

Joe Lawwill's Manuals Made Easy

Forget wheelies and learn a skill that matters

“A wheelie is something for showing off, but it doesn't have much use on the trail,” explains BikeSkills instructor Joe Lawwill, before revealing the trick he finds most useful during any ride, whether racing against the clock on a downhill course or on a trail ride with friends. “Learning to manual is an essential skill that needs to be in every rider's arsenal.”

Wheelies and manuals are often confused because they both result in raising the front wheel off the ground, but that's where the similarities end. A wheelie requires the rider to increase acceleration by pedaling while pulling up on the handlebar to raise the bike's front wheel. A properly executed manual does not require pedaling input. Raising the front wheel is accomplished by shifting the rider's weight. Don't get it? Think of a skateboarder who does not have pedals to increase his speed. Instead, the skateboarder weights his rear leg to lift the front of the board. That's a manual.

Joe Lawwill has taught hundreds of riders how to manual at his BikeSkills clinics. “I had a 50-year-old female student manualing before the end of our morning session,” explained Joe. “If you follow these steps, there is no reason why you shouldn't be able to master the manual too.”

BIKE SETUP

Control over the rear brake is essential for a manual. Adjust your brake lever assembly far enough inboard and angled on your handlebar so that your trigger finger can always rest on the sweet spot of the brake lever. You don't want to have to reach down to contact the lever. Also, lower your saddle far enough that you can sit in the saddle with your feet flat on the ground.



OFF THE BIKE

You do not pull up on the bar to do a manual because the slightest unbalanced input will cause the bike to wander to one side or the other. Instead, use the shifting of your body weight to raise the front wheel. So the first exercise is to get the feeling of the weight shift. Stand to the side of the bike with your hips touching the handlebar. Now, thrust the bike forward. Do this in one quick movement. Don't move your hips to the bar; bring the bar to your hips. Remember; push out, don't pull up.



Check out my feet and body.

They are still in the same place as where I started the exercise. I have not moved my feet. I have bent my knees and pivoted from my hips. Do this a few times to get familiar with the feel of throwing the bike.



Think like a fighter throwing a punch. That is the same thing you are doing with the bike. Push the bike forward with commitment. Your body stays in relatively the same place. It is the bike that gets thrown forward.



If you are doing this correctly, you will notice that at the end of your bike thrust, the front wheel naturally comes off the ground. I'm not pulling up in this sequence, and you shouldn't either. Throwing the bike forward will naturally lift the front wheel. Note my crouched position. My ears are hitting my shoulders when I am all the way back.



ON THE BIKE

Find a flat area, pedal a few rotations, and push your bike forward. You are not trying to do a manual yet. I just want you to get the feeling of your weight being this far back on the bike. Note that I've lowered the saddle. Also, check out my left hand. My trigger finger is always resting on the brake lever. Check out my position in the "correct" photo. In the "wrong" photo, my head is way too far away from my shoulders, I'm looking the wrong way, and my body weight is too high. Having a friend video you might help you find the right position.



I come up on a small rut, bring my hips forward and then throw the bike forward, shifting my weight all the way behind the saddle. The front wheel comes off the ground, I push slightly with my legs (like getting up out of a chair, the rear wheel drops into the rut and I'm man-ualling. I'm using my body weight to make the rear wheel act like a fulcrum.

Once you get the feel for the manual, you will be able to use your weight to get the front wheel higher off the ground and for a longer period of time. Your rear brake is your best friend. I drag and modulate the rear brake the whole time I'm riding a manual.



You only want your front wheel high enough to clear the obstacle. The steeper the hill, the higher the wheel will be from the ground. On flat ground your front wheel should just hover a few inches above the ground.



You will find that once you master the manual, you will use it all the time. It is a basic skill that will make every trail ride better. You can watch my how-to video at www.bikeskills.com or better yet, sign up for one of my clinics. □