Can't we just include trikes and sidecars in an MRC/RSS?

It's important to realize that MSF courses are specific to two-wheeled motorcycles. If you attempt to include a rider on a three-wheeler in the MRC/RSS or ERC, you are teaching many of the wrong skills, and missing most of the needed skills. Worse yet, you're sticking your neck way out in the process. MSF courses were not designed for three-wheeled motorcycles, and there are experts out there who will be glad to explain it all in a deposition once the lawyers get into the act.

“One-stop” Training/licensing

In the future, as determined by the National Agenda for Motorcycle Safety this year, the goal will be “one stop” training/licensing. Consider the implications of your state licensing department trying to deal with a trike or sidecar driver who is not physically able to take the beginning course on a two-wheeler as a prerequisite to a license. Many Driver Licensing examiners can barely understand two-wheeled motorcycles, let alone the skills required for three-wheelers. As both Virginia and Wisconsin have already discovered, it makes a lot of sense and eliminates a lot of time-wasting red tape to allow completion of a sidecar course as a waiver for an on-street license test for an applicant who only drives a sidecar or trike. South Carolina is in the process of legalizing a specific three-wheeler skill test.

If you haven't really thought about including trike/sidecar training in your courses, that ought to be a high priority. We suggest that the place to start is the SSP's *Driving A Sidecar* course, or at least a review of the textbook *Driving A Sidecar Outfit* (Whitehorse Press 800-531-1133. If there is sufficient interest, it would be possible to set up some sample exercises and lessons at a future SMSA conference, to allow you some hands-on experience. If you're interested, let us know.