



DH for XC

DOWNHILL! The utterance of the word conjures images of tattooed youth flying recklessly down steep inclines in pursuit of scant seconds and adrenaline charged victory. They ride exotic machines, show complete disdain for the beauty of suffering that is cross country, and rip around the country side on motorcycles in the off-season.

What do you care about DH'ers? You're a died in the wool cross country machine! You watch your body fat, eat lots of Carbs & Protein, and max your mileage in pursuit of lactate tolerance. Besides, you say, I'm already fast downhill! Yea, I thought so too...then I started riding with a pro DH'er and I learned a lot! Downhill techniques can be broken into several components, each of which will help you become faster and give you the edge necessary to win in any situation:

1. Vision:

The single most important element of going fast downhill is vision. Where you look, what you process and how you react are all vitally important. First, get your head up! If you like most riders you tend to keep your eyes glued to the trail directly in front of you hoping to spot and avoid any impending disasters. Instead try raising your head and looking further down the trail. Depending on speed and conditions you want to focus 40-80 feet in front of your bike. From this base you can then use your peripheral vision to briefly scan the trail to spot potential hazards. If your looking far enough ahead you should see any major problems far enough in advance to make corrections.

2. Body Position:

Most XC riders are far too passive in their approach to DH technique. They keep their weight back and hope for the best. My DH guru is a huge proponent of keeping your weight neutral, or slightly forward on the bike, and being the one in control. By consciously bending your elbows and sliding forward slightly you adopt a more aggressive and controlled stance on the bike. At the same time you want to elevate your head and shoulders so that you can see what's going on around you better. Pedal position is another area that riders struggle with. Having your feet at 9 O'clock and 3 O'clock is the most common and most controllable position to be in. For corners you want the inside leg up, the outside leg weighted and straight. If you normally ride with your right foot forward (i.e. at 3 O'clock) on descents then try riding with your left foot forward sometimes. It's the same theory as dribbling a basketball with both hands. The more comfortable and balanced you are on both sides the better your technique and speed will be.





3. Braking:

Braking is a love/hate relationship. Love because they set your speed for corners and, inevitably, save your butt during a ride. Hate because they scrub off speed, cause handling errors if applied incorrectly and sometimes spit you off the bike real hard!

My first recommendation is spend time getting comfortable with how hard your front brake stops. V-Brakes and Discs have tremendous stopping power. Do you know how to get the most out of them? If not experiment on familiar trails to find the point of optimal braking.



Secondly....NEVER* apply the brakes in a corner! This is the most common mistake made by riders. Set your corner speed before you get there. If your braking in a corner you are losing time and losing control. You also want to practice sliding the front and rear wheels in corners. Your bike will "hook up" differently under hard braking and it's important to find the limits of traction and control before you get into trouble.

The last word on braking for today....When In Doubt Let Er Rip!!!! Staying off the brakes is an acquired skill that will pay huge rewards in the end, plus cleaning a tough section with no brakes feels awesome!

*Ok – never is not quite right. With time you'll develop ample skill at feathering the brakes in corners, but that's a whole different article

4. Finding The Zone:

Downhill requires intense concentration and focus. Like all aspects of sport the psychological component is as important as the physical one. When you get to the top of the climb, take a deep breath and reset your head for the downhill.

I'll often have riders repeat a phrase that they associate with a fun training ride...."Catch em", "Go" or even "Breath" work great for keeping a rider in the right place mentally. You want to push yourself, but in order to win the race you need to finish the race! By finding the right focus you will increase your performance and enjoyment while decreasing the risk of accident and injury. Absently flying down a trail is a sure fire way to end up with a spectacular "Get Off" story for your friends. Instead look at the experience as one of fun and accomplishment. I guarantee that if you are having fun, clicking off turns and finding the fastest way down will be much easier.



5. Picking Lines:

This is really an extension of vision. Being able to "see" the best way through a challenging section is hard to define. If you have the opportunity to pre-ride the course it will help your line selection tremendously. During your pre-ride stop and examine difficult sections, ride them with different lines and see what works best.

Many times carrying speed through a corner requires you to change a traditional outside-inside-outside line to something more aggressive. Try lines that are completely different from the established ones. Perhaps there is an advantage to be found that your cross country brethren have missed with their limited vision!



Work with these techniques to improve your downhill. If you have the opportunity to ride with some local DH'ers, give it a shot. They are actually nice, fun loving folks who are happy to teach you, and learn from you too. Who knows you may find that you want to give downhill racing a try sometime. It's a great way to develop into a complete rider and have a gas at the same time!