

TRAVEL & LEISURE

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

bicycling



Brad Baum rides the River Scene Trail at Castlewood State Park in Ballwin, one of the best places in the St. Louis area for mountain biking.

Spring is perfect time for mountain biking

BY STEVE PITTMAN

Special to the Post-Dispatch

Call it a return to childhood. For me, mountain biking brings back sunny days spent bicycling with grade-school friends through the woody trails behind our neighborhood. Today, mountain biking delivers me regularly from the cars and concrete of my normal world to the solitude of nature.

Unfortunately, most mountain bikes sold in the United States never see a dirt trail. But with the following few mountain biking tips, I hope to entice some of the neighborhood cyclists out there into trying an off-road trail this spring.

First the hype. Springtime in St. Louis is perfect mountain biking weather. Cooler spring temperatures make for fresh, crisp days on the bike, and the summertime threats of spider webs, poison ivy and insects generally remain in hiding until May. And with the right apparel, mountain biking can be quite comfortable even in colder weather as the cover of trees and brush offers protection from chilly April winds.

Now for the tips. I credit my friend and longtime St. Louis mountain biker Bruce Murphy

with teaching me a lot of what I know about off-road riding. One of the first things he taught me, and something I still think about today, is the "see rock, hit rock" principle. It says that you will drive your bicycle in the same direction you point your eyes, so if you focus on a rock up ahead that you don't want to hit, you'll hit it.

To overcome the "see rock, hit rock" phenomenon, simply locate the rock or obstacle with your eyes and then look beyond it. Your peripheral vision will take care of the rest. I try to focus 10-20 yards ahead on trail, and generally the farther I can look ahead the better.

The second most important thing for beginning mountain bikers to remember is to relax. By its very nature, off-road trail riding includes bumps and holes in the riding surface. Attempting to negotiate these obstacles with tight arms, hands, back and legs will almost always cause the bike to veer off line. By relaxing, especially your upper body, you allow the bike to flow smoothly over obstacles while maintaining the desired riding line. If you feel yourself tightening up, simply slow down and relax. Let your arms and legs act as shock absorbers,

and you'll be more comfortable and go faster.

My final tip: If you happen to fall down, don't worry. It's part of the fun.

For beginning off-roaders, I recommend Spanish Lake County Park in north St. Louis County, the River Scene Trail at Castlewood State Park in Ballwin, or the Lost Valley Trail in St. Charles County. Each of these destinations offers excellent novice-level bicycle trails with the deep-woods feel of real mountain biking. If you haven't heard of these places, call your local bike shop for directions and other trail information.

Lastly, beginners and experts alike should remember that riding on muddy trails can damage them for months and even years. As a general rule, wait three days after a saturating rain to ride any of the local trails.

Otherwise, challenge yourself this spring: get out of the neighborhood and off-road with your bicycle. In the process, you may discover a long-lost inner child.

Steve Pittman is editor of Cycle St. Louis, a monthly bicycling magazine published by The Touring Cyclist, Inc.