



The Finer Points Of Pedaling

Mountain biking at Vail, Colorado. Photo by Jack Affleck.

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By: **Shauna Farnell**



Everything I need to know, I learned on my mountain bike.

As a Colorado native, I have enjoyed traveling on two wheels since I was very small. But I didn't seriously take up mountain biking or understand its profound benefits—both physical and psychological—until I was getting over a breakup in my early 20s. At the time, my mind was incessantly spinning with scenarios that led to the end of the relationship, what I did or didn't do or say. Keyed up as I was with the empty anxiety that comes with any sort of loss, my brain was exhausted by this onslaught of constant analysis.



Trail with a view, Vail, Colorado. Photo by Jack Affleck.

It wasn't until one afternoon of riding off-road—negotiating a slalom course of rocks and roots on the notoriously technical Peaks Trail from Frisco to Breckenridge—that I suddenly realized my mind was no longer awash with emotional turmoil. Pedaling along a narrow, twisting trail requires

pure, simple focus, but doing it successfully involves several simple techniques that are also useful in moving past hard times that transcend the physical.



Every time I went out and pedaled the Peaks or any other singletrack, pushing myself to ride over intimidating obstacles and technical sections I hadn't yet conquered, my heartache faded. I grew to love mountain biking so much that for several years I was a regular in the local Summit County and Vail town race series. Although never a top rider, I relished the competitive spirit of a heaving pack of racers navigating the same skinny trails all at once, strategizing our speed and gear changes, and employing the same set of time-tested fundamentals. There was a solidarity in our efforts that kept my mind, and my



Hitting the trees in Park City, Utah. Photo by Dan Campbell.

heart, wholly occupied.

To this day, every mountain bike ride still brings a unique sense of mental solace. On rough days especially, a pedal on Vail

Mountain—up Lion Down and

down Radio Flyer and Big Mamba—still provides better therapy than any counselor could possibly offer. That pure train of thought takes hold and a shortlist of fundamentals springs to mind, making not only for a successful ride, but also for a smooth path back to a happier mindset.

Here are the basic rules by which to bike—and by which to get you from mental anguish to the top of your game:

1. Don't be daunted by the road to the top. Starting at the bottom—say, the base of Vail Mountain—and wearily contemplating the miles of slogging in your future is not the right approach. Simply concentrate on what lies in your direct line of sight. You'll be surprised how much easier it goes by.

2. That said, always look ahead. Keeping your eyes on the trail about eight feet in front of you will prevent your front wheel from veering off-trail and will make for a smoother ride, particularly around tight switchbacks or tricky-to-navigate terrain.



Getting some air in Keystone, Colorado. Photo by Aaron Dodds.

3. Pace yourself; the journey uphill is slow and steady. Pedaling furiously will wear you out fast. You're not going to break any speed records riding up Vail or any other mountain, so as you're ascending, find a gear in which you're comfortable pedaling at a steady speed, and anticipate your shift to an easier or tougher gear as the trail gets steeper or flatter.

4. Breathe. Take slow, deep breaths. This will regenerate and coax out your inner strength.

5. Don't fixate on barriers. If you stare at the curve of a tight switchback, chances are you'll

pedal right into it and your wheels won't make the turn. Same goes for rocks and roots on the trail. Think beyond the barrier, keep your eyes ahead, anticipate your moves, and your chances of blowing past the tricky parts unscathed will increase.

6. Keep pedaling through obstacles and rough terrain.

Your impulse might be to slow, stop, even look for an easier route when you encounter a rough patch. But you can pedal through more than you think. There is one section of Lion Down in which the trail is full of loose, fist-sized rocks and a few other areas on Big Mamba and Radio Flyer where the trail is very soft and deep around steep downhill switchbacks. If you keep forging ahead, continue your motions, and continue to pedal, you'll be amazed at how your wheels roll right on through.



7. Enjoy the view at the top.

The downhill is so much more rewarding when you acknowledge the work you put in riding up. At Eagle's Nest, take in the panorama of the surrounding peaks, including the majestic Mount of the Holy Cross looming in the distance. Reflect on how far you've come. And let yourself anticipate the joy of the descent.



Pedaling through an aspen grove in Vail, Colorado. Photo by Jack Affleck.



Getting in the groove in Park City, Utah. Photo by Dan Campbell.

8. Keep balanced, especially when charging downhill fast.

Especially on steep sections like those big, sweeping switchbacks on Radio Flyer, your butt should actually be behind the saddle with your feet in a neutral, 50-50 position. This allows gravity to work in your favor and gives you more control of the bike. The downhill is exhilarating and fun—but don't let it steer you off course.

9. Don't slam on the brakes. Ever. It's the perfect recipe for going over the handlebars. If you're looking ahead and see an obstacle coming that you're sure you can't ride over, it's OK to step off the bike or walk through the obstacle. Otherwise, look ahead for smooth parts of the trail where you can lightly tap your brakes to check and control your speed.

10. When you reach the bottom, know the trip back up will be easier next time. Familiarity really does fuel you. You'll know the route, its obstacles, and how to handle them better next time.

11. Get back in the saddle. Of course.

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