

No Boys Allowed

FEMALE-ONLY CYCLING SCHOOLS ARE THE BEST WAY TO LEARN—NOT TO MENTION CATCH BIG, BADASS AIR BEYOND YOUR WILDEST DREAMS IN JUST TWO DAYS.

By Loren Mooney

I NEVER BOUGHT INTO THAT all-girls thing. I don't find greater self-discovery, empowerment, renewal of my spirit or camaraderie simply because there are no males around. I have never found boys intimidating, and actually kinda like hanging out with them, especially when it comes to sports. Even as a twiggy 10-year-old playing neighborhood Nerf football in the circle of my dead-end suburban street, I was one of the best players—except for Chuckie, who would go on to become the quarterback at our high school. Guys have always been an athletic watermark for me. Gym class, college track practice, recreational road rides as an adult: I typically kept up with the midpack guys, which meant that I was better than just about all of the girls, and that was just how I liked it. Hard-assed? Perhaps. But it served me well in my competitive college-track days. And it's why mountain biking gave me fits.

I love being in the woods. I love being on a bike. Something happened, though, when I went into the woods on a bike: The people I was riding with—men and women—would speed down the trail ahead of me, out of sight, triggering my I'm-behind stress. I would tell myself, "It's no big deal. It's not a race." But still my legs would turn the cranks harder and my speed would pick up, and then my front wheel would hit an obstacle at the wrong angle, or my rear wheel would skip off a rock and throw me off balance.

After picking myself up off the ground and checking the fresh scrape with its blossoming pink tinge, I'd remount and pedal on to meet my friends, who would be waiting for me at the next juncture. Then the whole episode would repeat.

I wanted to stop the cycle.

"Give us a weekend, and we'll improve your whole year," said the website for the Dirt Series, a women's mountain bike

camp, which in its six years has taught 2,500 women at traveling camps around western Canada and the Pacific Northwest. The site had flowers on it, but wasn't overly cheery about the fact that it was all-girl, which appealed to me. Instead, it was matter-of-fact: We're here to make you a better rider. I e-mailed the camp founder, Candace Shadley.

"I suck at mountain biking," I wrote.

"Everyone who comes to camp learns a ton," she replied. "And they fall so much more in love with mountain biking than they ever thought they would."

SATURDAY AT 10:30 A.M., WE campers arrive at our first riding spot of the day. We are in North Vancouver, British Columbia, one of the most spectacular dirt-riding destinations in the world, with mile after mile of ladder-bridge-strewn singletrack in impossibly lush, primeval

and chest protectors—body armor, they call it—under their arms. The notion of doing anything that requires the shielding of my mandible and thoracic region terrifies me, which is why I'm happily in Group Two, with my road helmet. I do have a loaner set of elbow pads and shin guards. "No bashing shins on pedals," one of the coaches had said as she handed them to me, for which I was grateful. In addition, the Rocky Mountain Slayer demo bike I'm riding has been outfitted with flat pedals—no clipping in, I'm told, because worrying about unclipping causes needless stress when pushing limits.

Group Two circles up and everyone gives a quick self-introduction and explains why she came to camp. "My husband rides," says the first woman to speak, "and I want to be able to keep up with him." Second comes the girlfriend: "He's faster than I am, but we both love

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forests of firs and hemlocks. We mount up and pedal to... a nondescript dirt field in a suburban park with netless soccer goals at either end. Primeval forest is nowhere to be seen. I mention this to one of the coaches, who is pulling wood planks out of the bed of a pickup truck. "For skills sessions, it's better to be here," she says as she stacks the planks, which we'll later use as ramps, on the ground. "The environment isn't distracting."

The 36 campers have been divided into six groups based on interest and experience; Group One is rank beginner and Six is the women who are standing around casually holding full-face helmets

to ride, so I want it to be something we can do together." Next: "I'm the slowest one in my group."

When it's my turn, I say, "I'm sick of falling." I glance up to see nods all around. I admit to myself that it does feel good to be with my own kind. Yet I can't help myself: My inner hard-ass thinks, "Bet I won't be last in this group."

The skills session begins with pedaling slowly in big circles. "Now you want to stand and swing your bike back and forth beneath you," says our coach, Kelli, a former pro downhill and Canadian provincial champ, as she demonstrates what she calls proper "bike-body



balance." Bike and body form one unit, she explains, so a movement in one direction by one part means a necessary counterbalance by the other.

Then we tackle our first big challenge of the day: riding in a straight line. Kelli has set out an old, flat fire hose, and she demonstrates by riding lengthwise along it. I think to myself, "Really? I know we're beginners, but a straight line?" When it's my turn, I begin to pedal forward—and feel my tires slip off the hose halfway through. It's harder than I thought.

"Look ahead," says Kelli. This will become the mantra of all the coaches, followed closely by what she says next: "What you think is going to happen is going to happen." She demonstrates the hose again and explains that you can't steer with your handlebar when you're on the line. I try again and see that she's right. It's only with subtle weight shifts of my bike and body that I make it even close to the end.

Our next task is riding along the 6-inch-wide, 8-foot-long planks. We take turns, making a run at the board over and over. Soon, we line up in front of a 6-inch ramp that leads to an elevated plank. Kelli demos, and we go one by one. A few riders veer off the plank. "Look ahead," Kelli says, and eventually everyone gets it.

Then Kelli tutors us through a series of harder challenges: two connected, elevated planks, with a turn between the boards; a tiny teeter-totter; a taller teeter-totter. When I nail a 2-foot-high teeter-totter, I do it exactly as Kelli had demonstrated: Pedal with some speed, body in a neutral position on the way up, and then when I feel the tip, I jut my weight back behind the lowered saddle for the steady landing. Timing is everything, I am learning. Less than two hours ago, I was falling off a simple, straight, flat plank.

"Okay," I admit to Kelli, "that's pretty cool."

"Isn't it?" she says. Behind her, across the field, I see a woman in Group Six launch into the air off of a big box—while doing a wheelie.

Next, we do front-wheel lifts and manuals, a lifting move used to launch off something or to clear trail obstacles at high speed. I experience the same rapid progression, starting by simply pressing the bike's front suspension to



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get a sense of what compression and rebound feel like. A half-hour later, I can time my manuals over a series of five sticks that Candace and the other coaches have pulled from the suburban woods.

Finally, after lunch, it's time for the forest. My group drives to the local mecca, Mt. Seymour, where we gather at a figure-eight loop in the demonstration area. Tanya, a former New Zealand national team member and dental hygienist, is our coach for the afternoon. Instead of bombing the trail, we ride Dirt Camp-style: Tanya leads us until we get to a technical part of the trail, where we all stop, get off our bikes, watch Tanya ride the stunt and then attempt it ourselves. As one of us tries the section, the rest line the course's tricky parts, acting as spotters.

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Pack Your Bags

HERE ARE 6 WOMEN-ONLY CAMPS.

DIRT SERIES BY ROCKY MOUNTAIN BICYCLES

WHAT: The camp in "No Boys Allowed," these summer-weekend mountain bike camps focus on improving technical skills. Evenings include maintenance and fit clinics. For boyfriends and husbands: The final two camps of the year are co-ed. **WHERE:** British Columbia, Alberta, the Pacific Northwest, Northern California and Park City, Utah **COST:** About \$255, plus lodging **INFO:** dirtseries.com

CARMICHAEL TRAINING SYSTEMS (CTS) WOMEN'S CYCLING CAMPS

WHAT: Founded by Chris Carmichael, Lance Armstrong's personal coach, CTS offers this three-day immersion in road riding for beginning

to advanced riders. You'll get individual attention from world-class coaches and a comprehensive analysis of your riding and how you can improve. **WHERE:** Colorado Springs, Colorado, and Asheville, North Carolina, where there's still space available for the Oct. 19 weekend **COST:** \$599, not including lodging or meals **INFO:** trainright.com

MAVERICK WOMEN'S WEEKENDS

WHAT: Join former World Cup pro racer Mia Stockdale, now a personal trainer and coach, and her crew for three days of singletrack heaven. The camp is geared toward riders who range

from fit with some technical-riding experience to advanced. **WHERE:** Fruita and Vail, Colorado **COST:** \$250, not including lodging or meals, besides lunch **INFO:** vailmountainbikecamps.com

LA DOLCE VITA TUSCANY CYCLING RETREAT

WHAT: A mellow tour for riders of all abilities, with elite athletes as guides. A typical day: yoga, a leisurely breakfast and pedaling from the Etruscan coast on the Mediterranean to the heart of Tuscany, Val d'Orcia. **WHERE:** Castagneto Carducci, Italy **COST:** \$2,600, including meals and lodging **INFO:** Sept. 23-30; womensquest.com

REVOLUTION COACHING WOMEN'S CAMP

WHAT: Six-day instructional tours of the rolling roads of California's Santa Ynez Valley with Colavita/Sutter Home pro racer Dotsie Bausch and other coaches, for intermediate riders and up. Lodging is at the historic Sky View Motel. **WHERE:** Santa Barbara, California, wine country **COST:** \$2,350/person (double), all-inclusive **INFO:** revolutioncoaching.com

DEVINE MOUNTAIN BIKE CAMPS

WHAT: June and September riding-skills weekends with Canadian Cindy Devine, former downhill world champion, in the B.C. Rockies. All skill levels welcome. **WHERE:** Rossland, British Columbia **COST:** About \$215, not including lodging **INFO:** devineride.com—Jennifer Mack

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roots no longer scare me, distracting my gaze to my front tire and throwing me off balance. Instead, my eyes are down the trail, sticking to the line Tanya has pointed out. As I spot for the others, I find myself twisting and turning, using body language to try to help my group-mates through. "Good job," I say whether a rider cleans the section or puts a foot down. When it's my turn, I lose it at a hairpin turn with a log obstacle and fall, coming to a cushioned landing on the earthy forest floor of decomposing needles. "Almost," I hear someone say. I try again, and ride through flawlessly. I stop and one of my spotters reaches a hand out for a high-five. We have become a team.

I REALIZE NOW THAT I DIDN'T really know how to mountain bike before. I used to think I just wasn't any good at it, a typical female-thinking pitfall, according to educational psychologists. We evaluate ourselves more critically than boys do and see a failure as an innate lack of ability, rather than a mere bump in the

road to shrug off and move on.

The Dirt Series teaching methods, it turns out, are all those that education researchers say are important for girls to learn effectively. Divide girls into small groups with a common task. Give them mentors to break down the task analytically and take the mystery out of whatever doesn't come naturally, such as a beginner rider doing a wheelie. Take away outside distraction to minimize stress and pressure. Do all of these things, research shows, and girls learn best. "When girls go to same-sex schools, they stop being the audience and become the players," write Myra and David Sadker, prominent education researchers, in *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls*.

Back home, when I'd watch a guy lift his wheel over a 4-inch log or launch off a drop, my assumption was that he could do it because he was good at riding, and that it was out of my league. At camp, when I saw a woman do a similar move, I wanted to try it too, with no thought that it was above my abilities. It was simply my turn

to go. Learning with girls empowered me—because the boys weren't there.

WE BEGIN DAY TWO BACK AT the dirt field, mastering other skills in the same way, then head to the forest to show off our stuff on a trail with swoopy ladder bridges, some with sections as high as 4 feet in the air, and other features that a few days ago were way beyond my limits.

The last hard section of the day is a rocky climb with a log at the top, which then rounds a corner and ends with a drop, or a bailout route around it. "Once you get here," Candace says as she picks her way through to show us the best line, "You can ride to the side and stop down at the clearing." She doesn't expect us to do the drop.

When it's my turn, it's as if my Slayer is on rails. I clean the log, make the corner and pedal straight for the drop. I execute a perfect manual and fly into the air, landing solidly on both wheels. "Yeah!" I hear Candace yell behind me, and a few of the women in the group let out whoops. And I pedal on, past our regroup point, free at last. ■