

WHEN THINGS GET *Wet 'n Wild*

Dragoo Adventure Rider Training lays down the basics for control in a variety of terrain.

> By **Arthur J. Treff**

Overland Expo is a biannual outdoor event catering to two- and four-wheeled adventurers. The most recent expo was at Reeb Ranch, a lovely mountain valley in North Carolina.

The benign setting amplified the mercurial fall Appalachian weather. Apocalyptic rains began the night before the event and continued throughout opening day, reducing the show site to a traffic-snarling, boot-sucking sea of mud.

Vendor tents regurgitated rivers of rain. Walking the midway had knees popping as legs strained against the sticky goo. Exotic four-wheel drive overlanding vehicles became hopelessly mired. Some had to be extracted by bulldozer, others were unable to leave for several days.

Dragoo Adventure Rider Training (DART) offered a scaled down version of its curriculum on-site. What better way to take advantage of unexpected mud than to train in it?

The DART team designed an enticing terrain garden in a flat grassy area, which was already collecting puddles in the steady downpour. Excitement turned to fear while descending the sopping steep pitch to join the class. I didn't want to drop my big GS in front of everyone.

Morning class was a cone carnival of weaves, circles and figure eights, ideal for beginners. But each pass required altering our technique. Continuous erosion made the obstacles ever more challenging. In rapidly deteriorating conditions, instructor Josh Sewell reminded us that the DART cornerstones of ADV riding are: Balance, Control, Judgment and Attitude. When a rider is lacking in one, or conditions get tough, we must work hard on the others, to compensate.

Waiting to ride a 20-foot circle, I watched the rider ahead struggle to maintain traction. He began the turn, felt the bike start to fall, then gave



Dragoo Adventure Rider Training used a muddy Overland Expo setting in North Carolina to reinforce teachings about control in treacherous riding conditions.

it too much gas, which spun him into a muddy low-side.

Drop-repeat-drop-repeat.

I had decent off-road tires, and aired them down, but was still worried about traction. I dabbed a foot numerous times, instead of falling. Having ridden much tighter circles

on asphalt, my inner voice yelled, "Use the clutch, not your foot," but it didn't help. I was a clueless tangle of embarrassment.

Bill Dragoo called me over for coaching and instinctively knew what I was worried about. He reminded me that if we're in the

ARTHUR J. TREFF

proper position we can lean a bike, even in slippery conditions. "What do you weigh, 150?" he quietly asked. "We're both skinny guys, so to lean a fat bike, we have to get our butts way over the side. Let's try it."

Using just the handgrip, Bill held my machine upright while I practiced leaning and counterweighting the bike, a simulated practice of balance and control. After this muscle memory tune up, I re-entered the fray, and rode much better.

The DART team was six instructors, alongside Bill and Susan Dragoo. Teaching in a muddy, 40-degree downpour could not have been easy. Yet the team seemed to be everywhere, smiling, offering encouragement and timely coaching.

Due to conditions, our entry-level exercises became a master class in attitude, and traction management. The next day was supposed to be clear and dry, so Bill canceled all afternoon training. The venue's roads offered abundant mud, beginning with our exit from the training area. The way out had become an exceptionally gooey uphill. A crowd gathered at the top to watch our attempts.

I was on the pegs, approaching the hill, riding slowly and feeling unstoppable. I let a couple of bikes pass in front of me and missed my acceleration point. Up I went, quickly running out of traction, and ideas. At least I didn't fall. I backed it down using the clutch, but self-doubt rattled me as I pushed my rig back for a retry. Instructor Shalmarie Wilson was standing nearby.

"So, what's your plan?" She smiled.

"Head over to the left, get some momentum and look up," was my chastened schoolboy reply.

"OK, make it happen," she said with a laugh. Buddhists are correct: The teacher appears only when the student is ready.

I easily made the sloppy climb.

By evening, the event site was all but impassable as I plotted an exit for a warm hotel. On advice from an ill-informed official, I rode down a grassy hillside, which terminated in an unseen muddy mess. I recalled Josh's four cornerstones, as inspiration. Judgment had me off the bike and walking, looking at the terrain and forming a battle plan. Attitude took control as the bike slid around, but failure

was not an option. Balance and control fell in line, paddling tires through mud like happy ducklings.

The next day was windy, cloudless and cold; puddles had iced over. The ground was a little drier, but traction still had to be managed and we were riding on a slight hill. Morning warmups included riding three passes in each direction, inside a 17-foot circle. Instructor Zeke Sikich struggled with the demo, but stayed loose and explained what he was doing wrong. It was another valuable lesson in attitude. We're human, we don't get it right every time. This stuff was hard.

I entered the cone circle and dabbed my foot right away, "Damn, what am I doing wrong?" I remembered Bill's coaching and focused on Balance and Control. Not good enough. Dab. Dab. Damn!

I exited and re-entered in the opposite direction. Halfway around, my foot was going down, then Josh shouted, "Eyes up!"

A case of cone fixation! Looking beyond the cones for trees, buildings, vehicles, anything; I nailed two perfect circles. "One more,"

shouted Josh. I rode out of the circle to the cheers of my classmates.

Then we moved on to the GS Trophy course. That confidence quickly eroded on obstacles like steep four-foot moguls placed closer than a bike's wheelbase. Ridden too fast, we'd be airborne, too slow, we'd lose traction and be unable to touch the ground. It took several tries, but the dirt made for soft landings, and there was plenty of help picking up bikes.

It was fun, until the rock bed. Not gravel, but something civil engineers call riprap. Sixteen-inch diameter stones, loosely placed in a long rectangle, a foot and a half deep. Let the mind games begin. Zeke made the demo look painless.

"Falling there looks painful," said a voice a lot like mine. "I'm scared of this one!"

"It all comes down to eye work and attitude, Art," Josh said. "All of you can do this, trust me."

The first rider said, "Go slightly faster than you think you need to." Eyes up, and gas on, I was pleasantly surprised. The big GS rolled over it all. Conquering fear was fun. Josh then incorporated a 90-degree turn in the middle. He changed it so seamlessly that we didn't have time to worry or struggle.

The challenging fun continued throughout the afternoon. We crossed a felled tree, then rode its length. Balance and control were soundly tested in a



The DART team teaches balance, control, judgment and attitude, the importance of which becomes increasingly clear in muddy terrain.

one-handed downhill weave. The throttle hand was tasked with picking cones up and placing them atop posts. It was maddeningly simple, frustrating and addictive.

In the hands of the DART team, the Expo's war zone conditions became a mental playground where doubt was powerless against judgment and attitude. Freed of suffocating anxiety, my body relaxed, unlocking balance and control.

Making slippery ascents and descents, riding on downed trees, carving sharp turns through rock gardens and successfully escaping the muddy grounds helped me conquer fears and become a better rider. **MCN**