

Taking the lead

Ride leader skills are as useful for club cyclists as they are for employed guides, as **Dan Joyce** found out when he became a CTC Trail Leader

Not bad but I've got one word to say about that: Elvis.' CTC Leader Trainer Mark Hill's comment draws blank looks. Participant Martyn Bolt is acting as ride leader and has been explaining how we'll try riding 'through and off' to add interest to a section of road-width bridleway. 'A little less conversation, a little more action please,' Mark croons.

When you're giving instructions as a ride leader, Mark explains, it's important to boil it down. 'The skills teaching mantra is NED: Name it, Explain it, Demonstrate it.' It's what he was doing yesterday with everything from bike checks to effective braking, providing the information in three succinct parts.

Today it's about us, the participants,



putting it all into practice. Mark watches and comments. When not leading, the rest of us are role-playing the kinds of groups you might get as a ride leader – anyone from fellow club riders to kids on an activity holiday.

There is much ham acting, especially when I draw the short straw and get to lead 'bored teenagers'. 'How much is your bike worth, mister?' Mark shouts out, already in character.

I'm trying to show them how to brake safely because I know from pre-riding the route that we've got a big descent coming up. I name, explain and demonstrate safe braking, then show what will happen if, for example, the 'teenagers' suddenly jam on their front brake. 'Face? Bovered?' mutters Steve Bailey. They each have a go braking. Mark pulls an enthusiastic skid: 'How good was that?!' Then Kath Pickard and Tamina Oliver wander off in different directions...

It sounds like a game – and it is a bit of a laugh – but it underscores an important point: that there's much more to being a ride leader than just picking a route and riding at the head of your group. 'I want you to be like swans at the end of this,' Mark says. 'Calm and serene on the surface, but paddling like mad underneath to keep everything moving.'

The outdoor classroom

The aim of the course is to turn mountain bike riders into mountain bike ride leaders. You get a recognised qualification and more importantly a good grounding in best practice when

it comes to leading rides.

Of the six of us on the course, three of us (Peter Blood, Dave Simpson, and me) are here because we're members of a CTC-affiliated club, Richardsons CC, and we'll be leading rides both for our club and for the general public – to get families and beginners cycling.

While the course produces mountain bike trail leaders, much of the content is equally suitable for riding on lanes. In fact, CTC Off-road's definition of trail terrain 'does not involve specific route selection (for example between rocks, roots or other obstacles) in order to ride on it. It can be as narrow as handlebar width. Typical trail terrain includes: forest tracks, fireroads, cycleways, and other smooth ground. Public highways and roads also fall within trail terrain.'

In Forestry Commission terms, this means blue and green graded routes. It's the kind of terrain that, if you wanted, you could traverse on a touring bike. (CTC Off-road has other courses dealing with technical mountain bike riding – see overleaf.)

Since Trail Leader is the entry-level course, it isn't meant to turn out Ranulph Fiennes style explorers. The qualification is to lead rides that last at most a day; take place in non-hazardous weather; stay below

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600-metres altitude; and don't stray further than 2.5km from either a road or landline phone and shelter. Sounds restrictive? Check your local OS map: you'll be surprised.

Pre-ride preparation

Since the course is two-and-a-half days long, the first chunk of ours took place on a Friday evening. Our venue was the village hall in Sawdon, a North Yorkshire village on the edge of Wykeham Forest. Over cups of tea, instructor Mark made the introductions; he was joined by instructor-in-training Kath Pickard, a keen downhill mountain biker.

Mark chatted amiably over his Powerpoint presentation of what the course comprised. Preparation was the key point. We learned about the pre-ride – the scouting out of the route that the leader would do ahead of the actual ride.

We learned about risks assessments and operating procedures. Both were really a codification of the kind of common sense precautions that can and do get overlooked: checking the weather forecast; telling someone where your group is going, when it would be back, and what to do if it were not; getting medical details and emergency contact numbers for participants; and much more.

Saturday dawned bright and sunny, which was good news as we would spend most of it outside. First we



(Clockwise from left) Trailside repair skills – Tamina fixes a broken chain. 'Trail terrain' isn't technical – this is borderline. Under the emergency shelter. Dave assumes the default descending position on his bike. Mark talks about the next bit of the ride at a predetermined stopping point.





(Clockwise from top) Simple route measuring with a pen and paper. Assessing the group's skills before the ride. Two months after the course, Dave leads a family off-road ride.

examined the different things you might want to take with you on a ride, individually and as a group.

As ride leader Mark was carrying gear not just for himself but for the group, in a sizeable pack. He had spare snacks, extra clothing, bike spares, a first aid kit, some tissue paper and a lighter ('in case anyone gets caught short'), even an emergency shelter.

Mark then took the role of ride leader and checked over his group – us. Did everyone have suitable clothing, a properly worn helmet, and mitts or gloves? Were we feeling okay? Had we had a good breakfast? Rather than asking the group, he asked each person a specific, different question. 'It gets everyone else thinking about their answer,' he explained.

Then we each M-checked another participant's bike. With all bikes deemed fit to ride, we took part in some basic skills games, such as riding around cones and balancing at slow speed. 'It's a warm-up and it gives you an idea of how people ride and who's up for what,' said Mark.

Taking it to the trails

Finally we were off, on the route Mark and Kath had pre-ridden the day before. The first bit was a short road section. As leader Mark rode at the back, slightly further out into the road and wearing a hi-viz backpack cover.

As the ride went on, Mark's position in the group changed depending

on the kind of riding that we were doing. When we were going downhill off-road, he was in front to check our speed. When we were going uphill, he was at the back to catch any stragglers. We didn't just ride off when he was at the back because we all knew where the next stopping point was, where we'd regroup.

'The three things you've got to be aware of when you're riding are: leader position, communication, and the next stopping point,' Mark said.

Over the course of the ride, we looked at different ways to keep riders engaged and interested. We did some map reading. We did some skills sessions, going over the different techniques for riding uphill and downhill.

Back at the village hall, we covered trailside repairs and navigation. The main job, however, was to get ready for the next day's ride. Each of us would be responsible for part of the group ride preparations, such as the bike check, and for leading one of the six legs that the ride had been divided into. It would be the same ride we had done that day, only in reverse, so we'd effectively done our pre-ride already.

Learning by doing

We each took a stint as ride leader before and during the ride, after which the rest of us chipped in with comments and Mark took stock. For all the hammy acting from the 'different groups', it was enlightening

to be put on the spot as leader – not just in terms of remembering procedures but in terms of managing the group.

We knew what kind of group we'd each be leading: club riders, teenagers, pensioners, squaddies, families, and so forth. We didn't know what scenarios Mark and Kath had cooked up for us. Everyone, it turned out, had a mechanical problem and a people problem to deal with.

Someone 'fell off and hurt their ankles'. Someone 'broke a spoke in their wheel'. Someone 'wandered off'. Someone 'had an angina attack'. The acting wasn't very convincing – apart from that by ex-undercover cop Steve Bailey, who could have *been* a Saga rep in a former life – but the situations demonstrated the diversity of things a ride leader might have to deal with.

At the village hall, workbooks were completed and Mark interviewed each of us about the course. All six of us passed, and there was a positive buzz about what we'd learned.

'I thought the course was very good,' said Dave Simpson. 'It was well structured and left me with enough knowledge that I will be confident to lead groups on trails. I will be looking at doing the Technical Leader course next year when I've had a bit more experience of leading groups.'

CTC Off-road leader courses

CTC's Trail Leader Award is a nationally accepted qualification for guiding off-road rides. You need to have or obtain a first aid certificate, and you need to be able to ride a bike safely on non-technical terrain. You also need to be an adult, although a Young Leader course is offered to 14-18 year-olds.

The next step from the Trail Leader Award is the Technical Leader Award. That's used for leading rides through more challenging terrain. There's also an Advanced Leader Award for back-of-beyond ride leading, and a Leader Trainer Award for instructors.

There are CTC mountain bike skills coaching courses available for instructors too. And CTC Off-road also offer a Trailside and Roadside Maintenance course.

Course prices vary depending on duration, accommodation, etc. A 2 1/2 day residential trail leader course costs £340 per person.

For more information, visit www.promtb.net or call 0844 736 8463.