



Palmer Park Velo novice guides: **Mountain bike racing**



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Mountain bike racing

There are a number of Mountain bike racing disciplines, but all require a mix of skills and fitness.

Equipment

All you need to start mountain bike racing is a mountain bike (CX bikes are not allowed), helmet, gloves, jersey and shorts.

Any mountain bike will be suitable to begin XC racing, as long as it has working gears and brakes. As you progress you might start to look at reducing weight, especially for XC racing, and investigate tyre options. While there are three wheel sizes (26", 27.5" and 29") available, the most important thing is getting a bike which fits. Bar end plugs must be fitted otherwise you cannot race, no matter which discipline.

You can start on flat pedals, and some riders prefer them, but especially in XC racing you will benefit from clipless pedals (SPDs). SPD style clipless pedals are dual sided with the cleat recessed in the sole of the shoe to allow easier walking. Road clipless pedals are not suitable for MTB racing.

For XC racing a normal cycling jersey and shorts will be fine along with the helmet you use on the road or track, and advanced riders might opt for a skin suit. Downhill and 4X racing require baggy BMX/MX style clothing, as tight fitting lycra is not allowed, and a full face helmet is obligatory.

Mountain bike racing does not have any gear restrictions for young riders, with the emphasis on a wide range of gears to cover a variety of terrain and retain grip. Riders should aim to spin and keep a high cadence, rather than pushing a big gear.

Suspension is not a requirement, but will improve bike handling and speed as terrain gets rougher. For XC racing bikes with short travel (100-120mm) front suspension are common, though as courses get rougher short travel rear suspension is starting to appear. Bikes for downhill racing have long travel (up to 220mm) suspension front and rear to soak up the terrain. 4X is usually raced on bikes with a long travel (160mm) suspension fork, very small frame for manoeuvrability, and often no rear suspension.

Types of event

XC (cross-country)

Cross country MTB racing is done off-road on a marked course, with multiple laps depending on the age group. There are two common types of cross country racing; XCO and Marathon.

XCO (XC Olympic, or sometimes just XC) involves races for all age groups from U12 upwards. Race distances are determined through a combination of time and laps, with max race times per age group. U12s will race for approx 20mins, through to an hour for U16s. Marathon cross country races are, as the name suggests, over much longer distances. Due to the long distances and race times they are not suitable for younger riders, with entries often only open to U16s and older.

There are XC races in the South throughout the year, on a variety of different courses, and these are the best place to start. Southern XC and Gorricks races are popular, as are XC Rampage races in the Autumn.

Palmer Park Velo novice guide:

Mountain bike racing

Downhill

Downhill is the most technical mountain bike racing discipline. Run in a time trial format down a marked course, race runs can take anywhere from 1min to 3mins. Courses are a mix of natural terrain (roots, rocks) and manmade obstacles (jumps, drop-offs). The fastest time down the course in each category wins.

Due to the technical nature competitors must be U14 and older to compete at National level as all competitors race on the same course. Some local races will offer an U12 (Ripper) category.

Competitors will get the chance to practice the course beforehand, trying different lines and memorising the course. You need to complete at least one practice run (sometimes two) to be allowed to race. Local races will often give racers 2 runs to record a time, while National rounds only provide one run. This makes downhill racing a mental challenge, as a race run is 'all or nothing'.

Local downhill races can be found at Tidworth, Chicksands and Aston Hill bikeparks throughout the year. Slightly further afield, there is a downhill series at Forest of Dean throughout the year.

4X (four cross)

4X (or Four Cross) races are a mix between downhill and BMX. Riders race from a BMX style start gate down a short man-made track featuring berms and jumps. Winning a 'heat' lets you progress to the next round, eventually making the final.

There are very few local or regional 4X races due to the requirement of a specialist course. However Chicksands bikepark does host races, as do some other trail centres. There is a National series for experienced 4X riders.

Enduro

Enduro is similar to car rally racing. The race has a number of stages which are timed, and competitors ride from the end of a stage to the start of the next one within a time limit. Some enduro races do not allow youth riders to race, due to insurance and safety concerns.

Required skills

Riders should have practised, and be proficient in the core skills covered in club MTB coaching sessions. These include; weight shift, cornering, front and rear wheel lifts etc. All of the core skills are applicable across all the MTB race disciplines, and will enable to ride off-road faster and more safely.

Advanced skills should also be practised including; drops, jumps, climbing techniques etc. Especially if you are intending to progress your MTB racing and tackle advanced terrain. These are covered as part of the club MTB sessions and can also be developed through advanced MTB skills courses, held at venues such as Aston Hill.

In mountain bike racing if two riders are of equal fitness, the most skillful will usually win.



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Mountain bike racing

Training

The key components of fitness for mountain bike CX racing are covered in training at PPV.

XC racing requires endurance and the ability to maintain a high tempo whilst making decisions about the best way to tackle the terrain in front of you. Downhill and 4X need less endurance but instead require power and strength. You need to power out of corners and regain top speed as quickly as possible, and to keep the bike pointing in the correct direction over extreme terrain.

Progression

For XC racing, the natural progression is racing in a different region to test yourself against different riders and a variety of terrain. The Midlands XC and Welsh XC series are within reach and will offer different challenges. The pinnacle in the UK is the National Series, open to U14 and older. These races are run on very technical courses where bike handling comes to the fore.

As with XC racing, progression in downhill is through racing on more challenging terrain. That means trips to Welsh, Northern or Scottish downhill races where courses are highly technical and only suitable for the most advanced riders. Entry to the downhill National series is only open to riders who have earned points competing at local or regional races, ensuring racers are not racing on courses beyond their ability level.

More information

For more information on events:

Cross country and downhill races: <https://www.britishcycling.org.uk/events/home>
XC Racer calendar of events: <http://www.xcracer.com>

Southern XC: <http://www.eventrexuk.co.uk>
XC Rampage: <http://www.xcrampage.com>
UK XC racing news: <https://www.ukxcnews.com>

Tidworth Freeride bike park: <https://www.b1ke.com/tidworthfreeride/>
Forest of Dean mini-downhill series: <http://minidownhill.com>
Aston Hill downhill events: <http://astonhillbikepark.co.uk/events/>

*Matt Carey
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