

Tips for Transitioning From Pavement to Dirt

By Gale Bernhardt

It is too bad when road cyclists get discouraged after only one mountain bike ride and then never try the sport again.

If you're a roadie that's thinking about trying out mountain biking, arm yourself with a little upfront knowledge. For those new to the trail, here are a few tips to make the transition from pavement to dirt easier:

1. Get Comfortable Moving Around on the Bike

Road riders are seated on the bike for the majority of any given ride. They might get out stand on the pedals for some portion of a climb or a sprint; but most of the time a roadie stays in the saddle. Mountain bike riders are not seated for a good portion of any ride that includes technical or difficult climbs and descents.

2. Move Your Body Weight Forward on Steep Climbs

When you climb steep trails or roads with loose sand, rocks and dirt, you will need to move your body weight forward so your rear wheel stays in contact with the earth, providing optimal traction. If you move your body weight too far forward, you lose traction. Move your body weight too far back and your front wheel can lift off of the ground.

3. Pedal, Pedal, Pedal

A big temptation on uphill sections is to get to an obstacle or tough section of the trail and stop pedaling so you can get a closer look at it, decide what to do and then make your move. If you've stopped dead in your tracks, more than likely you won't make it over or through the obstacle—that is, unless you can do a track stand and stunts a la trials bike rider Danny Macaskill.

You've got to make decisions about what to do on the fly and then pedal, pedal, pedal. Most of the time, momentum is your friend. There are times when too much speed is bad, but we'll save that discussion for another column.

4. Move Your Body Weight Back on Steep Descents

A road rider will make minimal adjustments to forward and aft body position on the bike, whether climbing or descending. You can find photos of mountain bike riders descending steep roads and trails where their body position is so far back, the saddle is completely visible in front of their torso.

5. Trust That Your Equipment Can Handle a Beating

Generally, road riders attempt to avoid hitting anything in their path—potholes, rocks, trash, road kill, etc.—because a hard hit can cause fork, frame and wheel damage.

Mountain bikes, on the other hand, can be ridden into and over obstacles because the shock system absorbs a good part of the impact. This impact includes dropping off of small and large cliffs. Trusting that your equipment can handle these blows to the bike will make you a more confident and skilled rider.

6. Your Equipment Will Get Scratched, Bent, Dented and Otherwise Damaged Cosmetically

Cyclists can keep road bikes in pristine condition for years of riding, sans the occasional crash. If you attempt to ride off road hoping not to get any scratches on your nifty frame or carbon cranks, you should probably ride on a bike path or groomed dirt trail with no technical sections.

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7. In Some Cases, it Is Better to Go Over the Big Rock Than Around it

Roadies see rocks as obstacles in the trail to be avoided. Mountain bike riders see rocks as naturally placed playground equipment. Sometimes it is a better option to just ride over the rock than attempt to go around it.

8. Some Trail Sections Are Perfectly Walkable

Yes, even the best riders get off their bikes and walk some of the really hairy sections of trail. Don't expect to ride every section of every trail. In fact, sometimes it's more energy and time efficient to just get off the bike and walk.

9. Expect Instability

On a mountain bike, expect to have a feeling of sliding around on loose dirt, gravel, rocks and tree roots while you're riding. Unlike road riding, the ground is often loose and moving beneath you.

If you can relax and not over-correct your bike as it slides around beneath you, it is easier to remain upright. Being scared or getting nervous that the ground feels like ice can make you tense. Expecting instability makes it easier for you to relax and handle rough sections of trail.

10. Look Ahead at Least 15 Feet and Decide Where You Want to Go

One temptation is to look ahead and become fixated on an obstacle, watching that obstacle until you are literally on top of it. If you're doing that, you have not picked your next move after the obstacle.

Look ahead, pick a path and then trust your equipment can handle it. Also trust that you can make adjustments by feeling how your bike is responding to the trail. Feel your way through it, don't try to see your way through it.

11. On Some Rides, Plan to Work on Skills and Forget About Aerobic Fitness

This means you will get off the bike and complete several "do overs" on one or more sections of the trail that you want to master. When your legs get too tired to give solid effort on tough sections, call it quits for that a day.

12. Ride With Experienced Riders That Will Help You Learn to Mountain Bike on Ability-Appropriate Terrain

Riding with people who want to take you over the toughest local trails on your first six outings on a mountain bike will likely lead to a bad experience and discouragement.

Ride with people that will take the time to help you learn new skills on terrain that is appropriate for beginners. Mastering small obstacles and getting some foundation skills will help you be a better rider in the long run and lowers the likelihood that you'll get discouraged and quit.

Mountain bike riding is excellent cross training for road riding. Taking a break from the road and hitting the dirt can revive waning enthusiasm and improve your overall fitness.

If you're tired of the road, consider getting dirty.

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