Observed Session – Current Best Practice

With the introduction of the new National Observer (N.O.) qualification and the setting up of Regional Training Teams there has been an increasing call for better identification as to what current best practice is considered to be when it comes to observed sessions. How to be a Better Rider clearly sets out what is expected for the Skill for Life test however no such equivalent currently exists for observed sessions. The aim of this document is to provide something similar in a simple, easy to interpret form.

Inevitably differing situations will require subtle changes to what takes place but on the whole the same basic guidelines will prevail. The following is based on what is currently being put forward as best practice in the practical theory sessions of the National Observer Training weekends in Wales.

Introductions

This is generally the first part of any interaction with the Associate, the 'getting to know' the Associate part. This will naturally change depending on whether the Observer is meeting the Associate for the first time or building on what has gone before. If the latter, then quite obviously some of the parts will not be needed depending on what has already been done previously. In the case of the National Observer test the candidate (the Observer) would be expected to provide any information already known about the Associate to the Assessor immediately prior to starting the session. If it isn't provided to the Assessor immediately prior to the session commencing the Assessor will consider it as not having been asked in the first place.

However on the assumption that the Observer and Associate are meeting for the first time, the initial meet and greet would normally be followed by the Observer introducing themself. This shouldn't be in too much detail, a name and position held should be enough, there is always the danger of the Observer sounding like they are boasting or the session becoming more about them than their Associate. If the Associate asks for more detail then, they should provide it where appropriate.

By far the most important part of this section is getting to know the Associate and finding out all about them, without at the same time becoming too intrusive. What led them to joining the IAM? What are their goals? What is their riding background? What is their experience? Do they have any time constraints today? (These are the things that in the case of a National Observer test the

Assessor will expect to be told in the case of prior knowledge of the Associate). The Observer should try and find common ground between themself and the Associate if they can. They should avoid formalities, such as checking documents or eyesight, too early as this can put a up barrier and make it feel too 'official' and impersonal, although if it does need to be covered then it should be carried out in this section.

They should find out how things have gone in any previous sessions the Associate may have had and whether there have been any issues. If there have, then the Observer should try and dig deeper to see what the issues might be. Again, the Observer shouldn't be too eager to try and deal with them yet, they are still trying to get to know their Associate.

Once they feel they know them and what they want out of the day/membership of the IAM, the Observer should move on to finding out what their knowledge level of both IPSGA/HTBABR and their machine is. Without this it is difficult to know at what level to pitch things, what terminology to use or how best to interpret what is taking place out on the road. Once having found out their level of knowledge and depth of understanding, once again, they should avoid the temptation to deal with it there and then. It is all too easy to become bogged down and start by entering into a mini lesson when what their Associate really wants to do is to get out on the road and do some riding.

It can also become too 'dry' and 'bookish'. The Observer should use what they know about their Associate's lack of knowledge or understanding to plan either this session or future sessions. For instance, if they had intended using a route that was mostly dual carriageways yet the Associate reveals issues with bends, the Observer should consider modifying their route to take in lots of bends, perhaps stopping at a suitable location to use a bend to discuss or even walk through it with their Associate if safe to do so.

If the Observer doesn't know the area well enough or they want to use this first session to gauge things more generally, then they should consider planning a subsequent session to deal with the bends issue and consider giving their Associate some homework in the meantime as part of their end of session Development Plan. The Observer should consider making a note of that fact now so that they don't forget it. As soon as the Observer reaches the bottom of their Associate's knowledge/understanding, they should STOP! Going any further will just make their Associate uncomfortable and put a barrier between them. The Observer should now know what they need to know and move on. Once again, they shouldn't let this become a mini lesson at this stage, it is too soon.

Once they have done all the above it is time to change the tempo. Up until now it has been predominantly the Observer asking questions and allowing their Associate to do most of the talking. Now we move on to the Briefing stage where the Observer will be doing most of the talking while their Associate listens. The Observer is now delivering information as to how things run so this part will, out of necessity, become didactic.

Briefing

Here the Observer needs to cover all the areas that their Associate will need to know for the session itself. What the aim of the run will be, where the Observer will be behind them and why, how the Observer will signal, what to do if separated, contingency issues, stopping procedure, the initial part of the route (avoid giving the Associate too much to remember), an agreed 'ready' signal and a disclaimer emphasising responsibility. The Observer should make sure they cover any signals that they may need to give them whilst en route to avoid confusion should they have to use them. If they need to do something different or give a signal they haven't mentioned, then the Observer should stop them first to explain. Pre-ride checks can either be carried out or the Observer may choose to check the Associate's understanding of these. Similarly the Observer may require the Associate to perform a moving brake test or check their understanding of why/where/how such a test is conducted.

On Road Management

The overwhelming need here is that the Observer keep control of the situation, that their signals are given in sufficient time, (i.e. just before THE ASSOCIATE sees the junction or sign that they wish them to turn at, not THEM), and that above all their position behind the Associate is safe for the both of them, whilst being in a position that enables the Associate to easily see the Observer's signals (i.e. not directly behind them where their mirrors won't allow this). The Observer should be prepared to stop them should anything potentially dangerous present itself. Their riding whilst following the Associate needs to be of a high standard throughout. The Observer should avoid just pointing at the back of their bike and giving a demonstration ride without having previously discussed with the Associate what specifically it is they are being expected to look for. Ideally stop and explain just what any demonstration is all about, although normally a demonstration ride will likely follow some sort of feedback/debriefing session.

Mid-session feedback

This is essentially where the bulk of the feedback should take place. Hopefully the Observer will have chosen a location that not only is safe, but will help in providing somewhere where what is to be discussed can be illustrated practically. Consider making some notes immediately after stopping, this will prevent the discussion becoming side-tracked or issues being lost as a result of other less important issues arising. Anything not covered here can be covered at the end of the session or in future sessions. It is particularly useful if the reason for stopping is a safety issue where emotions from both parties can be high thus leading to an overly negative experience for the Associate.

If nothing particular came up in the Introductions section then perhaps this will just be a convenient place to find out how the Associate feels about things so far and provides an opportunity to give them something to work on for the next part. If the circumstances and location allow then any feedback can be backed up with references to HTBABR or Roadcraft where appropriate and use made of diagrams where they would be of assistance.

The manner in which stopped should be consistent with the briefing and there should be a good balance between praise and criticism. Full use should be made of open questioning technique to establish both knowledge and understanding and the Associate should be encouraged to both self-analyse and, if possible, provide the answers to areas noted for improvement. The Observer should aim to provide solutions only as a last resort.

It is important to be able to observe the Associate after solutions have been obtained/provided in order to check that what is being practised is what was intended. It also provides a greater opportunity to give praise during the final debrief should improvement be shown.

Ability to give Guidance/Demonstrate

This is a requirement of the N.O. qualification. Ideally, at some point in the ride, the Observer will have found some technique that is lacking in the Associate's performance that can be broken down into its constituent parts and 'unpacked' into easily manageable parts and then demonstrated. This may be following the mid-session feedback. If not the Assessor may provide one, after the session with the Associate has been completed, which the Observer can then use to demonstrate to the Assessor. This is a test of the Observer's ability to take a technique and break it down so that it can more easily be understood by the Associate.

Slow manoeuvring check of Associate

There should, at some point either during or after the session with the Associate, be a check carried out of the Associate's slow manoeuvring ability. The manoeuvre itself should be suitable to the perceived ability of the Associate and dependent upon the space available. The Associate's technique should be analysed and the Observer should be capable of both recognising poor technique and providing the necessary solutions to it.

End of Session Debriefing

This should be carried out at a location conducive to extended discussion should the Associate so wish. The debrief itself should be both complimentary and encouraging, it should be a pleasant experience for the Associate. Once again, full use should be made of an open questioning technique to establish both knowledge and understanding and the Associate should be encouraged to both self-analyse and, if possible, provide the answers to areas noted for improvement. The Observer should aim to provide solutions only as a last resort.

Some form of written feedback should be provided along with a Development Plan. If not produced at the time, then the offer should be made for this to follow the session by way of an email or similar depending on local Group practice. (Some Groups have an online database system of monitoring both Associates and Observers). The Observer will be questioned on their plan as part of the N.O. test. A time scale should be provided for future sessions where appropriate.

N.O. test additional questions

In the case of the N.O. test there are a number of questions to establish knowledge of areas such as Skill for Life administration, resolving issues surrounding complaints, knowledge of machine dynamics, effects of different types of machines, questions on HTBABR, Roadcraft and the Highway Code, and the Observer's own self-analysis of the session.

Assessment ride (replaces the Demonstration Ride from the S.O. test)

This is the assessment ride that an applicant for the RTT, or the N.O. test, are required perform. This assessment ride will normally be conducted after the observed session when the Associate has left. The N.O. candidate has around 25 minutes to evidence their riding standard over a route of their choice, whereas any potential RTT member will have the route dictated.

This section should be fairly self-explanatory, it should be, in the words of the previous Senior Observer Training Manual:-

"… a demonstration ride that is safe, systematic and smooth throughout with a high degree of safe but legal progress for the attendant circumstances. This should be a ride, which encapsulates the full meaning of Motorcycle Roadcraft without any over emphasis, incorporating considered actions throughout and devoid of 'automation'. In essence, this should be a high level 'thinking-ride'. The candidate should consider the beneficiary of such a demonstration ride to be an Observer looking to become a Senior Observer or someone preparing for the Special Assessment."

It is defined in the National Observer (N.O.) qualification document as a ride that under normal IAM test marking would equate to a score of 30 or less with no individual section scoring below 2

('Good'). For the RTT that is very much the minimum standard, the difference being in the case of an RTT assessment that this will be carried out on roads that are, where possible, unfamiliar to the applicant.

The slow speed manoeuvre part of this will likely be either a figure of eight or circles which should be carried out at a walking pace, at or close to full lock, with vision clearly in the direction of travel. It should be carried out with apparent ease to give confidence to anyone watching that, with the correct technique, it is comparatively easy.

This is by no means an exhaustive coverage of the subject but should provide sufficient guidelines as to what will be expected in the same way as HTBABR does for the IAM Skill for Life test as well as also ensuring consistency across Regions.