

**I'M 44
AND I WANT TO
GET RAD**

**WHO EVEN
SAYS RAD
ANYMORE?**



BY JOE LINDSEY // PHOTOGRAPHY BY BENJAMIN RASMUSSEN

A LIFELONG ROADIE TURNS TO DIRT JUMPING—AND FINDS HIMSELF PARALYZED BY THE FEAR

OF CRASHING. IS IT TOO LATE FOR HIM TO GET BIG AIR?



T

THE JUMP IS FEARSOME, A STEEP WALL OF soil, frozen in a curl like a wave at Cortes Bank, motionless outside of geologic time. But there's a twist: It doesn't crash down on you. You crash down on it.

The consequences of said crashing aren't exactly the same, but it feels close enough when you're in your mid-40s and acutely aware of gravity and your lack of mastery of it. Acutely aware of being self-employed and purchasing your own health insurance. Acutely aware that a devastating injury could keep you from earning a living.

The problem is my head. In my quarter-century of riding, I've been mostly a roadie and XC nerd. I never raced BMX as a kid, never skied freestyle. I even found trampolines a little freaky in my youth. My MO on 'bikes has always been to keep the rubber pretty solidly attached to the earth. You want big air? Pull my finger, kid.

But I've always envied the smooth steez of more skilled and daring riders as they flowed over lines and roosted off stuff I avoided. That's why, when one of my best friends decided to "store" his Transition PBJ

dirt-jump bike at my house last summer, I saw it as an opportunity to try to fill this gap in my skill set. This was my chance to finally get rad.

I was in a great place to learn. I live in Boulder, Colorado, home to Valmont Bike Park. Most dirt jumps are ad hoc creations on odd lots built by odd kids who enjoy shaping earth into mounds with shovels and then hucking bicycles over them. Valmont, however, is a city-run facility with a full-time maintenance crew that doubtlessly performs its work under ISO Best Practices and Six

**LINDSEY
FACES DOWN
HIS NEMESIS
AT THE
VALMONT
BIKE PARK
IN BOULDER,
COLORADO.**

Sigma Quality Control. I'm not sure about that last part, actually, but the jumps are bitchen.

I started going to Valmont weekly, mostly in the early morning when no one was there to witness my level of suck. I

got better. I could ride the pump track properly, without pedaling, by using my arms and legs to maneuver the bike through the whoop-de-doo and bermed corners. I could roll the smaller slopestyle courses—flowing, slightly downhill trails interspersed with jumps that have gentle takeoff ramps—and get the wheels a few millimeters off the ground. But not much more. And I still couldn't do anything in Valmont's dedicated dirt jump area—starting with that first tabletop on the small line with the steep, intimidating, wave-like takeoff. (In reality, chickens probably have bigger lips than this thing.)

I would roll in every time, all steely-eyed focus...and promptly freak out and tap the brakes before the takeoff. Without enough speed, I'd come down short, landing the bike hard on the flattened top rather than the sloped landing on the other side. My lizard brain—primitive, purely instinctual, and solely focused on survival—was the problem. After months of frustrating attempts, I admitted I was stuck. Plateaued.

I began to wonder: Was I, in my middle age, just too old to learn this? Was my brain too trapped in its fears, borne out of past crashes and other painful brushes with mortality? But before I gave up, I had to explore one more avenue. As I'd said to myself at many other points in my life: "Son, you need professional help."

IT'S 10 A.M. ON A SUMMER WEEKDAY AT Valmont, far past my usual sesh time. The park is full of kids and families exploring the trails. There are kids on sweet dirt jump rigs, on department store bikes, on Striders. They roll into almost any line with that blissful ignorance of youth: zero regard for their equipment, their skills, or what lies on the other side of that takeoff. Moms watch warily, and give equally wary side-eye to guys like me who seem to a) not have a kid present to look after and b) not have a job to go to. But I'm here on important business: a lesson from Amy Shenton, a competitive dirt jumper and

skills instructor.

I hired Amy, who is 29, because she knows what it's like to learn this as an adult. A little over five years ago, her then-boyfriend brought her to the bike park. She was new to mountain biking. "It took me 20 minutes to get the courage to roll off a curb," she said. She hated it. But her boyfriend loved it so she kept at it, and got better, even getting decent at dirt jumps. Then, she took a lesson. She loved the confidence and control it gave her, so she took more. Then started teaching. Now she wins competitions and boosts the XL jump lines.

We start with fundamental skills like body position, braking, and cornering that might seem basic for someone who's ridden as long as I have. But we all develop bad habits.

For instance, about 15 years ago I went over the handlebar in a rock garden and broke my face and thumb. Since then, I've been terrified of endos and ride way too far back on the bike in techy stuff. The first thing Amy teaches me is correct "attack" position: hinged at the hips with knees and elbows slightly bent, my weight on the pedals with the heels dropped, and hands so light on the bar they're almost an afterthought. "If your weight is in the pedals, it's impossible for you to endo," she says.

We do a drill where I practice braking, with pedals at 2 and 8 o'clock. With my feet balanced properly, I'm still thrown forward—that's just physics—but in a controlled fashion and into the pedals, not over the front of the bike.

We move on to the pump track. I do OK here, and Amy cheerfully points out that "dirt jumps are basically a pump track." That is, if you traced a rider's trajectory between takeoff and landing, and filled in the area underneath with dirt, you'd have a big whoop-de-do like a pump track. This is why good dirt jumpers land so smooth.

Amy does a run on the small dirt jump line to show me proper form. She rolls in smoothly, absorbing the bike's upward momentum on the first whoop-de-do and then exploding up out of the takeoff on the tabletop, pulling the bike up in the air and then pointing it back down for a perfect, soft-touch landing. I watch and listen, nod dutifully, and then roll in myself. I approach the ramp-shaped takeoff with good attack position and the perfect speed and, at just the right moment, pull the bar up into my chest to gain momentum off the lip. For a brief moment I am soaring, gloriously, higher than I ever have. And then lizard brain kicks in.

“The way through fear isn’t brute force. It’s consciously practicing technique until it becomes second nature.”

In my state of alarm, I assume the position known as the “dead sailor”—frozen, off-balance, and coming down fast. I panic and stick my left foot out on the landing. The bike spins around with my foot as a pivot and the fate of my left ACL flashes before my eyes. *That was a really, really stupid thing to do*, I think, as my heart thumps between my temples. Amy rolls with it. “That was good!” she says. “You just froze up in the air a little.”

We try again. I gamely give a few efforts of varying quality, but lizard brain is wide awake now and, at best, my front wheel clears the tabletop with my back wheel landing flat on top of it, same as always.

“Let’s go to the slopestyle course,” Amy says. She is careful not to frame this as a failure, but I’m disappointed and even a little ashamed that I’m not ready for the dirt jumps. But I also see, based on her approach of building on fundamentals, why we’re moving on. The way through my fear isn’t brute force. It’s repetition, consciously practicing technique until it becomes second nature, so that every jump is consistent, every takeoff precise and controlled, every landing smooth

and soft. That builds confidence, which overcomes lizard brain. I’m not gaining confidence here, so the slopestyle course—with its mix of tabletops and rounded whoop-style airs—is a better choice for now.

I like slopestyle. The takeoffs don’t seem to have the same steepness and violent kineticism about them as dirt jump kickers do. I can judge my momentum better. I’m getting air and hitting softer landings. I feel like I’m slightly more in my element again.

Each lap, some little part of the puzzle tumbles into place. We do one final run and it’s my best yet.

EVERY WEEK AFTER THE LESSON, I GO BACK to Valmont, in my usual dawn patrol time slot. But now I have a routine. I start with the drills Amy showed me, reminding myself of proper body position and cornering technique. A few rounds of the pump track complete the warm-up.

Then I do a few slopestyle runs, aiming not for amplitude but consistency, precise takeoffs, and controlled landings. Some runs—some days—are better than others. And I still

haven’t mastered that first, upward-curling tabletop in the dirt jumps.

A single lesson was never going to transform me into the next Crankworx big air champ, nor did I expect it to. What it did give me was the framework to critique myself. Before, I’d have a good run and exult; and if I had a bad one I’d sulk, wondering what was so different. Now I know why. And far from reducing the magic of dirt jumping to something mechanical and routine, that knowledge is freeing, even making the practice meditative. Just focus on the technique, and go again.

Having the structure by which to improve was also satisfying. When you’ve been riding a long time it’s easy to forget the rush of breaking through some barrier to progress. I discovered that again in dirt jumping. The fear is still there, of course; it will likely always be. But it does not have to control my path.

At the top of the slopestyle run, the early morning air is bright and clean, and the golden sunlight glints off the Flatirons in the distance. The park is, as usual for this hour, mostly empty. I drop in and float off the bridge. I transition to the first jump, elbows and knees bent, torso low on the bike, then let the front end rise into the takeoff and pull on the bar, the bike coming up into my body before I push the nose down to the landing. I take a second jump, a tabletop, wheels touching down so soft that the rabbit a few feet away in the grass startles but does not run. Another, just like that, and then the final rush of momentum sends me shooting through the bermed turn to the exit. It’s my best to date. I thrill to the accomplishment. I’m not rad yet, by any means. But I am a dirt jumper. **B**

FLYING 101

Apply these basic mountain biking skills when you’re going off a jump and prepare to soar.

1/ ATTACK! To get into attack position, level your pedals, bend your knees and elbows, and hinge at the hips so your shoulders are at the same height as your hips. Move your butt back and forth until your weight is centered—you’re neither pulling forward on the bar, nor pushing back. Your

weight should be in your pedals. This is your position for entering a jump takeoff.

2/ ROW (AND ANTI-ROW) In a pump track, as the front wheel rises up the next crest, pull the bar up into your chest and push the bike forward with your legs—veteran mountain bike skills

instructor Lee McCormack calls this the “row.” Over the top of the crest, as the front wheel starts to drop away, push the handlebar away, down into the trough (anti-row) as your legs absorb the back of the bike up over the crest. Keep your weight over the pedals. If you do this right, you’ll preserve or gain

momentum. For a jump, do the row motion to pop off the lip. Use anti-row in the air to push the nose of the bike down for a smooth landing.

3/ LOOK THROUGH As you’re coming down, keep your pedals level and look at the landing, not at your front wheel.—J.L.

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