

Mastering MOUNTAIN BIKE Skills

Second Edition

- cross-country
- all-mountain
- downhill
- racing
- pump tracks
- dirt jumping



Brian Lopes
Lee McCormack

◦ SECOND EDITION ◦

Mastering MOUNTAIN BIKE Skills



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BRIAN LOPES
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◦ *SECOND EDITION* ◦

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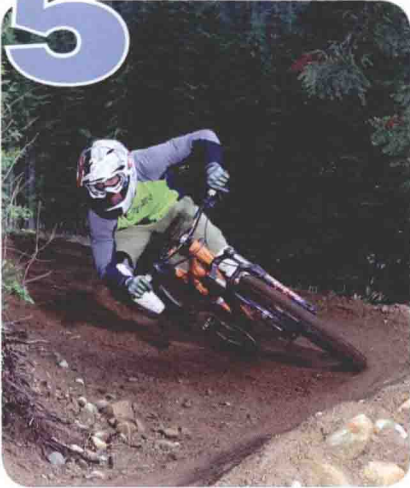


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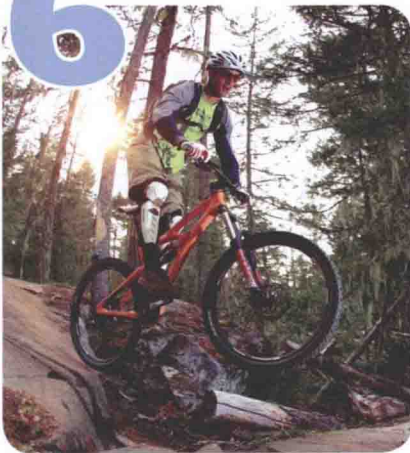


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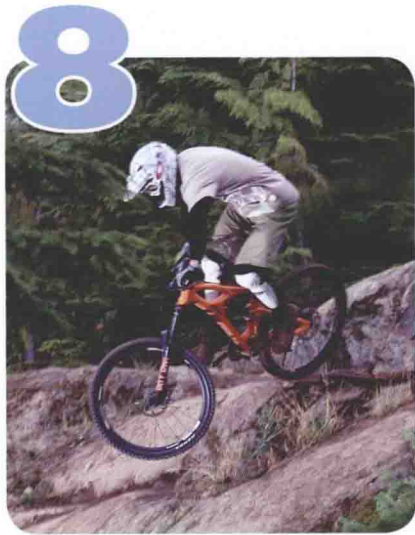
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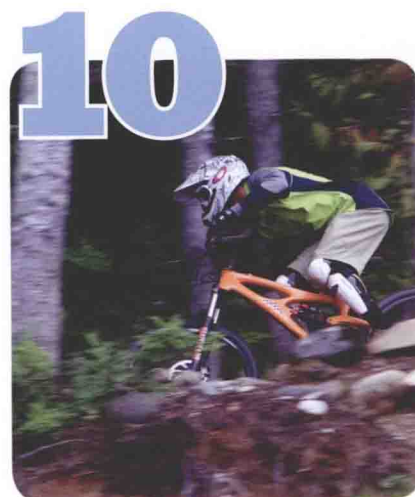
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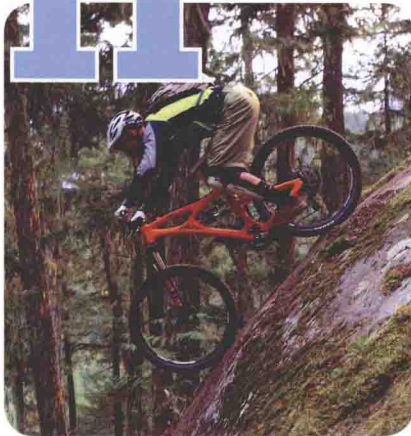


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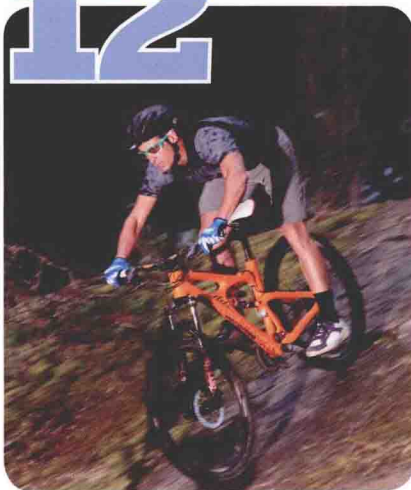


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INTRODUCTION

Would you rather repeat old failures or create new successes? If you're satisfied with your riding, keep doing what you're doing. If you want to ride better/safer/faster, you must consciously practice the skills that will get you there.

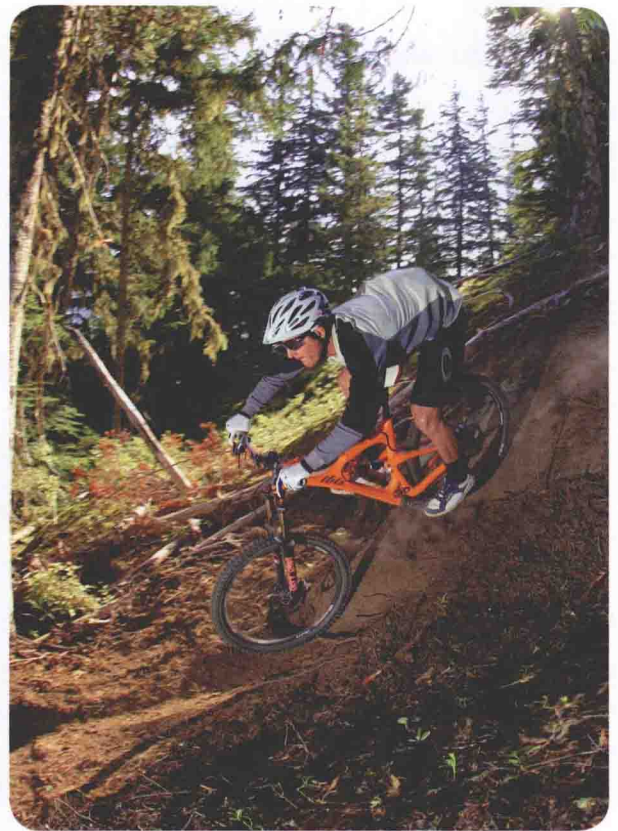
One thing at a time. Whenever you're out riding, concentrate on one skill or component of a skill. Look ahead in the corners, stay low over the jumps, weight your outside pedal, or whatever. Think about executing the move perfectly. Soon you'll be doing it without thought, and then you can move on to the next thing.

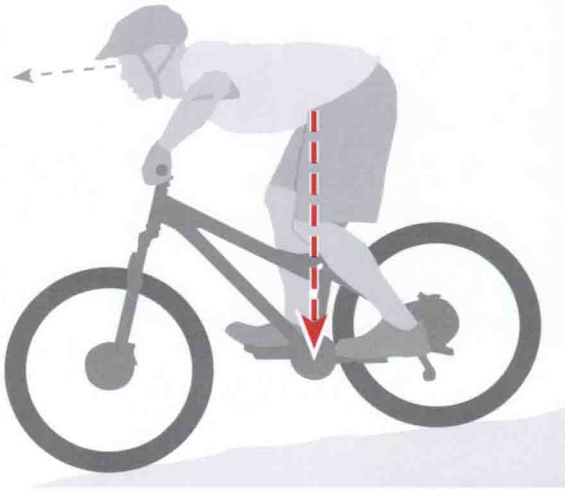
Don't let bad habits take over. It's OK to make some mistakes while you're learning. But when you keep making the same mistake, it becomes a bad habit.

Research by Wendy Wood, a psychologist at Texas A&M University, provides some tips for overcoming bad habits. Wood no doubt had habits like smoking and Xbox in mind, but these tips apply to bad bike habits as well. Let's say that as you do a big double jump, you stare into the gap and abort the mission.

- Make it difficult to continue the bad habit. You could attach a blinder to the mouthpiece of your full-face helmet, so you can't look down. If you tend to grab the brakes for no reason, wrap your fingers around the grips until there's a reason to brake.
- Change your environment. After you stop on the lip a few times, you probably will not go for it. Come back later or try a similar jump elsewhere. When your mind gets caught in a rut, a new situation can shake it free.
- Enjoy the short-term rewards. When you finally get that double, or at least take off without staring into the gap, give yourself a Lemon Zest Luna Bar. Yummy.

For additional info, refer to www.duke.edu/~wwood/Ouellette.Wood.1998.pdf.





Practice your attack position. See page 46.

Think about what you want to do rather than what you're trying to avoid. If you think “don't stare into the hole,” where do you think you'll stare? Many coaches recommend repeating a positive mantra: “I will fly over there. I will fly over there.”

Precision now, speed later. Don't make yourself a human missile and hope you learn something before you explode. When you're working on a new skill, do it slowly on easy terrain. We want to train effective habits here. Going too fast will introduce errors and greatly increase the danger. Stick this to your refrigerator: *Smoothness first. Speed later.*

CONSIDER GETTING SOME COACHING

You will learn a lot from this book, but there's no substitute for a qualified skills instructor. By having a coach, you will be able to:

- Learn in your own style. A good instructor reaches you using words, demonstrations, and on-bike doing.
- Get immediate feedback. It might feel perfect the first time, but it rarely is. A good coach zeroes in on what you're doing well, and what you can do better.
- Improve much faster. Avoid wasting time on bad habits. Build perfect new skills, and the confidence that goes with them.

Time and money spent on skills gets you higher performance—and more fun—than any equipment upgrade. We encourage you to learn at least the basics from a qualified instructor. For information on Lee's coaching programs, check out www.leelikesbikes.com.



Lee demonstrates the fine points of braking at a clinic in Nathrop, Colorado.

Step Up to a Higher Level

When you become a mountain biker, you begin a never-ending journey of self-improvement and good times. You have the most fun when your skills match the current challenge. When you step up your skills, you step up the challenge, and vice versa. Beginners and experts enjoy the same stoke. When you nail your first little double jump, you'll be just as stoked as Brian was when he won his fourth world championship.

As your skills evolve, so does your relationship with terrain. You get more confident and you learn to work a trail the way a surfer works a wave. Although your kung fu changes with the situation (you might be a confident trail rider but a sissy jumper), you probably spend most of your time at one of the following three levels.

Level 1: The Trail Works You

Your bike feels new and strange, and you have little faith in your ability to survive a trail. You keep all of your muscles tense, all of the time. You drag your brakes whenever your bike points downhill. You creep slowly over obstacles and frequently stop dead or flop over your handlebars. You don't lean enough in turns, and your constant braking keeps your bike from cornering smoothly.

Riding at level 1 is herky-jerky and, to be honest, not all that fun. You hear experienced riders talk about flow and groove and flying over stuff, but you have no idea what they're talking about. Heck, you might even think they're crazy.

Unfortunately, most people who own mountain bikes never get out of this stage. They either wallow in beginnerdom forever, or they just plain give up and stick to the road. If you're at level 1, don't give up. This isn't what mountain biking is about. The real fun is still to come.

LEAP FROM LEVEL 1 TO LEVEL 2

1. Relax. This is so important, we'll keep beating you over the head with it. If you find yourself tensing up, stop what you're doing and return with a fresh mind. If the tension remains, go work on something that doesn't scare you. Fear and tension make riding unproductive and unfun.
2. Lay off the brakes unless there's a specific reason to slow down. "I'm going really fast right now" is not a valid reason to brake. When it's time to brake, do it like you mean it.
3. Try carrying more speed into rough sections. Get light on your bike to get through more smoothly.
4. Have faith in your bike's ability to roll. That's what bikes do. They roll.
5. Dial in your attack position. This is key!

Level 2: You Survive the Trail

Now mountain biking becomes fun. You've learned to relax a bit. You coast between corners. You roll, clatter, and fly straight over obstacles. In corners you lay off the brakes, lean, and carve like a butcher.



You've become a competent rider. On a smooth, curvy trail you enjoy the sensations of speed and flow. When things get gnarly, you tend to tense up. You bog down in rough terrain, and you get bucked out of control when you hit obstacles at speed. You have trouble making corners when traction is iffy.

The majority of satisfied mountain bikers ride happily somewhere in level 2, blissfully unaware of the next level. When they see pros whiz by with utmost speed and control, they just shake their heads and assume superhero powers are involved. Truth is, being born on Krypton has little to do with achieving ultimate skill (but it can't hurt).

LEAP FROM LEVEL 2 TO LEVEL 3

1. Relax. Yes, even more than ever.
2. Commit. The ups and downs of porpoiseful riding require snap.
3. Scrutinize the trail. Not just any line will do. Look for banks to turn on and downslopes to pump.
4. Don't bash into stuff. It's no longer good enough to point your wheel downhill and let it run into whatever's in the way. Instead, try to unweight, wheelie, hop, or jump over the obstacles. When you stop crashing into things, you'll immediately increase your speed and control.
5. Pump backsides. Anytime the trail turns downward, press down for some free speed. We're talking any surface here: rocks, stumps, mounds, washing machines, anything. Pumping is the key to that flowy world you've been hearing about.
6. Develop your own style. Experiment to learn what works best for your skills, body type, and equipment. For example, if you can't muscle your bike through rough sections but you rail corners, you might tend to ride around gnarly rocks, which is fine. What isn't fine is thinking you rule at rocks but actually sucking, then bashing into the business end of a boulder. Know yourself.
7. Dial in your attack position. Yes, even more. More automatic. More fluid.

Level 3: You Work the Trail

This is the ultimate. You ride with relaxed aggression. You never let your front wheel hit a rock, and you never let a backside go by unpumped. The trail is a piece of clay, and you sculpt it to suit your fancy. Your line is as vertical as it is horizontal. You unweight or fly over obstacles, and you press hard into corners. You porpoise through rough sections, gaining speed and control the whole time.

When you reach level 3, be proud—you're in small company. But just because you can hop a boulder's face and pump its backside doesn't mean you're all that. As you get stronger and better at reading terrain, you'll learn to manipulate trails in even better ways.

YOU'RE ONLY AS GOOD AS YOUR HABITS

When you're under stress—in a race, on a new trail, with a potential mate—you'll always revert to your habits. Do you usually ride stiff and upright? If so, you'll do the same under pressure. So take the time to build good habits!

FIND YOUR STYLE

Although the core riding skills shown in this book are pretty constant, the way you apply them is up to you. Definitely practice the key moves, but, as you master them, relax and rock them in your style. Are you compact like a road racer or upright like a motocrosser? Do you stay low or go for the big air? Do you turn around boulders or bash right over them? It's all good. Just find the style that works best for you.

Disclaimer

Mountain biking is dangerous. You can break your equipment, and you can hurt yourself. That's what makes it so exciting. Ride within your abilities, and always wear the proper protective gear for the type of riding you're doing. Always wear a helmet and gloves. If you're anywhere you expect to crash, consider elbow and knee pads, body armor, and a full-face helmet. We also suggest eye protection.

The best technique and gear will not prevent all crashes or injuries. If you go out and hurt yourself, it's your own fault. Ride hard and take chances, but don't be an idiot.

Welcome to the exciting, gratifying world of high-level mountain biking. Remember that becoming a great rider is a long-term process. Be patient, take it one step at a time, and have fun! But before you go out and rip, let's make sure your bike is up to the task.

Choose Your Weapon



If you're reading this book, you're serious about ripping on a mountain bike. (Right on!) Buy a quality bike that matches the type of riding you do, and set it up to match your body and your style. Your bike is an extension of your body—you wouldn't settle for off-the-shelf arms and legs, would you?

Buy the Right Bike

Aside from your house and your car, your bike is probably your biggest investment. Actually, if you're a hard-core mountain biker, you'll probably spend less on your car than on your bike. So, aside from buying a house, buying a bike is the most important purchase of your life.

Spend as much as you can afford. Higher-level frames and components work better and last longer than low-end ones. You don't need the ultra-high-end Shimano XTR group to have fun, but it will outlast and outperform XT, just as XT destroys LX, and so on down the line. If you buy a cheap department store bike, you'll get what you pay for. It will fight your attempts to ride well, and you'll end up soured on the whole experience.

Buy from your local bike shop. You can find great deals online, especially on accessories, but a local bike shop will help you select the right bike, get you fitted, and keep your rig dialed. If you find a shop with knowledgeable staff and the parts you need, establish a relationship with the staff. You might pay a bit more than you would online, but the experience and convenience will more than make up for the difference. Try bringing your mail-order bike to a shop for a night-before-the-ride repair and see how it goes.

Take it easy on the upgrades. Don't sweat the components on your bike. Just ride the thing. Here are the most important upgrades:

- ◉ Saddle. It's hard to have fun sitting on a plastic anvil.
- ◉ Stem and handlebars. They should fit your body and riding style.
- ◉ Tires. Choose ones that match your riding conditions.

Run everything else stock until it breaks or wears out.

Hardtail or Full Suspension?

Back in the day, there was no choice because everything was rigid. When suspension forks first came out, downhillers gobbled them up, but the weight weenies stayed rigid in their ways. Now, almost every mountain bike comes with a suspension fork. In the same way, when rear suspension first became available, only downhillers went for it. As the designs got better and lighter, rear suspension appeared on all bikes from the high end on down—for hard-core downhill and for epic cross-country.

Hardtails are still lighter and cheaper than suspension bikes with the same components, and they can perform better in two particular conditions: cross-country riding on smooth trails and **dirt jumping** and **bikercross** on smooth courses. The lighter, stiffer bikes transmit more power to the ground. That's why some racers almost always race on a hardtail.