

DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME?

It's easy to forget how intimidating a trackday can be if you've never done one. So let's find out by joining two novices popping their trackday cherry at Brands Hatch

Words: Kenny Pryde Pics: Chris Brown



It's easy to get blasé working at *SuperBike*. We get to ride lots of bikes and get a more than average amount of track time. And some of the lads on the mag have been doing it for years. It's true to say that you can get used to all kinds of fringe benefits, and it's easy to forget that most people don't get to ride as much as us. So while we bang on endlessly about how great trackdays are, about how much fun and excitement there is in pushing yourself and your bike, we are always in danger of forgetting how downright scary and unnerving your first trackday can be. Trust

us, they were scary for us when we first rode them too.

But with the passing of time and after a few trackdays, those anxious feelings diminish (even if they never completely disappear). To remind ourselves what those first tentative laps on track were like, we decided to accompany a pair of rookie trackday riders at an MSV novice-only day at Brands Indy circuit. Both riders – let's call them Paddy and Mark – have been riding for years, but hadn't been to Brands even to spectate.

Paddy owns a Triumph Daytona 675 and Mark was on his Street Triple R – although neither of them works for Triumph, honest. Both riders – friends for years – ride fairly regularly, although only Paddy commutes daily and Mark is, by his own admission, a fair weather rider. Both were curious enough and keen

enough to give a trackday a go at their local circuit, though.

With the day booked and time off work sorted, there was plenty of time to prepare, think about what lay ahead and get anxious. You can watch as much racing on telly as you like, you can endlessly re-run YouTube footage of on-board bike laps of a circuit, but the first time you leave pit lane behind another line of bikes for your sighting laps, you can be excused for feeling nervous and wondering what the hell you have let yourself in for. In fact, it's probably the only rational response.

Arriving at Brands at 7.30 in the morning, there was plenty of time to find a garage, park up and have a cup of tea, but there wasn't much time to twiddle thumbs. No matter how early you arrive at a trackday, it never really seems like

there's enough time. And there's always time to panic that you've forgotten something – like your car/bike licence which you need to show on trackdays.

The pre-ride briefing to the gathered newcomers was given by ex-British Superbike rider and former contributor to this organ, Mr Ian Cobby. It was a bit of a change of tone and pace from his famously fast riding and stunting abilities, but Cobby has the background and skills not to overload the briefing with details. There's not much point in rattling on for ages when all riders want to do is get out on track and bury the nerves – although most have to visit the toilets first (also a natural reaction. See also – talking too much, checking your tyre pressures more than once, dry mouth, slightly queasy feeling, asking the same question over and over, etc).



Just arrived, and band already...



Under pressure?



If you can see the bridge, you're on the wrong track

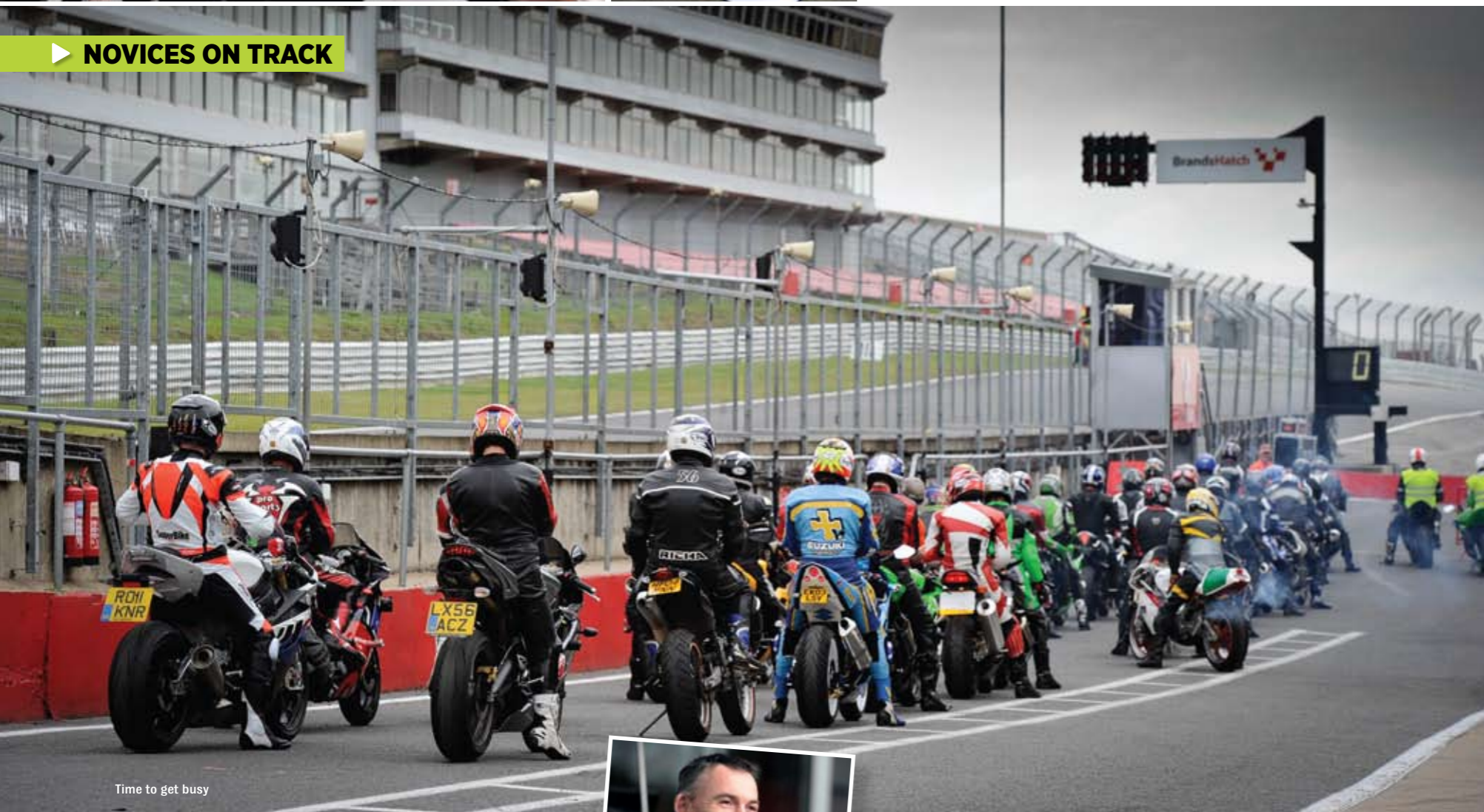


▶ THE EXPERT: IAN COBBY

10 TOP TIPS FOR TRACK NOVICES

Cobby may have calmed down a little – he would need to when instructing on a novice-only trackday – but there's no doubt our former road tester and BSB racer (he was Paul Denning's faster team-mate in the early days of Crescent Suzuki!) knows what he's talking about. So, taking advantage of his position as the man wearing the MSV instructor fleece, we asked him his best advice for novice riders

▶ NOVICES ON TRACK



Time to get busy

As per the pre-ride briefing, tyre pressures are adjusted to suit track riding; mirrors are folded back because, as Cobby pointed out, "all the things that might save your skin when you are riding on the road can get you into big trouble on track. So, forget lifesavers before you tip into a corner, don't look back because if you see someone coming up or sitting on your inside, you might be tempted to swing up or off line and you end up side-swiping other riders who are on your other side. Forget the mirrors and lifesavers, just stick to your line and focus on what you are

doing." Sound advice. And so to the line-up for the sighting laps. The tannoy calls riders to line up in pit lane and the butterflies flap harder and questions still race around your head. Did I stick on the noise-check sticker somewhere obvious? They did say it would be OK to get the bikes checked after the first session, didn't they? Is it three sighting laps or two? Have you got your briefing sticker on the bike somewhere where the marshal can see it? Have you got your wrist-band on? Has it disappeared up the arm of your leathers? Did you forget your



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earplugs? Dammit, they're still in your rucksack! Did you do up gloves before your wrist-band was checked? Is your bike over-heating? What the fuck is that guy doing on a race bike at a novice trackday? Christ that guy's knee sliders are well worn. Should you have gone to the toilet again? And...

And then you're off. Out of pit lane and stay inside the blending line. Jesus Christ, the drop off from the top of Paddock Hill bend is a shocker, it's like falling off a cliff. But you immediately realise that you are not going

to be out of your depth and you are in no danger of not being fast enough to keep up on the sighting laps. You also realise that, although this is a novice day, some people have clearly been here before, but that's no big deal – their knee-sliders still look box-fresh. Besides which, there's no overtaking on the sighting laps. Then, there's the chequered flag and you are back in pit lane, lining up again before being waved off.

Our two novices return to the garage laughing and with a lot to talk about; they've barely got their lids off

1 Prepare

Many novices turn up with tyres worn in the middle, thinking they'll finally be using the edges. But squared-off tyres affect handling, and your bike will require more physical effort to steer. Make sure your tyres are in good condition and don't think you have to fit 'sticky' race rubber for your trackday. Road tyres reach optimum temperature quicker and are designed for many heat cycles, whereas you'll need to be riding at a decent race pace to maintain temperature in race tyres, which will also benefit from tyre-warmers. These aren't allowed on MSV's novice days. Bring a tyre gauge and pump so you can let the tyres down first thing when they're cold (and pump them up again before the ride home); I run mine at 30psi front and rear on track, and I use Michelin Pure road tyres, as they offer good grip in wet and dry and don't wear too quickly.

Make sure there's plenty of meat on your brake pads, as they'll wear much quicker on track. They'll also get hotter; the heat transfers from the disc into the brake pad material, through to the caliper and into the brake fluid, which then boils and causes brakes to fade. The thicker the material on the pad, the longer it'll take for the heat to seep through, reducing the likelihood of brake fade.

Noise limits at racetracks can be a problem. If in doubt, nip along to an MSV track any time there's a bike event, and the staff will noise-test your bike. If it exceeds the limits advertised for the day, you can get a bespoke baffle made by someone like MHP.

Arrive with a full tank of fuel to see you through to lunchtime, and make sure your riding kit's up to standard – this must include one-piece leathers or two-piece that zip up at least three quarters way round.

2 Arrive early

The last thing you want to do is leave things late and stress about stuff. Signing-on and getting your bike noise-tested (and maybe having to fit that baffle!), attending the briefing, and visiting the toilet all take more time than you think. This also means you'll be ready

in plenty of time for the first session with sighting laps. Try to be as close behind the instructor as possible (although if every novice is reading this, that might be a problem!) so that you can follow their lines rather than those of the clueless guy in front of you. The further back you are, the more the correct line will be diluted.

3 Eyes front

Fold your mirrors, tape them up or take them off – they'll only distract you. Only worry about what's in front of you, not what's behind – it's up to the guys behind to get past you. What saves your life on the road can have the opposite effect on the track. Lifesavers before tipping into corners are a definite no-no – you may swerve to let the Yamaha R1 behind you through and veer straight into the path of the bike you haven't seen on the outside. And tape up your speedo too – if your mind's looking at the big numbers you're not used to doing, you may miss your braking point and end up in the gravel.

4 Cone your skills

Instructors usually place turn in and apex cones on every corner – use them! Observe where they are during the sighting laps and use them to learn your way round the course. You don't have to turn exactly on them, but use them as a guide and you'll gradually start to flow.

5 Think for yourself

Once the sighting laps are over, you're on your own, and the last thing you want to do is follow the rider in front – he's a novice too. On novice days, we often see one guy going out immediately after another and following him, thinking the guy in front knows what he's doing. So you end up with a freight train of 20 riders all following each other off-line! Instead, do your own thing and read the track. The black lines going in and out of corners are a good indication of where the right line is. If you're riding on the outside of the track where there are bits of rubber and other debris and no lines – i.e. the dirty part of the track where no one goes – there's a fair chance you're off-line.

6 Warm your tyres

Give yourself at least a couple of laps with no aggressive throttle or braking, and gradually pick up your pace as your tyres warm. We often see cold tyre crashes – riders come out of pit lane, into first, into second and into hospital, as they're straight off at the first corner.

7 Eyes on the prize

Look where you want to go, not where you don't want to go. If you stare at the gravel trap, you'll end up drifting towards it. Force yourself to look around the bend to where you want to be on track.

8 Let it go

Recognise the point when you've had enough. If you start to get tired towards the end of the day, don't think you need to stay out for the whole session; come in and have a coffee or, better still, water. It's important to keep hydrated; if you start to dehydrate, you lose concentration. One per cent dehydration equals 10 per cent loss in concentration.

9 Exit safely

If you do come in to the pits early, do so safely. Don't swerve in at the last minute. Before slowing down, look behind you to make sure there's not a gaggle of riders right up your chuff (if there is, you may have to wait another lap), put your hand up and blend in to the pit lane entry.

10 Learn

If there are classroom sessions available in between track sessions, take advantage of them. They're available on MSV novice days and they're not compulsory, but you'll get so much advice on track riding technique, which varies greatly from road riding – from braking to body position to racing lines to overtaking. If in doubt, ask the instructor; there is no such thing as a stupid question. MSV instructors are there for you, not for themselves, and a number of them are fully qualified ACU coaches.





Nice, lean, cone

▶ NOVICES ON TRACK



Having an instructor follow you around will pay dividends in feedback later

and are already discussing the tricky nature of Druids, of getting your lines right and of being impressed by the intimidating Paddock Hill Bend. "I don't think that the suspension on my bike is the problem," laughed Paddy, putting away the tools he had brought with him to further tweak his Daytona 675. Paddy had actually 'softened' the bike for his daily commute, but put all the settings back to standard for his trackday. No further adjustment was required, but it's always good to bring the tools and a notepad to record tyre pressures and suspension adjustments – plus, it often helps to draw a map of the circuit and note problem corners to try to work out turn-in points, apexes and exit points.

Mark was happy using the cones that were out on the apexes and turn in points, but laughing and bemused about



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why he kept on braking too much and too early. "I get off the gas and brake, then realise I've overdone it and have to get back on the gas again to get round!" It's a common problem

that every rider has, it's certainly not just a novice issue but both riders had plenty to work on in the sessions ahead.

Brands Indy is a great circuit to get to grips with trackdays on. It's short, there aren't many corners, you get plenty of chances to improve your technique and your lines in every session and the profile changes keep it interesting. Some corners are complicated and tricky to get right but, apart from the approach to Paddock Hill, none are really high-speed, so not too intimidating either.

As the day and the sessions wore on, both riders picked up the pace as they picked up those 'lines', and with a little bit of encouragement to 'get the throttle on the stop' both realised that their bikes had plenty of speed in them. Riders on bigger bikes were overtaken, and when Cobby came along to give some one-on-one tuition (which can be

booked in advance by any rider, inclusive of the price of their day) body-position lessons were handed out.

Astonishingly – and it is apparently a feature of many MSV days – there were no red flags at all during any of the sessions. In fact, there was one yellow flag when a rider paddled into a gravel trap, but that was it. That's the first time that has ever happened at any trackday I have ever been on in over a decade.

As for the riders, they left Brands happy and keen to have another run around. "It was seriously good and I learnt a lot," said Paddy, "it was a pity I got the instruction at the end because I made a bollocks of Druids all day, and only after my critique did I realise what I should have been trying. Also, I was a bit surprised because riding on track does take it out of you – my legs were getting stiff! But I'm definitely up for more!"

Would Mark and his Street Triple R venture out on track again? "Yes. Overall, it's a great day out with your mates and makes you realise how much better your bike is than you are. It gets fast and a shift on when you really open up the throttle – but the brakes are good. Having the instruction early in the day allowed me time to improve as well. I need to relax more – and about 50 other things too!"

MSV TRACKDAYS

MSV – Motorsport Vision Ltd – is owned by Jonathan Palmer, and the company owns a number of circuits in the UK: Brands, Snetterton, Cadwell Park, Oulton Park, Bedford Autodrome, running trackdays at them all. You're never too far from one of them. In addition to novice-only days, you can do your ACU licence 'practical' if you want to go club racing and there's an 'advanced' rider course where tuition is centered around a syllabus. Plus, there's always coaching from the instructors. If you fancy a dabble, then the evening sessions are a cheap introduction to the delights of going round and round in circles as fast as you can. www.clubmsv.com