

TRAIL SKILLS

SIT WITH ATTITUDE

With John Nick

I hear it often, especially from hikers and mountain bikers: 'Of course riding that dirt of yours takes no effort, not like my push bike, you just sit there and that noisy engine does all the work'. Yeah right, if riding a dirt bike is cheating on physical effort.

Make no mistake, there is a big difference between plonking your arse on a couch and the sort of effort I'm thinking of. As with the dynamic standing positions, in the seated attack position, the rider gets active and gets weight over the all-important steering pivot of the bike. This means largely abandoning the back of the seat except for very easy trails and roads.

Sitting to turn

Much of your active seated time on trails will be spent accelerating on smooth to medium bumpy ground, or cornering on relatively smooth ground. Unlike the MX track many NZ trails can be slick clay or grass, without berms. Here we are looking at getting the front to stick in these berm-less situations.

When you hear someone say, "This thing is a bitch to turn," it's no wonder really, we are fighting momentum, trying to get a not inconsiderable mass going in completely different direction, over loose or slippery ground. To make this happen first we need to get the front wheel to track faithfully on the intended path. The rear can have its way to a certain extent, we can even initiate a rear wheel brake or power slide to get a slight sideways attitude to assist the turn, but if the front wheel doesn't go where it's pointed the turn is in trouble before it's begun.

The best way to ensure the front grips in a turn is to get your weight forward on the seat, right up to the fuel cap if necessary. Front wheel braking before the turn transfers weight forward, but to keep it there the rider must be right forward on the seat with head and shoulders as far forward as possible over the steering pivot. To adopt this position you are going to have to get your elbows up and bent, especially the outside elbow. Keep your head and shoulders centralized and upright and lean the bike from side to side to turn or make corrections as the bike moves about. Generally we keep our feet on the pegs as much as possible, but thrusting the inside leg as far forward as possible, just before the apex of the turn further assists weighting the front wheel and doubles as a prop should the tyre slip. As you accelerate get that foot back on the peg.

Sitting to accelerate

Effective acceleration builds speed between turns or the sort of momentum that lets you climb hills that others can't get up. As long as the ground is reasonably smooth and there is good traction best acceleration is achieved seated forward in the attack position, keeping your head and shoulders forward and centralized, and again leaning the bike from side to side to make corrections. Your legs still play a part however, so having both feet up on the pegs and gripping the frame pegs strongly with your boots and knees will help you remain fluid and relax the upper body.

Less than optimum traction finds the need to transfer weight onto the back wheel to get drive and forward momentum. Just straightening the arms can deliver more rear wheel grip. As traction becomes harder to find, sliding back on the seat gets that knobbly hooking

up. Your weight is now a long way back, so be ready to make adjustments if grip dramatically improves.

Practise technique

A good way to practice these skills is to set up a small flat figure 8 track with two 180 degree second gear turns about 30 metres apart. The idea is to compress all the major braking, turning and accelerating skills into a short lap. You will also find this very tiring. Most riders like to start this exercise riding anti-clockwise with the rear brake foot on the outside of the turn.

Ride standing to the entry of turn one in third gear, braking and shifting to second gear while leaning back in the standing attack position. Drop forward into the seated attack position, thrusting your inside leg forward as you do so. Power through the turn, remember, bum and head forward, elbows (especially the outside elbow) up. Push down on the outside foot peg. As you get on the gas lift your inside foot back on the peg. Keep accelerating, shift up a gear and really get on the gas, crossing the figure eight. Get into the standing attack position before you need to brake for turn two. Repeat the process as for turn one. Try to stay relaxed in the arms and also ride the track the opposite .