



Words by Carl Patton
Photography by www.cycle-photos.com

Taking a mountain bike skills course is something I thought would only be a good idea either for beginners to learn the basics, like braking and leaning back when the trail is steep. You know, easy stuff for the newbie mountain biker. Or maybe an advanced skills course would be good to learn some fancy tricks like manualing or improving your jumping. I pictured that course being full of stupidly fast teenagers wearing improbably low-slung shorts. But since attending a MTB Skills Clinic's 'phundamentals' course I've adjusted my thinking somewhat.

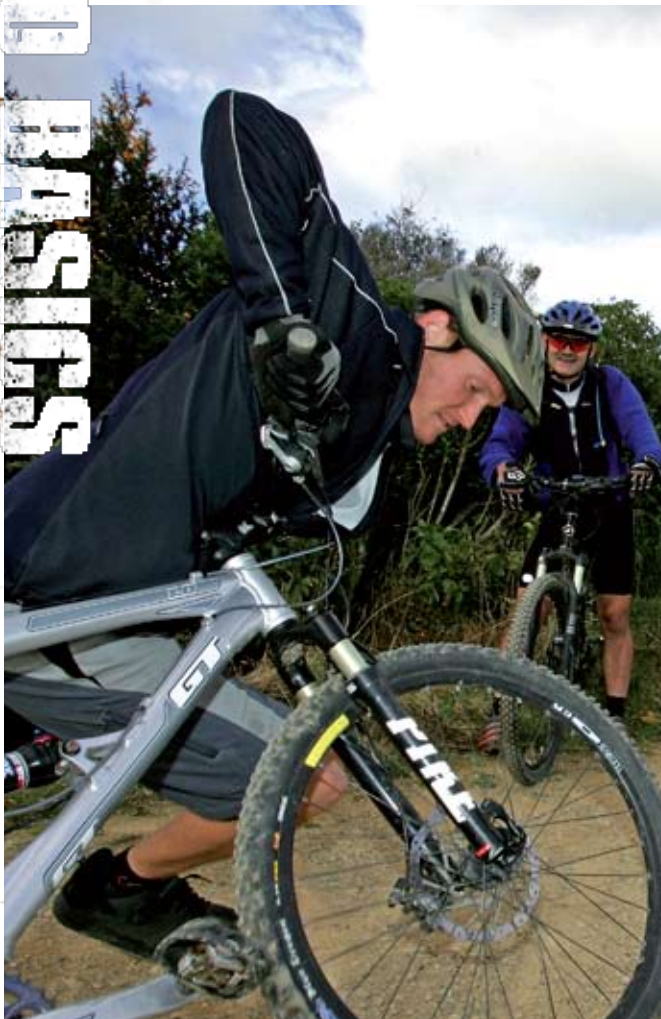
James Dodds (Dodzy) and Gabby Molloy have been running their MTB Skills Clinics for over two years, and they now offer three courses: phundamentals; advanced; and trailmaster. All the courses are focused on improving your abilities in the downhill parts rather than the uphill parts of your riding. I chose the 'phundamentals' clinic, despite feeling like I would probably know the basics and that it would just be a bit of a reminder before I took the advanced course. While I'll never be a gap-jumper or a garage-roof-hucker, I've been riding mountain bikes

for over 18 years, done my fair share of racing, and biked in various parts of the world on all different sorts of terrain, so I considered myself a pretty good biker. Nevertheless, I knew there were some particular aspects of my riding that I felt could be improved, like high speed corners on loose ground. Occasional misdirected efforts on my behalf over the years had failed to fix such shortcomings, so I figured expert tuition on these particular aspects could be the solution I needed. But Dodzy and Gabby were adamant that I should do the phundamentals course first and not try to jump straight into an advanced course: "lot's of riders think they know the basics and think they should just skip the phundamentals course, but without the basics, you won't get the benefits of the advanced course, trust us, you'll learn something!"

Friday 10am rolled around and as usual I was rushing to make it on time. Fortunately it was a beautiful crisp Wellington morning and 'Deliverance' track lay between me and the clinic's rendezvous point near Makara Peak MTB Park. Arriving in the nick

> The author puts theory into practice under Gabby's watchful eye.

SKILLS CLINIC



of time, I met the rest of my fellow course attendees, or phundamentalists, if you will. We were a diverse bunch, ranging in age from 16 to 60 and with mountain bike histories as short as 10 weeks, and as long as 20 years. Some were on basic hardtails, some were on swanky new full-sussers, but we had all come to become better riders, and of course hopefully to kick our friends' asses when next on the trails.

Following a quick check of our bikes involving a few minor adjustments to seat positions and brake levers, Gabby and Dodzy had us roll down a gradually sloping paved hill and watched us sweep back and forth across the road. The sweeping exercise gave our instructors an idea of how we balance ourselves on the bike, highlighting any traits we might need corrected.

Having demonstrated our natural riding tendencies, we moved on to the essence of the course: balance. It was explained that our balance on the bike is determined by body position, which was basically broken down into 'forward and back position', and 'up and down position'. Could it be so simple? Apparently there is no secret cornering technique or special way to hold our tongues behind improving our riding skills. Instead, as Gabby explained "everything else about our riding flows from our balance. If your body position and balance isn't right, it just doesn't matter whether you try to apex the corner or feather your brakes just right, you'll never reach your potential without getting your basic balance sorted out".

Rather than go into detail about the positioning, it's more effective to let the pictures speak. I'll just say that the position emphasised a low centre of gravity, and a somewhat more forward body position than my usual riding

position. As Gabby said "leaning up against a wall practicing it you'll look like a twat, but on the trail it works". We duly adopted the pose under watchful eyes. Even at this early stage, with heads and bodies lowered, elbows wide, and bums sticking out, the group's new riding style looked somehow more in control.

One of the key flow-on effects of having proper front to back balance is having a front tyre that grips the ground effectively and it was here that a great myth of bike control was busted that many of us know well and practice frequently – that you should lean back if the trail points downhill or if you feel out of your depth. As Dodzy explained, "while there is a place for leaning back off the bike, the problem is that it's easy to lean too far back, and then your front wheel has no grip. This means your front wheel is likely to slip out when you try to turn, added to which when there is too much weight on the back wheel, so it won't want to let the bike turn either – so you end up in a tricky steep section unable to turn, and obviously this means you've got a good chance of crashing". This particular scenario was uncomfortably familiar to me, and I could tell from the nodding heads that I wasn't alone.

Dodzy and Gabby are both very talented riders, having both been at the top of their game in downhill in New Zealand, but more than that, they're both excellent instructors who were able to communicate and pass on their skills to our diverse group. The clinic was very interactive and we spent a good portion of the course observing each other ride and discussing how our usual ways of riding a particular corner differed from the way we do it with the new body position. This is one of the advantages of attending a course – unlike reading about skills in a book, a course comes complete with real dirt, tyres, and riders.

After practicing the basic balance and position techniques through several corners we were split into two smaller groups based on experience. The practice was the same for both groups: use our new skills on trails that we would ride on a normal day in the saddle. My



group headed up to the new Ridgeline Extension in Makara Peak to tackle a couple of tricky rocky and rooty corners – the sort of thing that had our 'lean off the back' reflexes kicking in. It took some will to stay forward and keep weight on the front wheel. But it was worth the effort instantly. After his first attempt using his new body position, David railed the tricky corner and exclaimed "I just can't believe how much grip the front wheel can get!" I had a similar experience and noticed how the back end of my bike was happier to turn the corner and was able to break free in a controlled way while the front end stayed planted – a good feeling. After much patting ourselves on the back we headed down for a final run and re-grouped to hear similar stories of improvement from the other half of our group. Like Rachel who explained: "I haven't been mountain biking long, so I haven't learnt to throw my weight back if I feel like I'm in trouble, or any other bad habits, so this course was great to learn the right way to ride your bike before I learn any bad habits and they become cemented"

By the end of the course, I was surprised at how quickly such a simple change in position and balance could have an effect on our riding abilities, both for those of us who had gotten stuck in a metaphorical rut with our bad habits, and for riders who hadn't yet had time to develop bad habits. But I suspect it's one of these things that will have an even greater effect as all of us who attended the course spend time practising it on our own trails over the next few months. So in a few months I'll be asking the other phundamentalists who attended the course if and how their riding has improved further, and provide a brief update. Until then, I'll be working to make the new body position my natural riding position and on surprising my riding buddies with a new turn of speed.

Dobies: kiwi for bike shorts

We knew we were on to something that afternoon in 1998 when we saw our first pair of Dobies come off the machine. The happy combination of knit and woven fabrics that has become our trademark product was unique then and remains so today. Before the year was out they had been taken to heart by our little band of customers, shamelessly copied by several competitors, and they had forced us to reconsider our whole business. This is absolutely true: to name this product we hung a piece of paper in the shop and invited suggestions. Who knew that the winning entry (thanks Jake) would become part of our language?



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