

**“A police officer’s perspective: Patrolling on a bicycle in an urban environment made of concrete and steel. How can training on single-track improve your skills as a modern-day bike cop?”**

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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!”

Well yes, you should ride the curbs and stairs, but that’s not all you should do. Think of your cycling skills as muscles. Just as with your physical conditioning, in order to improve the system of your choice, you must tax that system to stimulate the desired physiological adaptations. Simply put, if you want bigger muscles you have to work them beyond what they are accustomed to. The body then 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. We 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. Listen to co-workers swap suggestions on which uniform shorts are most comfortable, which gloves serve the best dual-purpose for both riding on patrol and searching a suspect, which local bike shop is the most helpful.

OK, let’s get down to business. We’ve got our lead rider and we’ve got our sweep, both experienced instructors and both carrying 2-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 advise, and stifle any frustration with 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 the friendly but frank ribbing from the riders behind him, who were forced to stop as well!

We maneuver through some hairpin turns with lots of tree roots and a sharp 20’ drop to the outside. Look down at the roots - only briefly - and pick your line quickly, because we need to look farther ahead to maintain our balance, especially with the

potentially painful consequence in that drop-off just 18 inches away! Boy, that reminds me of sneaking down that narrow alley off State Street. Remember? We had to be “stealthily” as we slowly 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 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. Big 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 never get started again on this incline! And you’ll let your fellow officers down who are struggling behind you. Keep moving, 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. You know the one – where the sign is posted for motor vehicles “Braking required”?

Here comes the downhill; looks like a monster! Unlike the 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! 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. Yeah, let it go! 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. “Ride like a cat,” like we read in that article! (*Bicycling*, March 1999) *Never panic!* Be agile and quick, flexible but strong, reactive but assertive, relaxed but ready to pounce. 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 at the bottom of the hill. Good thing we both cleared it; it’s just like taking curbs at higher speeds downtown, huh? Oh, check this guy out – he is going a little too fast, and there’s a hint of panic in his eyes. “Hey Craig! Get back a little and ease the brakes!” Watch that... ohhhh. That looked like it hurt. Y’allright? Dude, you *almost* cleared it. Uh, now 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. You must have dropped a little too much air when you prepped your bike. Keep a little more 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 you say? 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. 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; both cycling *and* policing. 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 on University property. 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. This reminds me of the physical fitness training in the academy. How did I ever get through that? It's no longer physical, it's mental. The physical is spent, and now it's up to the mental aspects to keep you in the game, to give you a chance to win the fight. Dig deep, don't quit, keep climbing. Find it within yourself to make it to the top. Just like any physical altercation on the job, only the outcome has the potential to be much worse if you give up during a struggle. No, 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 at the time, but feels so good when you make it to the top, when you finally get those handcuffs on 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 your bicycle upright. 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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## “IPMBA”

The International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA) is a professional, non-profit organization that provides specialized training and education to officers who use bikes in the line of duty. Since its founding in 1991, IPMBA has certified over 500 instructors throughout the United States and Canada, who have trained over 20,000 officers, EMS professionals and other public safety cyclists. IPMBA has 3,000 active members representing over 2,000 agencies in 47 states and more than a dozen foreign countries. IPMBA offers a series of training programs, including the IPMBA Police Cyclist Course, the IPMBA Police Cyclist Advanced Course, the IPMBA Maintenance Officer Course and the IPMBA Instructor Course. It also offers the premier training opportunity for public safety cyclists and the Annual IPMBA Conference, which features five pre-conference training courses, 18 dynamic and innovative on-bike workshops, over 40 information-filled classroom-based sessions, and the nation's largest and best bicycle patrol product exhibition. The LAPD Bicycle Rapid Response Team training is one of the pre-conference courses, and deals with the use of bicycles during civil disobedience occurrences.

Membership in IPMBA is open to individual public safety cyclists. Members receive a subscription to *IPMBA News, Bicycling*, and discounts at the annual conference as well as discounts on products and equipment offered by participating suppliers. The 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of IPMBA is May 22 – 24, 2003, in Charleston, West Virginia. The 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference is scheduled for May 6-8, 2004, in San Antonio Texas. For more information call (410) 744-2400 or write to IPMBA, 583 Fredericksburg Road, Suite 5B, Baltimore, MD 21228. Visit IPMBA's website at [www.ipmba.org](http://www.ipmba.org)