

# STARTING AND STOPPING

*Do You Really Know How to Ride a Bicycle?.*

*by Sheldon Brown*

Most people think that once they can get around the block without falling down, they've "mastered" riding a bicycle and know all they need to about riding technique. Like most skills, however, there are levels of mastery, and a cyclist who has learned and practiced good technique will be a safer, more effective cyclist.

## Starting

Many long-time cyclists have never taken the time to learn the correct way to mount and dismount. They have bad habits that put them at risk when they try to start up in traffic or cycle uphill.

The most basic cycling skill is the ability to ride straight — without wobbling from side to side. It is impossible for most cyclists to do this until they reach a certain minimum speed, typically in the range of 5-8 miles per hour (8-13 kph).

Learning correct starting technique will enable you to reach this critical maneuvering speed sooner so you will spend less time with your bicycle under partial control. This is particularly important for the urban cyclist who starts up along with motor traffic when the light turns green.

When riding a loaded touring bike, reaching maneuvering speed promptly and smoothly is even more important.

## Some Wrong Ways

**The Cowboy Mount.** This technique is popular among cyclists who learned to ride on a bicycle that was too large for them. Indeed, this is the only way to get started on a bike that is too tall for the rider. This dubious technique involves standing next to the bike, putting one foot on a pedal, then swinging the other leg over the saddle while the bicycle is in motion.

The cowboy mount places the rider's weight on the bicycle while it is leaning over at a sharp angle. This puts considerable lateral stress on the frame and even more on the wheels, which are not designed to withstand serious sideways stresses.

**The Shuffle Mount.** This maneuver involves straddling the



bike, then standing on the low pedal, and trying to get the bike moving by pushing off against the ground with the other foot...you can't get up to maneuvering speed quickly this way, and you can't get started uphill at all with this technique.

**The Flying Leap.** This mount is less common but equally poor technique, consisting of running alongside the bicycle then vaulting up onto the saddle. Riders in a hurry sometimes mount this way, but it is dangerous and inelegant. (Disregard this comment if you ride an old-time "high wheeler." The flying leap is quite appropriate for these machines.)

## Correct Basic Starting Technique

1. Stand astride the frame, both feet on the ground. Most people get to this position by swinging a leg over the saddle, but if you have low handlebars, you can swing your legs over the bars as well. The leg-over-the-bars move is very impressive visually and not difficult. Assuming

you're mounting from the left, you hold the middle of the handlebar with your right hand. As your leg swings up and over, you let go with your right hand and immediately grab the bar with your left hand. With a bit of practice, this is smooth and easy on a bike with drop bars.

If you have a "lady's" bike, folder, or other bike with a low frame, you may be able to lift your foot over the frame. It sometimes helps to lean the bike to the side before straddling it.

Don't try to sit on the saddle while the bike is stopped. This is not possible on modern bikes if your saddle is properly adjusted.

2. Rotate the pedals so that the pedal for your less skillful foot is 45 degrees forward of straight up.

3. Step down hard on the high pedal. This will let you use the pedal as a step to lift yourself high enough to get onto the saddle while applying driving force to the chain, causing the bike to pick up speed.

If you have not learned to do this, take the time to practice. It may sound difficult, but it isn't as hard as it sounds. Once you

get used to it, it will become second nature. You will become a better, safer cyclist because you will be able to bring your bicycle quickly up to a speed that allows you to ride without wobbling.

## Stopping

Stopping is not as much of a challenge, but there are some bad habits to lose and good habits to teach yourself.

Shift down first. If your bike has derailleur gears, it can only be shifted while in motion. It is very worthwhile to cultivate the habit of shifting into a fairly low gear as you glide to a stop so that you will be in a suitable gear for starting up again. Usually, this will involve shifting the rear derailleur onto the lowest (largest) sprocket and the front onto the second largest chainwheel. In an emergency, you'll just stop and not worry about the gear, but for

controlled stops, you can teach yourself to do this downshifting automatically.

## When to Put Your Foot Down.

Because they want to assist inadequate brakes with shoe leather, some cyclists have a tendency to put a foot down too soon, which can be painful. When stopping, you need to rest your weight on one pedal (which will, more than likely, be at the bottom of its stroke). Your other foot should not touch the ground until the bicycle is very close to being stopped.

If you put your foot down while the bike is still moving, here's what happens. You're already slowing down and the brakes are slowing the entire bike/rider unit. If you put a foot down and transfer your weight to it, the brake then only needs to slow the bicycle, which is much

lighter than you. The amount of braking force that was slowing the bike and rider at a controllable rate will be sufficient to bring the bicycle alone to an abrupt halt. Meanwhile, your body's momentum keeps you in motion and you whack a delicate part on the handlebar stem. Ouch!

## How Do I Get to Carnegie Hall?

If you are one of the many cyclists who, despite years of experience, has never overcome bad starting/stopping habits, it is not too late to improve your technique. These approaches may feel funny at first, but when you get used to them, you'll see how much better they work. Practice, practice, practice! **AC**

*Sheldon Brown expounds on all sorts of bicycle issues. More of his insightful ruminations can be found at [www.sheldonbrown.com](http://www.sheldonbrown.com).*