

# THAT TRIALS THING

Story and photos by Steven Beane

Do you ever get a song in your head that you just can't get out? Maybe it was something in a dream that triggered it, or a thought about an old girlfriend, or just catching a few lines on a radio as you passed a storefront. One familiar riff or a key lyric has you rolling that song over and over in your head - you'll sing a few notes, hum it, whistle it, whatever, but it's stuck there. Riding trials is a lot like that.

At some point or another most motorcycle riders have seen or heard about trials, but few pursue it, because for the most part riders and especially racers thrive on speed, on noise, on raling berms and sailing over jumps. Trials most definitely is not like that.

The premise of riding trials is relatively simple - ride as slowly as possible (but as fast as necessary) over a variety of hazards, be they impossibly tight turns, radically sloping terrain, fallen logs, creek crossings, or rocks, without putting a foot down or stalling your bike. The simplicity of the concept belies the difficulty in achieving the desired outcome.

To most people trials bikes look strange - basically an engine and two wheels, with nary a seat in sight. Trials riders have been likened to the violin players of motorcycling, and I've described the riding itself as yoga on two wheels, but what does that really mean? How does one go about "doing trials"?

Perhaps more than in any other motorcycle sport, success in trials depends more on the rider than the bike. That's not to say that new technology doesn't exist - Ossa marketed a fuel-injected two-stroke years before KTM even thought of the idea, Beta's line-up features a mono-coque aluminum frame with an integrated gas tank, and several brands offer aluminum or titanium forks - but you're just as apt to be competing with someone astride a Honda Reflex (circa 1986) or a Yamaha TY (look it up) as something built this century. Understanding the nuances of the bike, be it throttle response, clutch release point, or braking action is far more important than what that response, release point, or action is, and that typically comes by spending a lot of time learning



Even a small obstacle can feel like this when you start riding trials. Help is seldom far away



Perhaps the perfect trials bike for Everyman

the bike, regardless of whether its new or old. Nevertheless, trials bikes are a little like high-end mountain bikes - the less you get, the more you pay. The engines are seemingly shrink-wrapped in the frames, the fuel tanks are tiny, the "seat" is really just a set of graphics on the lowest part of the body work between the two gummy, low-pressure block-pattern tires, and every effort is made to tuck the exhaust and radiators (and everything else) out of the way of the rocks that will inevitably be encountered. Both two- and four-stroke engines are common, and like in other aspects of the powered world, electric power is trying to make inroads. Suspension is handled by conventional forks up front and linked single shocks out back, with between 4 and 6 inches of travel aimed at ensuring traction over obstacles and some absorption against big drop offs or assaults into the face of boulders. The big players in the trials market are Beta, GasGas, and Sherco, and to a lesser extent Vertigo, TRS, and Scorpa. Honda is still

somewhat involved in the sport, teaming with Spanish firm Montesa to market a line of bikes, but they qualify as exotic instead of mainstream.

The layout and flow of a trials event is different than that found in other motorcycle sports too. If you ride trials in Michigan, on any given day you'll be completing 40 sections, which are typically five laps of eight or four lap sections. After a typically boilerplate meeting, competitors can start on any section they like, but once they start they have to continue sequentially throughout the course. Scoring is pretty straightforward - a point counted for every time you put a foot down in a section (maximum of three counted), or a five if you stall your bike, end up with both feet on one side of the bike, need to be assisted by a bystander, you miss a marker and take the wrong line, or if you cross over your own path. A rider "cleans" a section by getting from the entry gate to the exit without putting a foot down or landing a five. A course worker punches your score on a card after every section, and at the end of the day, low score wins. For every section, required "lines" or paths are set for riders of different skill levels - Beginners, Novices, Intermediates, Sportsmen, Advanced, Seniors, and Experts. Age doesn't really factor in - I've competed against nine-year-olds in the Novice class and marveled at



This "simple" uphill

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In moto or enduro this endo represents near-certain doom. In trials it's a little stretch

of 70+ year old riders like Don Tudethout in the Senior division. If anything, age is an advantage, as much as it is a proxy for experience. Sure the fearless young guns

can attack a rock face, but watching a (hu-hmm) 'more seasoned' rider read and then dissect a section is also cool. In fact, most riders will walk a section two or three times before they attempt to ride it, just to ensure the path is clear in their minds and they know where they intend to put their tires the entire way through the section.

The fitness aspects of trials can be split into two categories - physical and mental. Different muscles ache after a trials event than after an enduro or motocross race, because you're on your feet all day, attempting to balance on the balls of your feet, and letting the bike move around underneath you.

Mental fatigue is very real as well. Even though nothing comes at you very fast - top section speed may be 5 mph - it can be big and daunting. Some days you can "clean" a section every time through, and other days you never make it through without putting a foot down.

Riding trials certainly isn't for everyone, but I'd hazard a guess that you'd become a better rider overall if you tried it (and stuck with it) for a little bit. The rocks and logs won't seem so daunting, your fine motor skills will be much improved, and your ability to read terrain will be sharper than its ever been. Be careful though - it can get in your head, and it's hard to get

