

# TRIALS FOR TRAILS

Stretching more the  
able in mountain  
biking sessions

## Part 1

by Graham French

Recently I've been working with PGCE students looking into how we can differentiate learning in outdoor activities sessions. The restriction often encountered is that the range of abilities in any activity group essentially have the same equipment and facility/environment in which to operate, so the teacher or instructor is challenged to differentiate the task itself rather than the outcome. It may also be that the ability of a group in a particular activity is only revealed to the group leader/teacher when they arrive at a venue and commence the activity.

Whilst it is common to look to deliver on learning objectives that are not centred around psychomotor skill development<sup>1</sup>, there are some adventurous activities that have a requirement for a certain level of motor skill to progress and access these other aims. How can you challenge the more able and talented whilst still allowing time and opportunity for those who need more support?

Consider mountain biking. It is perfectly feasible to run a mountain bike session with a group of young people to help them become better bikers. However, it is equally likely that this is not the only aim, as mountain biking offers the ability to develop risk awareness, personal confidence, coordination and balance<sup>2</sup>. So how is it possible to manage and teach a group that may contain individuals who have seldom, if ever, ridden a bike, and some who ride regularly and are confident to jump, bunny hop and wheelie? It is tempting to set a practice type exercise and leave the more confident to get on with it whilst you dedicate your time to others. This may work as a group management technique (although you may find the attention of the more able wandering and they have the potential to push the boundaries whilst your attention more focused on the needier individuals), but what if there was a way you could challenge these individuals at the same time as developing their bike handling skills? What if you could motivate them to improve their skills rather than just filling in time before the journey or trail commences?

In this article, split into two parts, I'd like to present some ideas on how we can use trials skills<sup>3</sup> to help develop and motivate young riders who already have a high level of skill on bikes in general or mountain bikes specifically. Please note, I'm not envisaging us all with groups doing front loops or Danny MacAskill-esque fence riding<sup>4</sup>, but using trials skills that can actually help riders on mountain bike trails, be they natural or man-made at trail centres.

The skills will be covered individually, with some coaching tips and the purpose/usefulness of each skill considered in the context of trail riding. It is intended that the skills are set out in a progressive fashion, with the easier ones first, moving on to more advanced moves in part two of the article.

## THE TRACKSTAND<sup>5</sup>

**WHAT IS IT?** Staying balanced on the bike with both feet off the ground without moving forwards.

**HOW IS IT USEFUL ON THE TRAIL?** Allows you to stop and scope out a feature before rolling/committing to it. Especially useful if you graduate to riding clipped in.

**WHY DO IT?** Develops balance (side to side and front to back), develops core strength.

**PROGRESSION:** Start by controlling rolling movement with the brakes on, then as you improve release one and then both brakes until it is balance keeping you still, not pushing against the brakes. Can also be started with a partner holding the front wheel between their knees and hands on the handle bars to help balance. This can

progress to holding the rear wheel between a partner's knees and then allowing some movement side to side.

*Photo 1: the track stand – notice how Tom is covering the brakes but not relying on them*



### HOW TO DO IT:

You are trying to stand up on the pedals in more or less the neutral position without moving forwards or backwards at all. To do this you will need to turn the handlebar and hence front wheel so they are almost at right angles to the normal straight line running position and keep both brakes on. You then need to move your body

(not the bike) to balance in the upright position for as long as possible. Practising this gets you used to the feel of moving around with the bike relatively stationary under you, and also allows you to get to grips with exactly where the balance point of the bike is. In the early stages, you may need to release the brakes ever so slightly for a few cm of movement to help keep you balanced. As you get better you will be able to balance without resting on the brakes.



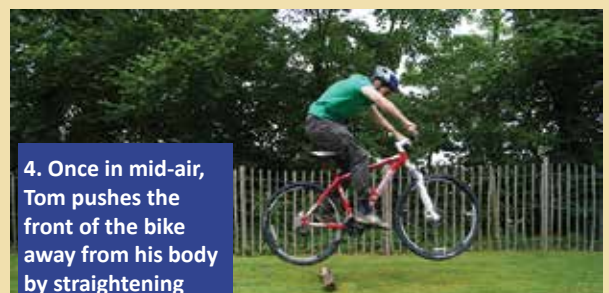
1. Tom prepares by getting low and bending his arms and legs, ready for an explosive leap upwards.



2. Just before he reaches the log, he pushes hard with his legs and literally jumps up into the air.



3. As he rises into the air, he scoops the pedals with his feet (toes pointing down or even backwards) to help lift the bike and get extra height.



4. Once in mid-air, Tom pushes the front of the bike away from his body by straightening his arms, and gently bends his legs allowing the rear end of the bike to come up under him, whilst maintaining forward momentum.



5. Finally, he brings the bike to meet the ground, and keeps his weight low over the back of the bike with knees bent to absorb the impact and avoid being bounced off the bike or over the bars.

## THE BUNNY HOP<sup>5</sup>

**WHAT IS IT?** Lifting both wheels simultaneously off the ground whilst moving forwards.

**HOW IS IT USEFUL ON THE TRAIL?** Allows you to hop over obstacles that would slow/redirect you so you can maintain speed and ride efficiently.

**WHY DO IT?** Develops awareness of weight distribution on the bike (front to back), develops ability to unweight the bike, develops confidence in having both wheels off the ground at the same time.

**PROGRESSION:** Start with small twigs as obstacles to get over. Move on to higher obstacles such as logs to refine technique. As ability develops, go faster to jump further, or go slower to jump higher, or try to change direction when in the air – progressing on to side-hop (see below).

### HOW TO DO IT:

The set up and first part of the bunny hop are exactly the same as a front wheel lift. Push down with your legs, bend your arms and then explode upwards, straightening your arms and legs as you rise and then bending them as the bike follows up underneath. A bunny hop requires you to actively lift the rear end of the bike just after you have lifted the front wheel - so both wheels don't quite go up together but the rear follows the front. To achieve this lift, when you are in the air you need to do two things. Push the bike away from you by straightening your arms (just like when riding a larger drop off) and then point your toes downwards and scoop the pedal up and behind you, which acts to lift the rear wheel. I would strongly recommend practising this with flat pedals even if you normally ride with cleats - they allow you to lift the back wheel but without developing the technique, so that when you need to hop in a real trail if your timing is even a little off the back wheel comes up too early, pushing the front wheel down meaning you are more likely to land front wheel heavy and go over the bars. This artificial pull is not possible with flats, so I think it's best to learn moves like this on flats and then go back to cleats once you've got them wired.



## THE SIDE-HOP

**WHAT IS IT?** Jumping the bike laterally either whilst still or more commonly whilst moving forward to land in a spot parallel to where you left off.

**HOW IS IT USEFUL ON THE TRAIL?** Allows you to avoid obstacles in front of you, allows you to escape deep ruts that may be controlling your direction, allows you to move off of off-camber sections cleanly.

**Why do it?** Develops core strength and balance, and the appreciation that small movements in the core can have a large effect on the wheels.

**Progression:** Start with the bunny hop, move on to hopping on and off edges of increasing height stationary before practising this whilst moving along, and then ultimately into and out of ruts.

### HOW TO DO IT:

Very similar to the bunny hop, but usually started in a stationary position. Get into a trackstand. Prepare as for the bunny hop, crouching down on the bike ready to spring upwards. As you spring lean slightly to one side so that if viewed from behind, instead of the bike going vertically upwards it goes up at an angle of about 15 degrees to the vertical. The nature of the bunny hop means that the front wheel goes up (and hence down) before the rear wheel, so as you scoop the rear of the bike up with your feet, you also need to twist your hips slightly to bring the bike across and in line with the front wheel. You also need to anticipate the sideways momentum your body will have and counter this by pushing harder on your outside leg when you land – otherwise you hop sideways and then fall off on the side you've moved towards. As you get more confident you can go for higher side hops (crouch lower, more spring) or more distance (lean further or even turn the bars very slightly). When you want to transfer the skill to a moving context, be careful to anticipate the momentum your body has – not just sideways but also forwards so that when you land you are relatively balanced, counteracting any forces pushing/pulling you off the bike by pushing harder with your legs and keeping your core steady.

Brendan compresses the fork and bike (1+2), forcing his weight down through the pedals and bends his arms and legs ready to spring – he even brings his chest down low to the top tube.

1

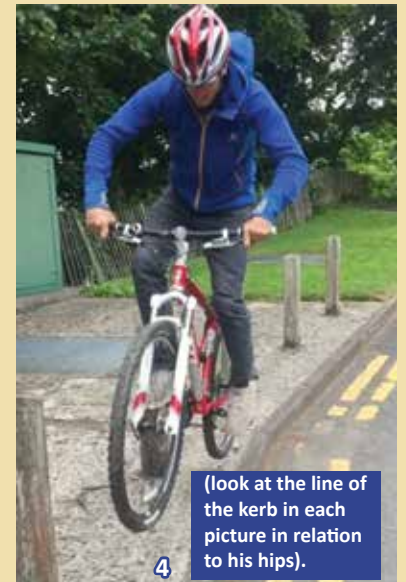


2



3

As he springs up (3) he moves his hips over the edge of the kerb



4

(look at the line of the kerb in each picture in relation to his hips).

5

This brings the front of the bike over (5) and up, and as he continues to spring up,



6

he brings the back of the bike underneath him (6+7),



7

hopping it up and sideways at the same time.





## CUTTIES

(not essentially a pure trials skill, but nevertheless useful)

**WHAT IS IT?** A turn that just allows the back wheel to lose grip and drift gently (without locking it with the back brake).

How is it useful on the trail? Allows you to turn as sharply as your speed allows

**WHY DO IT?** Develops an awareness of the grip point/limitations of the tyres, develops balance and the ability/confidence to lean the bike over.

**PROGRESSION:** Start with wider turns and put your foot down if you feel the need. Gradually increase the speed you take into the turn, or decrease the turn radius (tighter turn) and push with both legs not putting your foot down.

### HOW TO DO IT:

Ride along in a straight line and then turn as tight a corner as you can. Gradually make the turn tighter, and lean the bike over more into the turn. At the same time try to keep your weight through

the frame by weighting your outside foot, but keep your weight as forward as possible to unweight the rear wheel and let it slide. As you get to a particular point and angle, you will need to put out your foot as the bike will lose traction and slip from underneath you. The idea is to get as close to the slip stage as possible for the fastest cornering. If you want to progress further, you can try getting the bike slipping sideways, and then forcing more weight back and down through the outside foot so you gain grip and stop the slide without putting your foot down. If you can perfect this, try it on a loamy/loose trail and you'll make some big roost – just like all the top free-riders do in their edits!

So, these are four basic trials type skills that you can introduce to stretch more able students during your session. Of course, they can also develop your riding ability, so you can get more out of the trail, and go even faster! In part 2 we'll look at the more advanced skills involving getting/riding with one wheel off the ground.

Part 2 will follow in a future issue of Horizons. ■



### References

1. Bloom, B. S., 1956 Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals, 1st ed. Harlow, Essex, England: Longman Group
2. French, G. 2014 Does mountain biking have a place in multi-activity programmes? Horizons 61 pp8-11
3. Mountain bike trials or street trials are a largely urban offshoot of mountain biking and BMX utilising balance and precise bike control to perform tricks, ride narrow or difficult terrain with large step ups, step downs or gaps. Trials riding usually takes place in an urban or man-made environment, and has a competitive element. Trials riding has been brought to popular attention by the likes of Red Bull athletes such as Danny MacAskill and his various viral edits.
4. Danny MacAskill/ Dave Sowerby 2009 Inspired Bicycles - Danny MacAskill April 2009 available at: <https://youtu.be/Z19zFIPah-o>
5. French, G. (2017) The mountain bike leader's handbook Independently published via Blurb/Lightning source: Milton Keynes (available through Amazon.co.uk or direct from Blurb.co.uk)
6. Anthill films 2015 An UnReal dirt blizzard available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FefcH8IQhFE>



### About the author

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course at Bangor University, and tutor to the Outdoor Activities PGCE group. He is a keen mountain biker and paddler and is the author of the recently published 'The Mountain Bike Leader's Handbook'.