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Does Riding Off-Road Really Make you a Better Bike Cop? Scenic dirt riding pays off in an urban patrol setting

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As part of our refresher training for the bike unit, let's take a ride together on the Potawatomi Trail. The "Poto," as it is affectionately called by off-road enthusiasts in the Michigan area, consists of 18 miles of hard-core, NORBA-material single-track. It is visited thousands of times during the riding season by mountain bikers from all over the U.S. "Why," your supervisor — or even you — might ask, "should you go for a nice bike ride in a state park as part of your refresher training? Shouldn't you ride some curbs and stairs, or maybe through the local parks? After all, there aren't any off-road trails on your beat!"

Of course you should, but that's not all you should do. Think of your cycling skills as muscles. If you want bigger muscles, you must stress them by lifting heavier weights than the ones to which they are accustomed. The body responds to the added stress by building bigger muscles. And so it is with cycling skills. To improve your general cycling skills, including low speed, high speed, obstacle clearing, unstable surface riding, and shifting efficiency, you must challenge each skill accordingly. What is one of the best ways to do this? Off-road riding, of course.

Let's prep our bicycles for the ride, just as we do for our shift. We fill our water bottles and make sure we have tools and first aid supplies. Won't need that ticket book so leave it in the truck, remove the lights & siren because they just add weight, run through the ABC Quick Check. Swap suggestions with co-workers on which uniform shorts are most comfortable, which gloves serve the best dual-purpose for riding on patrol and searching a suspect, which bike shop is the most helpful.

OK, let's get down to business. We've got our leader and we've got our sweep, both experienced instructors and both carrying two-ways and cell phones. They'll see us through the tour and make sure that we all leave a little more skilled than when we arrived. They will stop at various points along the way to explain certain obstacles and how to tackle them successfully. They'll lead us on the correct path so nobody gets lost. The "caboose" instructor will assist with injuries and mechanicals, and both instructors will monitor individuals, offer specific advice, and stifle frustration through patient coaching. If it's alright with you, we'll hang in the middle somewhere.

Let's warm up with a short uphill. Larry stalls halfway up and has to put his foot down, but not before we hear the sound of the derailleur arguing with the freewheel as it tries to move the chain to a larger cog. Larry is politely coached by the rear instructor on how to maintain his cadence and downshift a little sooner to avoid stalling. The unspoken lesson is that proper shifting will help him avoid ribbing from any riders behind him!

We maneuver through some hairpin turns with lots of tree roots and a sharp 20' drop to the outside. Look down at the roots — briefly — and pick your line of travel quickly, because we need to look ahead to maintain our balance, especially with the potentially painful consequence in that drop-off just 18 inches away! Boy, this reminds me of sneaking down that narrow alley off State Street. Remember? We had to be stealthy as we followed the guy who was walking towards the parking structure. We had to look ahead to avoid the low speed wobble, so our bar ends wouldn't scrape the brick building walls on either side. All that debris, coupled with the concrete step-up, made for a challenging task. Good thing we didn't make noise — we never would have caught him breaking into that car. That arrest cleaned up quite a few car B&E's, didn't it?

OK, next hill. Shift down, push hard and don't stop. Keep the rear wheel weighted but don't lighten the front end too much because it will loft. Don't stop! You'll let your fellow officers down. We made it. Sweet! Boy, that was a thigh-burner! What a boost of confidence. We don't use granny that often but she sure helped us get up that one. Now I know that I can make it up *any* hill while patrolling downtown. I'll deposit that one in my mental bank because I might have to make a withdrawal later, maybe while responding to a medical at the top of the hill on Broadway Street.

Here comes the downhill; looks like a monster! Unlike the last slow and controlled descent, let's let it roll. Let's discover our personal limitations. I'd rather find out here, on the trail with my co-workers, than

during the Ann Arbor Art Fair, in front of 500,000 people! Or worse yet, while pursuing a home invasion suspect! Let's see...it's pretty narrow with dirt banks on either side and some significant drops created by large tree roots, so play it smart. Let's go! Stay light on the front end and flexible in the legs, lift the front end over the drop, again, and one more. Now press the brakes a little bit because there are three or four significant drops in a row and we're picking up a little too much speed.... that's it, keep it under control but stay fluid and push the edge. As they said in *Bicycling* (March 1999), ride like a cat — agile and quick, flexible but strong, reactive but assertive, relaxed but ready to pounce, and *never panic!* Nice job, what a rush! There is not a set of stairs on my beat that I cannot conquer, not even the 60 stairs on the east side of Crisler Arena! That will be my first stop when I call into service tomorrow.

Let's stop and see how the others take *this* log. Good thing we both cleared it; its just like taking curbs at higher speeds downtown, huh? Oh, check this guy out — he is going just a little too fast, and there's a hint of panic in his eyes. Hey, Christopher! Get back a little and ease the brakes! Watch that...ohhhh. That looked like it hurt. Y'allright? Dude, you *almost* cleared it. Uh-oh, you've got a flat. "I'm a police officer, I can help...." Looks like a pinch flat, let's throw in a new tube. Put a little more pressure in your tires next time, you might avoid the pinch. Just like in the bike school when we learned how to ride up stairs in Liberty Plaza — the guys who didn't have enough tire pressure all had flats. Anyway, it looks like you blew out the sidewall. Suggestions anyone? Duct tape on the inside of the tire? Hey, I could have used that last week when I had to call a patrol car to come pick me up. Here's your falling star sticker, bud, put it on your helmet and wear it with pride — you earned that one.

This part of the trail is difficult but pretty fun. The tight, winding turns with trees on either side infringing on the handlebars add to the challenge. Watch the trail and pick the best line through all the roots and rocks, but thread the needle between the trees. Reminds me of the time Ralph's bar end caught the building abutment. Now he knows how to handle *that* urban obstacle; if only he had ridden this trail *before* he earned that star...make sure you're looking and planning ahead. There's not much reaction time with the passing of each apex on the button hook turns. Oops, that root was a little slick and your front tire slipped. Good thing you allowed for just a little extra room, nice job. Have a plan, and have a back-up plan. Look ahead and always pay attention. Hmmm. Just like at work. This is challenging, both physically and mentally. Nobody told me I would have to *think* on this ride, let alone plan ahead under physical and mental stress! Hmmm. Just like at work.

Here's a shallow but steep valley. Allow the proper float; back off the saddle but stay extremely light on the front end as you make the transition from the steep down to the steep up, quickly transition your weight forward and stay over the bike, very nice technique! That looked exactly like Metzger's pursuit, the one that went through the drainage ditch at the University. It's funny how all of this scenic dirt riding can be applied in an urban patrol setting!

We're coming up on the final ascent, and it's just as challenging as the first — only now we've got 17.5 miles, a few scratches and bruises, a couple Power Bars, and two water bottles under our belts. And we're pretty exhausted. C'mon, let's tackle it. Halfway up and is this ever grueling! I don't know if I'm going to make it to the top. It's no longer physical, it's mental. Stay in the fight. Dig deep, don't quit, keep climbing. Find it within yourself to make it to the top. Think of it as a physical altercation on the job, where quitting is not an option. No matter how exhausted you are, draw upon every ounce of physical and mental energy to finish the fight, to make it to the top. Yeah, that's it. It hurts, but it'll feel so good when you make it to the top, when you finally cuff that guy. What a fight! What a win! Nice job everyone, congratulations.

It sure is a nice feeling to be so comfortable with your urban riding skills that you can concentrate on the suspect's actions instead of having to think about keeping the tires below your head. The more advanced your riding skills are, and the more innate and defined your actions become, the more successful you can be on patrol during both low and high stress conditions. Developing your riding skills will allow you to concentrate on the important things — such as *what the suspect is doing* as he's running away from you — rather than how to negotiate the upcoming obstacle.

And who says off-road riding can't help you be a better bike cop?

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