



Mountain Biking ... A Relic of the Past or the Key to the Future



DON'T you just love mountain biking?

I do, I love it.

by
Rich Martin

Mountain bikes have been around just

about as long as I have been in the outdoors (12yrs). In that time the Mountain bike has, like it's rider, had many ups and downs.

Initially, they were welcomed with open arms; after all, everyone loves a new piece of expensive shiny kit.

All you needed in those days was a ML & First Aid ticket and you were off. Then things started to go a little wrong. Punctures, buckled wheels, broken rear derailleur; not to mention countless trips to casualty and then to top it all off: expensive repairs and maintenance bills. It didn't take long for the shine to quite literally wear off and for this expensive new outdoor activity to, like the bikes, be quietly forgotten about and placed in storage behind all the other irreparable outdoor gear that all centres accumulate.

The cost was one aspect that no centre manager liked. Especially when you compare the annual costs of kayaks and canoes and steel karabiners. But the issue that really didn't help was the hits on the accident/incident book. Now that really did hurt, literally. Page after page of incidents all related to the lovely mountain bike.

They say you only get one chance to make a first impression. With regards to MTBs for the majority of centres it was *"well we've tried it but no thanks, maybe later."*

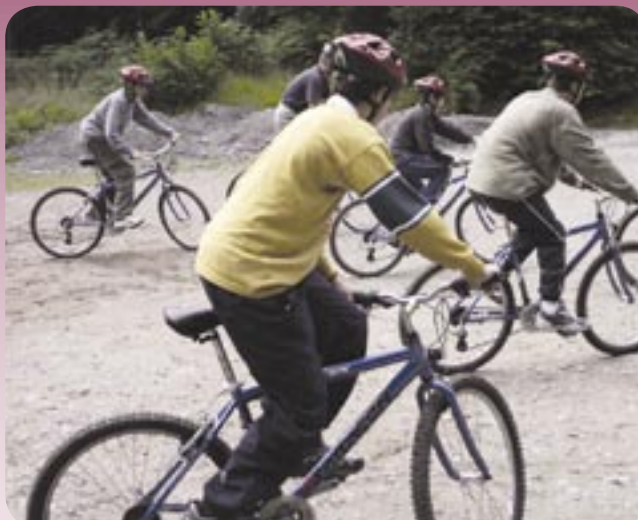
Time is a great healer. Indeed, time waits for no one and, like anything good, you can't keep a good thing down.

I am pleased to announce therefore that mountain bikes are back; not that they ever went away but they are back, and back to stay, and about time.

Before we move forward, let's revisit the past with that wonderful gift: hindsight. If you consider our transferability of skills, what happened in the early days of centre mountain biking sessions that caused such a tremendous hit on our incident/accident was, I believe,

equivalent to taking a novice group of paddlers down a grade 4 rapid within 2 hours of being introduced to the boat.

No wonder we got so many accidents. Ask most young people today to not think but act instinctively and put the hand up in the air that pulls the front brake and 40% of them will get it wrong. It's the right hand for those that don't know. But think about all those steep slopes we sent them down and many not even knowing that useful piece of info.



Currently, AALA recognise 34 bike awards. I haven't a bad word to say about any of them simply because they were introduced because people were aware that having an ML simply just wasn't good enough. You needed to know not just about navigation but equally important issues like coaching of uphill and down hill techniques/ cornering/ track stands/ bike repairs. Nasmith's Rule goes out of the window when you are climbing or descending on a bike.

As a Qualified Scottish Mountain Bike Leader Association Tutor (SMBLA), governed by British Cycling, I write with an abundance of enthusiasm, authority and experience (having once managed 4,500 MTBs).

Our collective first impression of *'Mountain biking weren't great'* was not totally unfounded. But Mountain biking has evolved. It is better understood, better qualified and waiting for others to get back on their bikes.

In my experience mountain bikes have a huge role to play in outdoor education. Think about it. After a week long outdoor course, which piece of outdoor equipment is easily accessible to that young person. Kayak, Sailboat, Climbing wall, or bike?

Although the wall may get close, the vast majority of young people have access to bikes.

We already know the benefits of cycling and I am sure most of you would agree that the more exercise young people get, the better.

So, please, if you have had a love/hate relationship or perception with mountain biking then please think again.

In time not only have bikes got better, more economical and robust but so have the NGB awards such as the SMBLA Trail Cycle Leader(TCL) award which allows you to take groups up to 600m. Then there is the Mountain Bike Leader Award (MBL) which could get you anywhere; even Everest if you wish.





For those of you who do decide to get back on your bikes, here's a brief session plan I use:

- Issue bikes & helmets & safety glasses (90p each)
- Standing everyone side by side off their bikes do the following checks:
- Adjust seat to correct height (pedal/bum)
- Do brake quiz, asking which is front & rear
- Pulling both brakes, walk forward (back wheel should lift) then walk backwards (front should lift). This indicates how good their brakes are working.
- Next stand with front wheel between legs and "wrestle" handlebars to make sure handlebars are secure.
- Then check cranks are tight and wheel cones are tight. (Prevention is better than cure. It's easier to adjust at the centre where the big tools are than deal with what could become a much bigger one out on the fells.)
- Finally, explain/discuss/demonstrate how gears are used.
- It is also worth mentioning that brakes have improved and that the new V-brake system are much more powerful and responsive.
- After the initial bike check I get the group to ride around a level piece of ground, gently spinning wheels "playing" with the gears and familiarising themselves with the brakes.

Finally, before setting off on the easy terrain (Grade 1 or 2 equivalent for those paddlers) I have a race, not a reckless aggressive speed competition but a race that is really good fun for both you and the group that gives you a really good indicator as to what skill level you have to work with. A **slow bike race**, where the last person to finish wins is new to most young people. It demonstrates to the group how important balance is and normally the person with the best balance comes last and wins. It gives you a good indicator of what skill level your group has without having to send them down a big hill.

- I then proceed with my group on a lap or two of a small circuit watching again how they are riding.
- After these initial laps I then go on a journey that is a suitable off-road experience for the group.

So what's stopping you? Get some training, get qualified and enjoy bringing mountain biking back to the future. ■



KEY NOTES

There are some 30+ different organisations which offer mountain biking courses for various terrains. Here are a few key contacts:

British Cycling Federation

Tel. 0161 230 2301
coaching@bcf.com.uk

Mountain Bike Instructors Award Scheme

Tel. 0421 628 114
mias@bikerider.co.uk

Off-Road Training Consultancy

Tel. 0114 231 0240
enquiries@otc.org.uk

Scottish Cyclists Union

Tel. 0131 652 0187
scottish.cvcling@btinternet.com

CyclewiseTraining

Tel. 01768 898775
rich@cyclewisetraining.co.uk

Author Notes

Rich Martin has lived & worked in the Lake District for the past 12 years. In that time he has been employed by several local Education Authority outdoor centres. He now manages CyclewiseTraining along with Craig Scott. They are each fully qualified SMBLA Tutor's. They specialise in qualifying Trail Cycle & Mountain bike leaders and offer consultation in all areas of cycling.

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Photo info.
All taken by the author.