

Balance

Photography by Graeme Murray

Welcome to our first Skills feature in what will be a regular series from now on. In each issue we'll show you core riding techniques that will help improve your riding whether you've been mountain biking for years or are a complete novice. Even the top pros employ coaches to hone their skills; so for any recreational rider or racer having someone evaluate your riding to identify areas where your technique can be adjusted pays big dividends in your riding skills and confidence. And riding with more confidence will ultimately be a more enjoyable experience.

The reason that we harp on about balance is that the art of bicycle riding is a fine balance of weight between the ground and your two points of contact, these being your wheels. If you are unbalanced, any movement away from riding upright in a straight line will result in an unwanted loss of traction. In simple terms, if you are positioned too far forward your rear wheel will be unweighted and you are likely to have your front wheel dig in around corners and cross-up sending you over the bars.

A much more common occurrence is a rider's weight being positioned too far back. There seems to be a misconception out there that to ride a downhill section you need to get all of your weight over the back wheel to stop yourself from tipping over the bars. This actually results in the front wheel being unweighted and sledging in corners. As you probably are very aware, having your front wheel slide while your back wheel stays in traction is not a very cool feeling. For anyone who wants to learn, or already does jump, this is also REALLY important. Landing sideways, too far on the front wheel or 'candle-sticked' (doing a wheelie down the landing with the front wheel in the air), are all mainly caused by poor balance. Having a high front end also makes it more difficult to sprint as you cannot get your weight over the bike and drive down into the pedals.



STEM LENGTH AND HEIGHT: Usually the best place to start is the front end. Sit on your bike with your hands resting on the handlebars. What you are aiming for is a nice relaxed kink in your arms, too straight and you won't have room for adjustment in technical sections. Altering the stem length will achieve the right kink in your arms. Some riders believe they need a long stem to keep their weight forward when climbing, however if you are interested in an all round fun riding experience and want to climb and descend well, a little bit of compromise is required. Moving the seat forward will also achieve a similar result, but at the extremes it can upset your pedalling efficiency.

By changing the position of the stem spacers you can achieve a better weight balance between the wheels by raising or lowering the overall handlebar height. This can also be achieved by using a stem of a different rise or a handlebar with a higher or lower rise. You'll notice Gabby has a relaxed bend to her arms achieved by using a shorter stem and running the stem spacers on top of the stem.

SEAT HEIGHT: Adjusting the seat position up/down/forward and back will help get your weight centred. Choose a seat height that will provide a good compromise between climbing efficiency and descending confidence. Often an inch below what would be considered the optimum pedalling efficiency height is about right.

LEVER POSITION: The ideal brake lever angle allows a straight line from your elbow through your wrist and down your finger. One finger braking will help with brake modulation and bike control as you will have more fingers on the bars where they belong. Adjust the brake position on the bars for the optimum leverage with your forefinger and leave the bolts just loose enough that they slide around the bar instead of snapping off (in case you collect a couple of trees before the issue when we deal with cornering.) You may find it a little harder to reach your shifters, but you brake a lot more often than you shift gears so decide which one is more important.

SUSPENSION SET-UP: Take the time to become familiar with your bike's fork and shock (for those with rear suspension) manuals and then spend some time making adjustments starting with the sag. 1/3 of your bike's travel is the rough rule of thumb, but depending on the type of bike you ride it can vary between 25-40% of the travel. Once the sag is set correctly move onto the other settings including compression and rebound. At the end of the day, your suspension set-up won't override bad technique but it goes a long way to helping your bike feel and ride like it should.

BALANCE POINT: Now for a slightly more time consuming exercise. Because you are used to the way your bike feels it is very difficult to know if it is unbalanced. The easiest way to FEEL this is to ride around standing up on the pedals; try moving your weight forward over the bars until you feel your weight pushing on the bars, then move back until you can feel all of your weight on your pedals and you're having to hold on quite tightly to stop from falling off the back. Now try moving forwards and backwards until you feel the point where you could almost let go with your hands and all of your weight is on your pedals. This is your balance gauging exercise.

A good place to try out the different adjustments is in your driveway. Try sprinting in a straight line, and making some corners, if you make all of the changes at once it will feel pretty weird, so try one at a time in small increments and stick with it.

JAMES 'DODZY' DODDS AND GABBY MOLLOY RUN MTB SKILLS CLINICS AT SITES AROUND THE COUNTRY. THE CLINICS ARE AIMED AT ALL LEVELS OF RIDERS AND THEY CATER FOR GROUPS OR INDIVIDUAL TUITION CAN BE ARRANGED. CHECK OUT THEIR WEBSITE FOR MORE INFORMATION.

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