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JOURNAL ARTICLES

Bike Control Basics

Part 4: Applying Freestyle Skills

Scott Hagnas

This month, we will up the difficulty of our moves a bit and look into a few useful skills borrowed from BMX freestyle. While you might not need these skills directly when you are riding a trail, the improved bike control

and confidence they impart will pay off. Also, they're just a lot of fun. Expect that these skills might take a little longer to master than some of the ones I've discussed in past months.

Manual



A manual is basically a standing, coasting wheelie. In fact, that is the distinction: if you pedal, it is a wheelie; if you coast, it is a manual. Besides greatly improving your balance and control on your bike, the manual, once perfected, can be used to ride more smoothly through rough terrain. You can also combine it with a bunny hop, hopping onto an object, landing on just the back wheel in a manual, and coasting across it and off without ever setting your front wheel down. Riders have even done manuals down handrails!

To learn, find a smooth, flat area. Bumps or slopes in the practice area will slow down the learning process. Once you become good at manuals, then you can practice them in rough or sloped areas. Roll forward at a medium speed, pedals level and coasting. Lean forward a little, then quickly backward, really getting your butt back over the rear wheel. You will need to pull up on the bars a little as you do. This should lift the front wheel up and bring you near the balance point on your back wheel. You will sort out how much to pull up by a little trial and error. A small bike with a short rear end will pull up easily, longer bikes will take a much more vigorous effort to get up to the balance point. Once you get the manual down on your favorite bike, try it on other types and sizes of bikes to see the difference.

When first trying the manual, to help find the balance point and also to remove the fear of crashing, pull up too hard so that you loop out (fall off of the back). You will just quickly jump off of your pedals as you fall back off of the bike, and land on the ground in a squat. No harm done! Once you see that is all that will happen if you bail, you should be able to proceed with confidence.

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Manual continued

To learn to balance, you will need to learn how to shift your weight. When you initially pull up, keep your legs bent and knees soft. If you find that your front wheel is low and dropping, push your butt back while using your legs to push the bike forward underneath you. If you are starting to lean too far back, pull the front end higher into your body as you try to lean forward. If you've done everything correctly, you will be at your "sweet spot," balanced and rolling forward. You can get to the point where it seems like you are balanced effortlessly. Keep trying, and practice often. You will sometimes lose your balance to the side. You can correct side to side balance, or steer your manual, by leaning the bike (counterintuitively) to the side of your fall.

Try to stay relaxed as you manual, and don't overthink the balancing process. Avoid letting your legs lock

out, as you will not be able to make any significant corrections in balance if you do. I also recommend learning the manual without use of your brakes. You can feather your brake to keep balance, and this is a good skill to have, but you don't want to rely on the brake to keep your balance. Use it to save an overbalanced manual or prevent crashing, but for balance rely on body control.

Put the manual to use by using it to get your front wheel over bumps or rough terrain. Keep the front wheel up, and absorb the bumps with your legs. Try hopping onto objects and manualing them. Learn to bunny hop onto objects directly from a manual.



<http://media.crossfit.com/cf-video/Manuals.wmv>

Rollback or riding fakie

This skill is simply riding your bike—but while rolling backward. A bank like that used for training the kick turn is a great place to learn, but any sloped area will do. Make sure that you have a clear area to practice in, as you won't be able to see where you are going very well. A smooth, flat area makes learning easiest, but it is not essential. I learned this skill ages ago in a bumpy backyard.

Roll up the bank or slope, pedals level. Tap your front brake to do a small endo on the front wheel, as if to do a rocking trackstand. Release the brake and roll backward. The pedals will start to backpedal naturally, so you will need to pedal backward as least as fast as you are actually going. If you are doing this on a bike with multiple gears, a higher gear may make this easier, as you won't have to pedal as fast.

Keep your balance by steering the back end toward the direction that you are leaning. If you fall toward the left, turn your bars to the left; this will steer the back wheel underneath you. Reverse for leans to the right. Stay relaxed. It will come with practice.

Having a freecoaster bike, which does not backpedal, arguably makes this skill easier. However, if you

don't plan on becoming a flatlander or a street rider specializing in fakie tricks, it is not really practical. Pedaling backward as you roll back might actually help you balance.

Once you get the skill down, there are several ways to get out of it. If you are going slowly, the easiest is simply to hit the brakes to stop, then pedal forward. Much smoother is to do a 180 turn out. It will feel similar to doing the kick turn. If you want to 180 out to the left, lean a little to the right side, and steer the back wheel to the right. Pull up and tap your back brake, and you should pivot on your back wheel until you are facing forward. A smoother way yet is to not use the brake at all. Do as before, but stop backpedaling and apply forward pedal pressure—just enough to stop the back wheel from rolling backward, but not enough to actually roll forward. You'll spin around as if you had applied the brake; then you can pedal forward to smoothly set down the front end.



<http://media.crossfit.com/cf-video/Rollbacks.wmv>

Kickturn

The kick turn is one of the oldest freestyle skills in existence, and learning it will really help your turn control. You will need to find a bank or slope to learn this one. An asphalt bank like you'd find in some parking lots works well, or any dirt bank in the outdoors. A slope of about 30 to 40 degrees will be easiest to learn on. Shallower banks will make the skill a bit more difficult, as much of the turn will have to come from body english, while steeper banks might be easier, as gravity makes the turn quicker. However, this has the downside of having everything happen quickly and making crashing more likely. Stick to the moderate bank at first, and then take the skill to all types of banks and slopes. Also, don't forget to learn this skill turning in both directions.

Roll up the bank with your pedals level. Carve into the turn while leaning back and pulling up on the bars. This will feel like a manual. In fact, on a shallow bank you will need to actually do a short manual to get to your pivot point. As you reach your balance point over the back wheel, lock the brake and pivot on your rear wheel. To get a better pivot on the back wheel, torque your body into the turn to help muscle the bike around. If you've done everything correctly,



you should have turned 180 degrees and be facing back down the bank. Smoothly set your front wheel down, release the brake, and ride down the bank.

Kick turns are also possible without using the brakes. Pull up to the balance point, then use forward pedal pressure to keep the wheel from rolling backward. Once you have pivoted around, just make sure that you lean forward enough to bring the front wheel down.



<http://media.crossfit.com/cf-video/Kickturns.wmv>

Combinations

Try combining these skills together, or with the ones described in my previous articles. For example, you could rollback to 180 and then keep the front end up into a manual. Manual up a bank, do a kick turn, manual back down. Drop off of a curb, land into a manual. Or bunny hop with a 180 turn so that you land into a rollback. The sky is the limit.

I have intentionally shown the simplest versions of all these skills so that you could see that they are approachable to almost anyone, not just BMX/flatland devotees. Working these kinds of skills will increase your skill on any bike in any context, and improving your abilities on a bike will also transfer to better body control and balance off the bike. So get out and ride!

Scott Hagnas is owner of [CrossFit Portland](#). He is certified as a CrossFit trainer and Circular Strength Training (clubbell training) instructor. He has been riding BMX flatland for 26 years and counting and has filmed/produced/edited several series of BMX videos. He formerly competed in bicycle trials, placing second in amateur in the World Championships in 1990. When not training or riding, Scott can usually be found in the kitchen cooking up Paleo-style meals.