

Free Falling . . . The Fine Art of Drop Offs

From the staff at the Trials Training Center

Ok, smart guy, you got up on that big rock, now how you gonna get down? You say you've had those teeth all your life and want to keep them? You better have mastered the fine art of drop offs! Lucky you read all about it in Trials Comp.

For all the attention we devote to getting up obstacles, it's important to remember that every trial has an equal amount of riding devoted to going down. Oftentimes, a descent off an obstacle is followed by an immediate turn or another obstacle, so that control during and after a drop off is critical to setting up the next subsection.

Drop offs fall into three broad categories, depending upon how one goes about riding off:

1. there is the "rock-off" in which you can allow the skid plate to contact the edge, followed by smoothly easing the bike down,
2. there is the "roll-off" without hitting the skid plate, in which you apply a small amount of lift to the front end so that the skid plate clears without touching, but you still drop the front wheel first, and
3. there is the "wheelie-drop" in which you lift the front into the air and land rear wheel first.

If the drop is sloped and the run-out is not too abrupt at the bottom, then it is often possible to ease the bike off while using the skid plate for balance and control. This only works if the edge of the drop off is level and secure; a slope or uneven edge will pitch you to one side and may cause a dab or worse. Have your butt pressing on the fender to be sure that your weight is back. Brakes should be eased on (not jerky), front wheel straight and firm. Roll the front wheel off to the point where the skid plate makes contact with a firm grip on the bars. The firm grip is often needed to keep the front wheel from flopping to one side. Rock the bike as needed to ease the bike forward to the point where one more little scoot gets you started off. When you hit bottom, cushion with the arms but keep a firm grip on the bars in case unlevel ground makes the wheel tend to twist.

If the drop off edge is not level or uneven or if the drop off is undercut, then it is not possible to rock off the skid plate and you will need to roll off smoothly while keeping the skid plate away from the edge. This will require a little knee-dip to load the front suspension followed by a lift to pick the front up just enough to set the front wheel out away from the edge and make the skid plate clear. The weight goes forward to load the front suspension, then back to lift the front wheel and push the bike from beneath you. If there is an immediate turn or obstacle following the drop off, you should have a spot picked out to aim with the front wheel so that you can get on the brakes immediately upon landing.

If the drop off is steep or the landing severe, then you will need to do a wheelie drop with a rear wheel first landing. Approach the edge slowly and do a nice slow knee-dip wheelie with a minimum of throttle and lots of pressure on the back wheel. It is very important to do this with suspension and body weight with a minimum of throttle if the traction is poor or if you need to immediately stop after the drop. Carry the wheelie just off the edge so that the bike lands rear wheel first and keep your knees flexible so you can absorb the impact with your legs. You've got to be committed and confident.

Find some good safe spots to practice each of these techniques. For the roll off, practice putting the front wheel in a precise spot, and try to make a sharp turn immediately after to see how hard you can push the brakes. This is also a good spot to work on nose wheelie turns. For the wheelie drop, practice in a spot with a nice smooth landing. It doesn't have to be high to practice the technique correctly.

With these tips and a bit of practice, you can free fall without fear of flopping! For more info and some video clips, check the TTC website at www.trialstrainingcenter.com.