



Descending Safely

Descending is a skill that few cyclists work to improve, but many cyclists need to improve. Having good descending skills is not about riding downhill faster, but instead safer.

In some Pro cycling races, descending may be the difference between winning and losing, but rarely in amateur races, will descending be a factor in overall placing. Nonetheless, amateurs should learn descending skills to make for safer riding for themselves and those around them.

This handout will provide 3 tips to improve your control and level of comfort on descents. These tips should not be construed as a “green light” to push your limits or speed on descents. These tips should be used to make your overall cycling experience safer.

1. Look Ahead As Far As You Can

Looking down at the road or into the turn is a recipe for disaster. In most instances, you will be travelling too fast to even correct an overshoot corner, or avoid an obstacle in the road if you have your eyes focused too close in front of you.

You must look as far down the road as your eyes can maintain focus. In addition, when cornering on descents, you must look “beyond” the turn—meaning your eyes must always be looking at what is appearing as you make the corner. The farther you can look ahead and the farther out you can look through the turn, the more readily

you will be able to adjust your cornering angle and avoid upcoming obstacles.

There is an old adage in any sport that involves speed: Your body will go where you look. Try it on your bike on a flat road or a flat corner: look down just beyond your front wheel—you may find it hard to go in a straight line. This is because your body is moving toward a rapidly changing point. Try looking as far ahead of you as your eyes can maintain focus—you will find straight-line riding easier, because your body is moving toward a slowly changing point on the horizon. Try this in corners. First looking toward the curb on the corner and then looking through the corner, where you wish to steer your bike. I guarantee you will find the bike corners more cleanly, and you will feel more in control of the bike.

These principles work with descending as well: head up, eyes looking ahead, scanning the distance as you pick up speed. Head turned, eyes looking “around” the corner as you descend through a turn.

You will feel like you are in more control of your bike, because you *are* in more control of your bike. You are simply more prepared for what lies ahead.

2. Weight the Bike Properly

For straight downhills, the most effective position for control and safety, is pedals parallel with the

ground; hands in the drops with bent, loose elbows; a firm hand grip on the handlebars; back flat, head up with eyes scanning the road as far into the distance as possible; and knees close to the top tube, if not locked on the top tube.

For cornering on descents, all the above apply except the position of the knees, legs, and pedals vary. When cornering on descents, think of yourself as setting up a tripod. One leg of the tripod is the hand on the inside of the corner. The inside corner hand should place light pressure on the handlebar. This light pressure will help steer you through the corner, and keep good front tire contact with the road. When cornering on descents there is very little, if no, handlebar turning; instead you are leaning the bike to cause it to carve a corner. The light pressure on the inside hand is not a steering maneuvering, but an aid to leaning through a corner. For example, when turning right, place light pressure with your right hand on the handle bar.

The second leg of the tripod is your buttocks on the saddle. Sliding slightly back in the saddle, will provide more stability as the rear tire will have more grip. Sliding slightly back will also allow you to flatten your back. Keep contact with your saddle, but do not overweight the rear end your bike. You will need to be able to float over your saddle at times when switching leg position to get either the left or right crank in the down position.

The third leg of the tripod is your actual leg. The leg to the outside of the corner should be fully extended; in other words, the crank on the outside of the corner should be in the down position. It is important that you also apply pressure to this down pedal. The pressure will transfer to your rear tire, providing more traction and forcing it to carve in the opposite direction (the way you are turning). For example, when turning right, extend your left leg, and place pressure on the left pedal. For more pressure, roll your buttocks on the extended leg side so that you lift more of your weight from the saddle and place it over the pedal.

3. Attack the Downhill

When a cat is scared, it arches its back away from the danger, and extends its front legs and paws. When a cat is going to attack its prey, it crouches low, keeps its head low, and focuses straight ahead and directly over its paws

You must learn to attack a downhill; not in a dangerous, high-speed way, but in a focused, prepared way, like an attacking cat. The analogy may seem a bit silly, but visualize yourself attacking the downhill like a cat attacking prey. You will feel much more confident and in control, because you *will* actually have more control of your bike.

This position will reinforce the first 2 points.

Conclusion

Descending is a dangerous aspect of the sport of cycling, but it is part and parcel to its enjoyment. It is important that you learn, understand, and practice the skills necessary to descend in complete control of your bicycle. This is important to you and other riders.

Practice the above 3 tips on a flat road with little or no traffic. Once you mastered the skills, attempt them in corners on a flat road with little or no traffic. Once you have mastered that, move to downhills. Start with shallow downhills and move to steeper terrain. Then mix in corners on the downhills.

Remember the 3 tips as you practice:

1. Look ahead.
2. Form a tripod.
3. Attack the downhill.

Be safe by *never* attempting a downhill at a speed, which you cannot handle.

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