

TIPS FOR ROUGH RIDERS

Three Experienced ATB Cyclists

Tell How to Improve Technique

By Ed Pavelka

"There's a real quick learning curve in mountain bike riding... it's either do or die!" Off-road enthusiast Hannah North laughed as she said this, but it might not be so funny out on the trail.

Like any other activity, there is a right way and a wrong way to ride in the rough. The mortality rate really isn't too high, but North makes a good point. If you don't catch on fairly fast, you could have a few extra knocks to show for it.

Riding an all-terrain bike (ATB) is not hard, it's just different. If this is the summer you've added a fat-tire machine to your stable, congratulations. You're discovering a great new world of cycling, but getting good on an ATB can be a tad bewildering.

It needn't be. There are numerous helpful tips and insights that experienced ATB riders are glad to share. We found out a few from three of the best: San Diego's Hannah North, formerly a national-class road racer; ATB builder Chris Chance of Somerville, Massachusetts; and off-road pioneer Gary Fisher of San Anselmo, California.

A digest of their advice for beginners and more experienced riders follows.

PRACTICE SHIFTING — This might sound silly if you can operate a 12-speed gear system in your sleep, but those ATB thumb shifters aren't at all like the gear levers on a road bike. You have three chainwheels to deal with, and there are huge jumps between freewheel cogs. Get used to these things by taking at least one ride on a smooth

Riding through rocks, dirt, mud and water calls for a different set of skills than the ones you need for road riding. While negotiating this stream bed, for example, Wes Williams keeps his weight over the rear wheel for traction.

road so you can watch the ATB work. This will pay immediate dividends on the trail, where looking down may provide just the moment it takes to debark a tree. One key to off-road success is being able to operate your ATB's gear system as certainly as you do your road bike's.

ORIENT YOURSELF — Before heading to the forest, put some thought into how the ATB sits under you. Develop a sense for the long wheel base, how your weight is distributed, and the steering geometry. Put a stick on the road and ride over it a few times. Learn where the thump comes in relation to your location on the bike. Next, practice lifting the front wheel, then the rear, so you cross the stick without touching it. Get familiar, get comfortable.

RIDE ALONE — Make some off-road forays by yourself so you won't be rushed. Choose terrain that is fun, not demanding. (Later, they will be one and the same.) A low degree of difficulty now will speed the learning process and build your confidence. Whenever you run up against something that makes you put a foot down or fall off, don't keep going. Turn around and try it again, and again, until you get through cleanly.

RIDE WITH OTHER PEOPLE — If you go out with an experienced rider who is willing to keep the pace under control, you will learn a lot. Watch his or her technique and copy it. It's fun, and you'll find yourself pulling off some moves you didn't believe possible. If you falter in a tricky spot, have your friend show you again how to get through. Then do it.

RETHINK YOUR SADDLE HEIGHT — Road riders lose sleep over correct saddle height, but when it comes to ATBs variety is a virtue. You probably started at the same height you use on your road bike. Experiment — what's right is what feels comfortable and what works on the terrain. Those quick-release seatpost binders are not just for looks. A "normal" saddle height with good leg extension works best for climbing, but an extra low saddle greatly improves control and comfort on descents. The Hite Rite Quick Adjust Seat Locator is recommended by many ATB enthusiasts because it allows changes on the fly.

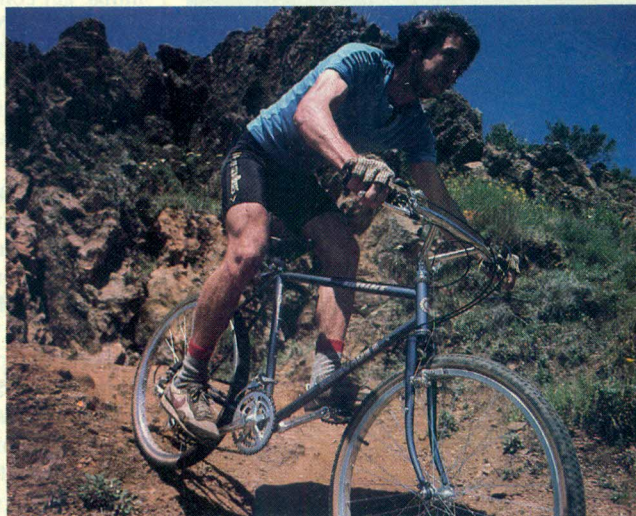
CONSIDER NEW PEDALS — Different pedals can help if your feet slip forward on bumpy terrain. This is a common problem with the rectangular steel pedals on many ATBs. Pedals like SunTour's oval "bear claw" pedals and Shimano's cantilever BMX pedals help eliminate sliding. But be careful — those "bear claws" can do damage (like the real thing) to your shin or calf. Protect yourself with thick knee socks or, in really rough terrain, high-top boots.



Descending calls for judicious use of the brakes. Let your bike roll over the flatter parts of a descent; save your arm strength for the steeper areas.



One ATB skill is finding traction where ever you can. Keeping your weight over the rear wheel increases traction, helping you power through mud, even up hills.



EVALUATE THE BRAKE LEVERS — Will slightly rotating the brake levers put your wrists in a more comfortable position? Many new off-road riders ache from fingertips to shoulders after their first ventures into hilly country. Trepidation on the long, bumpy downhills makes them grip tightly with rigid arms, and then they get hammered by rocks and ruts. If the wrists have to be cocked at an unnatural angle to brake, it's much worse. Good position and relaxation help a lot.

PONDER THE HANDLEBARS — It's become fashionable to cut down the handlebars, but think twice before you reach for that hacksaw. Small riders usually benefit from narrower bars — they don't have to overextend their arms when making sharp turns at a slow speed. This isn't a concern for bigger riders, who may find that wide bars provide better control. The smart way is to ride a friend's bike with cut-down bars, then make your decision based on function, not fashion.

BECOME AN AMATEUR GEOLOGIST — Begin working on two dirty skills — analyz-

ing soil conditions and finding traction. There is a never-ending variety of matter under the wheels, and it takes savvy plus concentration to follow the ground that's firmest. For example, it's usually easier to ride in the creek bed than in the soil on either side. When the trail is laced with ruts, make them work for you. Turn where there is a little berm and use it like the banking of a mini velodrome.

GO FASTER (SOMETIMES) — Nobody likes to crash, so it's natural to go slower when the terrain gets nastier. Natural, but often ineffective. No speed, no momentum, no movement. Just a little more juice will often help you, not hurt you. One example is when encountering a washboard surface. More speed may prevent your wheels from banging into every indentation; it will cause the tires to bounce off the tops and reduce the jolts. It's also the fear of going fast that leads to problems on descents. You must not lose control, but it's dangerous to have a death grip on the brake levers all the way down. That will kill your hands and arms.

Instead, let the bike roll free on the flatter sections so your muscles can recover, then slow down for the turns and steep drops.

MASTER THE BRAKES — Braking technique is different on an ATB. Out on the pavement, the front brake stops the bike best and is relied on most, because the rear brakes could cause the tire to skid. It can happen on an ATB too, of course, but the rear brake is the one to use most often, especially on descents. If the front brake is inadvertently squeezed too hard — it can easily happen when bouncing down a rocky path — you'd better have your helmet on. Many experienced riders don't even put their fingers on the front brake lever when descending. Some ATBs are now coming with more powerful brakes on the rear than the front.

CHECK YOUR TIRE PRESSURE — The recommended inflation range on the sidewall is probably 10-15 psi higher than what works best for most off-road conditions. A softer tire gives a broader footprint, which means better traction. It also improves shock absorption. Ride with a full 40-45 psi on any descent worth its salt, and it'll feel as if somebody hooked you to a jackhammer. However, if you're a large, heavy rider, don't go as low as 25 psi when the terrain is rough. You could hit a hole and bottom out, pinching the tube and ruining the rim.

A LITTLE DAB WILL DO YA — Many riders pride themselves on being able to go the entire distance without putting a foot down. In fact, trials riding is an ATB event that puts a premium on exactly that. But when worse comes to worse, don't be afraid to use one leg like an outrigger to help yourself stay upright. One move worth practicing before riding steep descents will help you control a skid, make a turn, and slow down — simultaneously. Practicing on a downhill with smooth dirt, lower the saddle and start down, then lock the rear brake and use body English to throw the rear wheel out to the side. Dab with your uphill foot for stability, but keep it on the pedal as much as possible. Once you develop the feel for this, it might get you out of a jam sometime. But do it only when you need to. That carved landscape and dusty cloud might look dramatic, but it's destructive.

PLAN FOR THE CLIMBS — When your gear is too high and you have to stand and honk the last few feet, you may not make it. The rear wheel will lose traction, which can happen when sitting in a gear that's too low. Once you know your gear range, it's a matter of eyeballing the particulars of the upward angle and picking the right ratio. When you must stand, you'll do best to keep your weight in the rear. That's yet another contradiction to the road bike and another reason why there's always a challenge on an ATB. ○