

# **MTB ABC's & FAQ's**

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So you've heard that mountain biking is one of the "things to do" here in the White Mountains. You've heard it's lots of fun and that it will make you feel younger and stronger. You've heard that it's the best low-impact exercise for your joints and that is great for cardiovascular conditioning. You've also heard that you can spend anywhere from \$179 to \$14,000 on a mountain bike and you are pretty sure you want to try a local single track without doing anything "too crazy", but you want to give it an honest try. Where do you start and what can you expect? I am not a certified MTB coach, a professional, a mechanic, or even a very accomplished rider, but I want to share what I have learned along the way in my MTB journey, beginning about 5 years ago.

### **What kind of mountain bike should I get?**

A good entry-level hardtail bike will cost you about \$1200 (sorry to say, that \$179 big box bike will be heavy, hard to handle, and uncomfortable to the point of not wanting to ride on a regular basis). You should look for a "1x" drive train, which means that there is one gear in the front and up to 12 gears on the cassette on the rear wheel. Having a front derailleur complicates shifting for a beginner and is prone to mechanical failures. You should try to get an air-based shock on the fork. If possible you should look for a bike with "tubeless-ready" wheels and a dropper post, both of which I will discuss later. Getting a name-brand bike rather than a big box bike will save you headaches later and will provide you with a much better riding experience overall. Shopping at a local bike shop will get you the right fit as well as the expertise and support you will need as a beginning rider.

**I'm short. What wheel size do I need?** In general, wheel size has little to do with bike size. 26" bikes are generally found only at big box stores and are not suggested for an optimal trail experience. Most riders are using 29" wheels with some smaller frame bikes being also available in 27.5". Larger wheels roll more easily over obstacles while the smaller wheels are somewhat more nimble. Most beginners will appreciate the 29" wheels on a mountain bike. If possible, visit your local bike shop to find out which bike frame size is best for you.

**What is the difference between a hardtail and a full suspension bike?** A hardtail bike is one that only has suspension on the front fork. This front suspension is

usually either spring-based or air-based. An air-based shock is more adjustable more responsive and more efficient. A spring-based shock is usually only adjustable by tightening or loosening the spring and is not as responsive. A full-suspension bike has shocks both in the front fork and within the frame of the bike. An entry-level full-suspension bike will generally begin at a cost of at least \$2500. Be very wary of those \$275 coil-spring big box full suspension bikes. They are extraordinarily heavy and not very responsive.

### **I'm a beginner, why would I want a full suspension bike?**

It is somewhat counterintuitive, but a full-suspension bike is much more forgiving for a beginner and is easier to ride. It takes more skill to ride a hardtail and is more difficult for a beginner to handle technical areas of a trail. The suspension on a bike is designed to keep both wheels on the ground over rough terrain. A rider can stay seated while peddling on a full-suspension bike whereas the rider often needs to use their legs for suspension on a hardtail and will need to be off the seat while peddling over rough terrain. In general, you should try to purchase as much bike as your budget will allow to give you the best possible experience and ride feel. The more comfortable you are on your bike, the more you will enjoy the experience and the more likely you are to continue riding.

### **What is a "dropper"?**

A dropper is a set-up where you can lower your seat with the push of a lever. The purpose of a dropper post is to allow you to lower your center of gravity when riding downhill or over rough terrain. A dropper post makes your ride safer and more controllable. The correct seat height is set for you at the shop and the post will lower to any point below this height with the push of a lever. The seat will return to the correct height, again with the push of a button, when you return to peddling.

### **What is the "lock-out" and when do I use it?**

Locking out the shocks means that you have a way to disable/restrict the movement of the shock. You would want to do this when riding smooth terrain or climbing so that you don't waste effort in shock movement as you pedal. You will open the shocks when descending or going over rougher terrain.

### **My butt hurts! What can I do?**

Like any new activity, your body needs to get used to pressure in unfamiliar areas. You will be sitting on the saddle using your pelvic bones, “sit bones”. Letting your body get used to the pressure gradually is important, as is getting a saddle that fits correctly. Wearing padded shorts, either alone or under MTB shorts helps tremendously as does concentrating on staying out of the saddle as much as possible while riding. In general, the only time I am sitting on the saddle is when I am peddling normally. If you are coasting, you should put your pedals at equal height, legs slightly bent and flexible, one leg forward and one back, the rear foot slightly in a heel down position. I practice this position with both the left foot forward and the right foot forward to give both Achilles tendons a chance to stretch between peddling sections. Use your legs to support yourself and you will see that this also takes the pressure off your hands. This technique is similar to riding a horse. A good rider will not be plopped in the saddle all day, instead, the rider will be using their legs, standing in the stirrups as the horse moves under them. In our case, riding the bike, you are standing on the pedals and allowing the bike to move under you as it goes over the terrain.

### **How do tubeless tires work?**

Instead of having tubes inside of the tires, you will have a special sealant. This sealant works by containing particles in suspension which are forced out of a puncture. The particles seal up the hole and no more air can escape. You will need to refresh your sealant every 3-4 months with regular riding, but you are very unlikely to experience a flat with proper maintenance. In my opinion, it is very well worth it to spend the extra money to get tubeless-ready wheels/tires. The only time I have ever had a flat on my bike was when I forgot to add sealant to a bike that had been sitting idle all winter. Oops! It's not fun to carry a bike out 5 miles...

### **Why do some bikes cost more?**

I see two bikes side by side which look similar but have a big difference in price. One thing that drives prices is the way the frame is constructed. Big box bikes are generally made of aluminum that is thick and heavy. A name-brand aluminum bike is made from a proprietary aluminum alloy that is thinner, welded more efficiently, and weighs considerably less overall. Bikes with carbon frames are lighter, stiffer, and more expensive overall. The other thing that drives prices is the quality of the components (drive train, brakes, etc) on the bike. Better drivetrains will shift more cleanly and quietly. Better brakes will stop more

effectively and quietly, hydraulic disc brakes are exponentially preferable to rim brakes. Better hubs and cranks will interact with your peddling more efficiently and will allow you to use backpeddling techniques over rough terrain. Ride both bikes and you will immediately be able to tell the difference. Again, save up and budget for the best bike you think you can reasonably afford. Purchasing a lower-level bike and changing out components is another way to go, but in the long run, this is the more expensive route to the same level of bike.

### **How do I care for my new bike?**

Keep it clean. A quick rinse after a ride to get off-road grime is helpful, but do not pressure wash because you don't want to force water into sealed areas. Lube your chain every ride or two to keep it running smoothly. Check for chain wear periodically and make sure that the headset, cranks, and hubs feel tight. Check your air pressure before every ride and know what pressure feels comfortable for you. In general, you can run with lower air pressure with a tubeless set-up, which gives you more engagement and comfort on the trail. Listen to your bike. If it is making strange or unfamiliar noises, see if you can pinpoint what might be wrong to catch small mechanical failures before they turn into major repairs. A professional annual checkup/tune up is a worthwhile investment in the life of your bike. Your new bike is a major expense and worth taking care of for years to come.

### **What if I want to look for a used bike?**

Bikes are expensive and understandably, used seems a great way to get started. Here are a few suggestions. Look online and see what is available locally. Ask if you can meet the seller at a local bike shop to have the bike examined before you purchase it. Often the shocks on an older full-suspension bike will need servicing, derailleurs and shifters will need work, you might need a new set of tires/tubes, and the bike may be very outdated. Your local bike shop should be willing to give you an honest evaluation of the cost to get the bike in safe running condition. New bikes come with warranties while used bikes are generally "buyer beware". That all said, finding a great used bike is a super way to get into the sport without spending more than you can afford.

### **Where do I begin riding?**

The best thing for a beginner to do is to start out riding on dirt roads. Get a feel for the bike and your balance. Practice flat-pedal coasting, practice shifting

gears, practice making curves and turns on your bike, and get comfortable on your seat little by little. I usually pick one thing to work on during a ride: maybe foot position on the pedals, maybe the techniques of the peddle backstroke, maybe it keeping cadence up, or just using one gear for the whole ride. I've done rides where I never sit down and rides where I ride in an s-pattern practicing balance for turns. Find roads with both uphill and downhill sections and gradually increase the speeds you feel comfortable riding. Start off small with 3-5 mile rides and gradually work up to 12-15 mile rides. After you are comfortable on your bike, begin exploring local singletrack or cattle/wildlife trails. If you come across a section that looks sketchy, walk your bike across it and watch how the wheels roll over the rocks. Notice the way your bike is handling the obstacle and imagine that you are now a passenger on the bike. If you can see that the bike is capable of rolling across the area without pitching or bucking, give it a shot riding or move on. Don't beat yourself up over anything you want to "hike-a-bike". Your safety is paramount. You will be able to easily roll over this same obstacle with some practice in a few days/months/years. Leave your ego out of it and be safe to ride another day.

### **What else to I need?**

There's a lot you will eventually want to have, but to start out with, a bike, a helmet, a floor pump, chain lube, a way to fix a flat, and a way to carry water and snacks are enough. Other things you will probably want are biking shorts, gloves, lights, repair tools, clipless pedals/flats, cycling shoes, a cycling computer, heartrate monitor, jersey, fitted saddle, bike rack, bike lock, repair stand...

### **What can regular riding do for me?**

I began riding about 5 years ago in my mid 50's. I am in better overall condition now than I was in my 40s. My weight is down about 10 lbs and I've added muscle and core tone, heart rate down, blood pressure down, and endurance up. I find that riding is a safe space for me mentally as I need to concentrate on many things to stay upright and safe on the trail so there is little room to worry about family, work, and life in general. I enjoy looking for photo opportunities and stopping to take pictures along the way. After a stressful day at work, it is tempting to lay on the couch, but I've found that taking even a short ride will reset the day and give you a new outlook and energy boost to finish into the evening. In the winter, when trails are muddy, we switch to gravel biking and I use an indoor trainer whenever I can't fit in an outdoor ride that day. In short, I

am 100% positive that cycling has both lengthened my active lifespan by a decade or two and has made me a better person overall. I am very grateful that my husband and I began this MTB journey so that we will have so much more time to enjoy life together.

If you have any other questions or just want to talk about how cycling can change your life, stop by your local bike shop and they will be glad to share their experiences with you.

