

# GROWING PAINS

It's time to put youth safety first

By Lee McCormack

**H**ello, friends. This article is more serious than usual. As a 36-year mountain biker and a 22-year professional mountain bike communicator and teacher, I see much beauty in our beloved sport, and I also see some ugliness that must be addressed. We are a community of people seeking health and joy. I offer this and future articles in the hopes we create a culture that's as healthy and joyful as possible.

In my work as a mountain bike skills teacher, I've trained more than 10,000 riders and about 2000 coaches. I trained a handful of coaches to work with me. I trained the rest to work as volunteers in various local, state, regional and national youth mountain bike programs.

As a person who has benefited greatly from mountain biking, I want as many people as possible to experience the joy of safe riding. For that reason, I have put significant time and heart into training volunteer coaches.

When I was giving big presentations I jumped up and down and screamed about the importance of safety. I proposed that there are safe ways to teach mountain bike skills. There are steps, assessments and best practices that, when followed, provide the best chance at riders enjoying themselves and not getting hurt. Accidents will happen, but we can minimize the chances of calamity.

I've devised a program to safely teach people to ride mountain bikes. This is one reason I've never had to file an incident report or insurance claim for an injured rider. The other reason is I am

massively committed to safety; I'd rather you hate me for not letting you hit some jump than allow you to get hurt on my watch. That is part of being a professional mountain bike skills coach. I must protect rider safety above all else.

To the volunteer coaches, I said, imagine the worst-case scenario: That a kid gets hurt on your watch. There's no way to reduce the pain that will be brought to any living, breathing coach. Then I said imagine being deposed by shark lawyers. They're going to ask you about your organization's best practices and what specific protocols your program uses to ensure safety. If there are no protocols that meet industry best practices, you might be in trouble. If there are protocols and you don't follow them, you might be in trouble.

I told the volunteers, even if you're not personally legally or financially responsible, if you endanger kids because you're willfully ignorant and lazy, you are ethically responsible. If you decide to be a mountain bike coach, you must make reasonable efforts to ensure safety or at least not increase risk. If you can't commit to that effort, don't do it



Haley Batten raced NICA events in high school, got some coaching by Lee McCormack, and went on to win a silver medal in the 2024 Olympics. (Photo: Bartek Wolinski/Nove Mesto/Red Bull Content Pool)

For the most part, all I got were yawns and, “Come on, man, it’s just biking.” My hardcoreness made me a bad fit for these organizations. Years after I was released as head coach for a big program, I was contacted by a professor of sports medicine at the University of Utah Orthopaedic Center. He was tasked with finding out why high school mountain biking injury rates were so high. He wrote, “Our first three years of data collection indicate that a lot of crashes are associated with some level of mismatch between rider skill relative to terrain and/or speed. If this is true, then better skills training is surely a key to injury prevention (and improved race times).”

Programs like NICA have a limited ability to manage safety because they are relying on volunteers to teach a potentially dangerous sport. NICA now offers two trainings for its coaches. On-The-Bike 101 is an online classroom session followed by three hours of training on the bike. On-The-Bike 202 is a five-hour in-person training. Both include a digital manual and a coaching field guide. I’m sure some wonderful people are doing their best to help

the kids, but eight hours of training (or even a weekend class) does not create a qualified mountain bike skills coach.

I need to be clear here: If you’re a volunteer coach, thank you. That’s wonderful. If you’re being tasked with managing the safety of kids, you should be trained properly — and you should be paid. This way you can dedicate the time needed to build your coaching skills, and the league can hold you accountable for quality.

My loud warnings about safe mountain bike coaching were always theoretical for me—until now. What follows is a sad and troubling story. As an expert witness on this case, I helped the family secure a settlement to take care of their son for the rest of his life.

## THE FACTS

Singletrack Mountain Bike Adventures (SMBA) is a youth mountain bike program in Boulder, Colorado. I ran their gravity program 20 years ago. Today, SMBA offers a wide variety of programs for young mountain bike riders. This is a paid program. Parents drop kids off in the morning and expect to pick up stoked

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Austin Moskowitz takes to the air for New Jersey's Highlands Composite Racing Team.



kids in the afternoon.

The emotions are coming back up, so I'm gonna make this terse:

A young man named Kevin was part of a group of teen riders.

Their coach took them to ride a bootleg downhill trail outside Nederland, Colorado. When Kevin's dad took me to see the trail, we had to grind up a steep, difficult climb, then carry our bikes over some logs to the start of the trail. This trail was so steep and raw, I was flabbergasted.

Kevin said he was afraid of this trail and didn't want to ride it. He was overridden.

Kevin said there was no formal skills instruction or assessments to make sure he was ready for such a trail. No training in how to brake. No training in how to turn. No training in how to manage bumps. No training in how to gauge speed. No training in how to pick lines. No training.

The coach told the kids to turn on Strava so they can compare times at the bottom.

Kevin was riding an XC race bike with a long/low cockpit and XC tires that did not provide great bike control. This did not directly cause the crash, but it certainly hurt his comfort and confidence.

The group took off in pursuit of fast Strava times, leaving Kevin by himself off the back.

A section of trail rolled down the fall line, over a water bar, then dropped steeply into a series of turns around trees. The ground was

loose, rutted and rooty.

From evidence and experience, I posit Kevin was afraid, tense, too high and too far back on his bike. When he hit the water bar, he got catapulted over the handlebars, down the slope and into a tree.

Kevin is now a quadriplegic. He's a positive and strong kid, but his life and that of his family have been irrevocably altered.

### MISTAKES WERE MADE

Let's count the big ones:

**Bike selection and setup.** Parents are not qualified to know all about mountain bike fit and setup, nor should they have to be. It's the responsibility of the coaching program to advise the riders and their families—and to maintain sensible standards that match the terrain the kids will be riding.

**Lack of protocols for skills development and safety.** I asked every which way, and the answer was always the same: there was no formal skills instruction, nor were there assessments to match riders with terrain.

**Trail selection was awful.** I can't see taking any student on a trail like that. If I had to, for some reason, I'd make sure the student can execute all of the individual moves in a clean environment, then make sure the student can maintain confidence under stress and, most important, make sure the student wants to ride this trail.

**Competitiveness.** Telling teen boys to turn on Strava and pin it down a steep, loose downhill trail? Come on.

**Poor ride management.** If Kevin was to be taken down that trail, a coach should have stayed with him and encouraged him to walk the sections he was afraid to ride. A great coach might have made him feel so safe, so taken care of, that Kevin would have had a great time no matter which parts of the trail he rode. Instead, Kevin was left by himself while the adult coach rode ahead with the faster kids.

If there's only one coach, the coach should have told Kevin to walk any section he doesn't want to ride. It's essential that the coach celebrates the no decisions as much as the yes decisions.

Gene Hamilton coaches one of his students on how to corner properly. (Photo by Scott Markewitz)



When the jersey says “COACH” on the front, you can tell he’s not one of the racers.



## ADVICE FOR PARENTS

Hire a coach or coaching company who values rider safety, not just in words but in real practice. Ask about protocols for instruction and safety. Ask how these protocols are conveyed to coaches. Ask about their insurance and claim history. If you hear the buzzword “progression,” ask for specific examples.

Find out who the coaches are. What is their training and experience? What is their age and level of maturity? How much are they paid? Do you trust these people with the safety of your children? If there is a protocol, are they capable of administering it? Is there strong oversight from the top of the organization all the way to the trail?

Make sure your kid is on a bike that fits 1) their body size and level of mobility (teen boys tend to be tight, so they need shorter/taller cockpits), and 2) the trails they plan to ride. Don’t waste money on fancy, expensive stuff. Just make sure the bike fits properly, and optimize it for safety. This means dropper posts (or a quick-release lever), flat pedals and grippy tires. Check the fit as the kid grows. A bike can grow with slightly longer stems and taller bars.

Consider hiring a professional coach to teach your kid how to ride safely. While I’ve seen a few great volunteer coaches, for the most part relying on volunteers and low-paid coaches to teach a dangerous sport is a bad idea. I believe volunteers should focus on creating a positive culture and taking kids on rides that match their abilities. Let a professional help with bike fit, fitness, riding skills and, most important, empowering kids to assert themselves and say no when they don’t feel safe.

Do your best to create an environment in which your kid tells you how it’s going out there. I was so proud of two of my young students. The sister/brother were with another coaching program who was telling them to do stuff they didn’t want to do. These kids said we are not doing this and called their grandmother to pick them up. Grandma supported them 100 percent. These kids are happily riding today.

If you want your kids to ride mountain bikes and you want them to be safe and learn useful life skills, demand that they work with qualified coaches. Be prepared to pay professional pay rates.

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High school racing give kids a way to improve both their fitness and riding skills.

What is a professional pay rate? According to Indeed, McDonald's crew members in Colorado get paid \$19–\$23 per hour. It's common for mountain bike coaches to earn about \$20 per hour (to teach a dangerous sport!). There are plenty of mountain bike coaches in the \$30–\$50-per-hour range. I earn \$200 per hour. As a parent, you can decide what price point keeps your kids safe enough.

Imagine how you'll feel if your kid gets hurt by unsafe instruction. I see how this has affected Kevin's dad. It's heartbreaking.

### ADVICE FOR COACHES AND COACHING PROGRAMS

More parents and adult riders are gonna realize getting hurt is not “part of the sport.” They will sue. They will establish precedent. The world of mountain bike skills coaching will be forced to grow up. I suggest we step it up on our own rather than wait to be regulated.

**Become a professional.** Learn about bike-riding dynamics, including bike fit, setup and sports psychology. Craft yourself into a master teacher. Put rider safety, both physical and emotional, above all else. You can only teach to the level you've achieved as a rider and human. Continually improve yourself.

**Charge a professional rate.** Parents expect to pay a premium for soccer, ballet, swim and gymnastics coaching, but they expect mountain bike coaching to be free or cheap. Right now on Indeed.com, I see the following listings:

—Private basketball or track and field coach. Athletes Untapped, Denver, CO. \$35–\$200 per hour.

—Mountain bike coach/instructor. Powderhorn Mountain Resort, Mesa, CO. \$17.50 per hour.

If you're earning \$17.50 per hour, how much can you be expected to do? Not much. This is one reason there are so few highly skilled, highly qualified professional mountain bike skills coaches.

If you decide to become a professional mountain bike skills instructor, craft yourself into a professional, then demand professional pay. The stakes are too high to fool around. If you're not

willing to take this seriously, don't do it.

I'm not gonna point out problems without providing solutions. Check out the certification programs from the Professional Mountain Bike Instructor Association (PMBIA) and Bike Instructor Certification Program (BICP). If you want me to provide industry best practices for your company, or you simply want you and your kids to learn how to ride safely, reach out to me at my website.

That wasn't the funnest article I've written for *MBA*, but it's the most important. Right now thousands of young people who grew up in youth mountain bike programs are enjoying mountain biking as part of a healthy, joyful lifestyle. Some, like Haley Batten, are crushing World Cups and medaling at the Olympics. She came up in the Park City, Utah, high school team. I'm proud to have helped her dial in her form, but I'm happiest to see her having fun.

Please have fun out there and keep your people safe. ☐

### What Does SMBA Say?

Before I wrote this piece, I e-mailed the director of SMBA, Matt Tomasko, to give him a chance to make a statement. I was hoping he'd say this tragedy inspired a retooling of how they conduct their work, and that they've instituted safe practices. Here is his reply to my e-mail: “Yes, an extremely unfortunate incident that we reflect on a daily basis, which could happen with any organization, individual, or professional colleague.”

When we got on the phone, he led with excitement that his SMBA riders all podiumed at Nationals. What? You know why I'm calling. A kid lives in a wheelchair and you're boasting about race results?

I gave Tomasko a week to send me a more complete statement. No statement was sent.

*Editor's note: Lee McCormack is a world-renowned mountain bike skills instructor. His books, articles, videos, and classes have helped millions of people ride and live better. You can learn with Lee via his Lee Likes Bikes MTB School ([www.leelikesbikes.com](http://www.leelikesbikes.com)) in a live class or in a Zoom lesson. Follow Lee Likes Bikes on YouTube and Instagram. Follow the birth of Mistress Cycles at [www.mistresscycles.com](http://www.mistresscycles.com).*