



Getting it right on the 'nursery slope' makes it easier later



The attack position: off the saddle, weight back, heels down



Bike set up, including brake lever orientation, is the first lesson

Skills School

Training is the best way to improve mountain bike skills or learn the basics. **Victoria Hazael** went on a CTC-accredited course with **Kathie Clark** and **Julie Rand**



Kathie puts it into practice on a proper slope



All photos: Chris Juden

Steep singletrack twisted down the slope through the Surrey Hills' winter trees. To someone who had never ridden an off-road trail until that day – someone like long-time road rider Kathie – it would look daunting. Yet there she was, descending confidently. Behind her rode mountain bike instructor Richard Kelly, offering encouragement and advice on the best line to ride.

Kathie was on the 'skills builder' course run by Richard, a CTC-accredited instructor and owner of All Biked Up – Surrey Hills, an off-road skills and guiding company based in Holmbury St Mary, near Dorking. His other clients that day were Julie Rand and me, Victoria Hazael. All three of us went into the course with differing levels of ability and experience. After just two hours' tuition, we had all gained new skills and confidence.

Mountain bike training, like on road tuition, can benefit every type of rider, even the most experienced. Until fairly recently, skills training was not widespread. CTC is working hard to train more instructors and to help more mountain bikers throughout the country.

Get more from your MTB

'No one decides to go skiing and heads to the top of the mountain and tries to work it out for themselves,' said Richard, who has been teaching CTC's courses for several years. 'Too many mountain bikers take this approach. Although they may get by, they'll suffer the consequences of poor technique or a lack of understanding at some point. This will hold them back or result in an absolute loss of confidence at some stage.'

It's easy to overlook off-road training, either because you've been riding off-road for years or because you hadn't considered having a go at mountain biking. Yet CTC's skills programme works in a similar way to skiing tuition, with different levels of instruction for different participants. It starts with basic body positioning, braking, cornering technique and descending and progresses, for the more adventurous, through to jumps and drops. What makes it unique is the philosophy behind it, which has been developed over a decade by Ian Warby, CTC's Senior Off-Road Officer.

How it works

CTC's off-road training is based around three core elements: the personal (the rider and his or her equipment); the psychological (the rider's feelings of control, confidence, concentration and commitment); and the physical (the way in which the rider actually controls the bike through footwork, body position, looking, speed control and energy management).

Your ability to ride a given section of trail may also be influenced by less obvious external factors. These are known as performance cues. By acknowledging them and managing them correctly, trainees are taught to overcome any fears and ride more smoothly and confidently than before. These cues are divided into three types: visual, input and anticipation.

We were given a printout with all this information on at the start of the session. Yet on the day the course was very much a practical one with a high level of instructor feedback and one-to-one tuition. It was all about getting out on the trails and having fun, not listening to a long lecture in the car park. We got to ride our bikes pretty much the whole time.

To begin with we rode to a fairly flat section of track to practise the core

FEEDBACK: Kathie Clark

ABILITY: Complete beginner

BIKE: Commençal Combi Disc – hired from Surrey Hills Bike Tours

HERE BECAUSE: I've ridden road bikes for years and bought a mountain bike without giving any thought to the different type of riding needed for off-road terrain. I didn't have any fears until faced with mud, logs, gravel and a steep slope and then I didn't know where to start!

INSTRUCTOR'S ASSESSMENT: Techniques instilled during many hours on road are in many cases not compatible with off-road riding. It isn't 'just like riding a bike' so when the transition is made the techniques employed on road may actually hinder off-road riding.

By the end of the session Kathie was riding with a confident and relaxed flow. During descents Kathie kept her pedals level, heels dropped and head up. Looking far down the trail to give herself the time to deal with upcoming obstacles and trusting her peripheral vision more, Kathie let her bike roll more freely and used the brakes for control rather than comfort. The final descent involved a long section of off-camber roots that Kathie dealt with like a seasoned mountain biker. The little stop half way down to gather her thoughts was controlled rather than panicked.

Overall, Kathie made enormous leaps forward in her riding in a very short space of time. The techniques she learned will soon become part of her sub-conscious riding. As Kathie starts to 'do' more and 'think' less, the benefits of best practice will allow her to ride with even more relaxed confidence. As the boundaries of her comfort zone extend, Kathie will take this same level of confidence into more and more technical terrain.

KATHIE'S VERDICT: This course provided everything I wanted from training, pushing me beyond my comfort zone to achieve more skills than I thought possible. It also gave me a good knowledge of the area so that I can return in my own time and tackle the terrain.



Cornering with the outside foot down helps balance



Richard shadows Victoria on a section of singletrack



FEEDBACK: Victoria Hazael

ABILITY: Novice

BIKE: Specialized ERA FSR Comp (WSD)

HERE BECAUSE: I've been riding off-road more and more and want to progress from my 'hope for the best' approach to drops and descents. I know that my confidence and level of skills are holding me back.

INSTRUCTOR'S ASSESSMENT: Victoria was a little more experienced in terms of hours in the saddle (this being part of the problem – on a mountain bike you should be out of the saddle a lot of the time). Her riding style displayed many 'flight' based responses – often apparent in riders who are happy, usually with a partner's coercion, to give mountain biking a go.

Riders with more hours in the saddle often take longer to 'reprogramme' as it is a case of unlearning bad habits first. By the end of the session Victoria was aware when she was slipping out of the comfort zone and when she was starting to display poor technique. A little mantra of 'footwork, looking, body position' when the going gets tough will remind her of what to do and how to do it. Great improvements were apparent even after our short session.

VICTORIA'S VERDICT: The course for me was an excellent experience that built my confidence and taught me techniques that have already improved my riding. During the session I found it hard not to revert back to my normal riding style but I'm sure with time and practice this course will enable me to ride better trails and keep up with my husband, who's been mountain biking for years.

body position for attacking a trail. With weight right back off the saddle, head up and eyes looking straight ahead, we learned to keep the pedals level and our heels down. Handlebars, we were told, were not for leaning on and balancing but for pushing our weight backwards, pulling it forwards and low-speed steering. To prove this point, Richard then had us riding with our hands in the air like circus performers. Next came controlled braking techniques, where we learned to shift our weight and lower our heels to dig our tyres firmly into the ground to stop more quickly.

Practice makes perfect

One of the key skills for mountain biking, which you seldom require on road, is the ability to ride over lumps and bumps in your path. Richard collected a pile of logs. We learned to roll over them by relaxing both arms, keeping momentum and looking as far ahead as possible, rather than tensing up and anticipating a potential hazard.

“No one goes skiing and heads to the top of the mountain and tries to work it out for themselves”

As the more experienced rider, Julie was given the trickier task of raising the front wheel over the obstacle by keeping her weight back and pushing the bars away from her – rather than attempting to simply pull them up. Mountain bikers call this manoeuvre a manual. In the jargon of the course, it is known as 'managing the energy input from the trail'. It is a technique that can be used by any rider, regardless of physical strength.

'I had previously tried many times to lift the front wheel by pushing down on the bars,' said Julie, 'but I had never been very successful at it. Now I can impress my 14-year old son with my new technique.'

We progressed to cornering, which involves far more than just turning your handlebars in vaguely the right direction. Richard explained how, unlike road cyclists who tend naturally to look way ahead, mountain bikers are tempted to look at the trail surface just ahead of the front wheel. We should, he said, resist that temptation and look as far ahead as possible. We also practised dropping the outside pedal and loading it with our weight while turning. By the end of the session, all of us were turning the corner with tight racing lines rather than veering off wildly into the holly bushes.

Next it was time to put all these core elements into practice and to attempt a bit of flowing singletrack on a route known locally as Telegraph Road. Julie had ridden this trail a few times and felt a bit nervous for Kathie and me as she knew there were some tight turns ahead. However, all of us



Julie's manual: this doesn't depend on jerking the bars

came out the other side in one piece, keen to practise the section again. We did, with Richard encouraging us all to try to use the brakes sparingly – for control, not comfort.

New skills, new thrills

Lastly, we rode to the lookout at Holmbury Hill – sadly overcast, but still a picturesque place for our last two challenges: a steep swoop with a cloggy mud patch at the bottom; and a steep descent back to where we started.

Richard explained what was ahead and encouraged us all to give it a go. We emerged grinning and triumphant at the bottom.

'I would never have believed that I could ride over logs, hurtle down singletrack or a swoop at speed on a mountain bike,' said Kathie. 'But I really enjoyed doing all three.'

We all agreed that whatever our initial level of experience at the beginning, we had all considerably improved from our carefully structured tuition. Richard explained: 'Training is important as it allows riders to learn through best practice rather than by their mistakes. A rider receiving the correct instruction will not only know "how to" but, importantly, "why to".'

'The CTC system we use is as important to novice riders as it is to elite athletes. Learning by succeeding on terrain matched to ability will instill confidence. Throwing yourself in at the deep end may get you a huge rush of adrenalin but won't make you smoother, faster or more confident in the long run.'

You can sign up for a FREE session of CTC off-road skills training in February, March or April at Specialized and Giant's 'Test the Best' events. For details, see the news story on page 6.



FEEDBACK: Julie Rand

ABILITY: Experienced mountain biker

BIKE: Specialized Stumpjumper FSR Comp

HERE BECAUSE: I hope to become a more confident rider and to fully understand body positioning. I'm concerned that I may have developed a few bad habits over the years.

INSTRUCTOR'S ASSESSMENT: Julie clearly has spent a lot of time off-road and is typical of many more experienced riders that train with us. With Julie it was more a case of tweaking her riding by stripping it back to basics on non-technical terrain before reapplying in more challenging environments.

Her confidence was high so with Julie it was more a case of building her understanding of how the fundamental physical elements can be built up to deal with any scenario. Working on getting her heels down, encouraging more movement around the bike's 'cockpit', tweaking bike set up to promote correct body position, etc. Also developing concepts of under-rotation on the bike and developing her understanding of 'energy management' and applying it.

Ultimately these factors will allow Julie to ride more smoothly, with greater efficiency, using the brakes less and reading the trail further ahead of her.

JULIE'S VERDICT: I've been mountain biking for more years than I care to remember but have never been taught how to do it right. After just a couple of hours of Richard's tuition, I feel much more in control and ready to tackle any obstacles the trail throws at me.

WHERE CAN I GET TRAINED?

CTC-accredited off-road skills training

All Biked Up – Surrey Hills
Holmbury St Mary, Surrey
www.allbikedup.com
07976 353963 / 01306 739387
info@mountain-bike-guiding.co.uk

Big Bear Active
Near Dalby Forest, North Yorks
www.bigbearactive.co.uk
01751 475111

One Planet Adventure
Coed Llandegla Forest, N Wales

www.oneplanetadventure.com
01978 751656
info@oneplanetadventure.co.uk

CycleActive
Lake District, Cumbria
www.cycleactive.co.uk
01768 840400
admin@cycleactive.co.uk

Get A Grip Mountain Biking
Chilterns and Bracknell Forest
www.getagripmountainbiking.co.uk

0781 050 8859 / 01491 682 175
rachel@getagripmountainbiking.co.uk

Surrey Hills All Terrain Mountain Bike tours
As per 'All Biked Up', plus www.mountain-bike-guiding.co.uk

Get Mountain Biking
Bedfordshire and Northants
www.getmountainbiking.co.uk
01604 779040
admin@getmountainbiking.co.uk

Firecrest Mountain Biking
Chilterns and Bedfordshire
www.firecrestmtb.com
07711 638195
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Since acquiring CTC (details in news last issue), CTC also offers off-road leadership training throughout the UK. For more information, visit www.promtb.net and www.ctc.org.uk/mtb, tel: 0844 736 8463, email mtb@ctc.org.uk