

IT'S GREAT OUTDOORS

COMMONWEALTH GAMES SPECIAL



Whether you're a seasoned professional or a beginner, there's no better time than right now – as we get geared up for the Commonwealth Games – to get on your mountain bike.

Technically challenging and fast-paced, cross-country mountain biking at the Commonwealth Games is set to be a real winner with spectators.

And wowing the crowds on the twisty, gnarly Cathkin Braes course will be a line-up of top Scottish riders, including British champions Lee Craigie and Grant Ferguson.

After the event on July 29, the public can ride the same route, testing their skill and confidence against the top riders' times.

It was the same at last month's UCI Fort William Mountain Bike Cup, when the riders all whizzed down the competition routes with amazing feats of skill and daring.

Once the Cup had come to an end, ordinary mountain bikers were free to give the downhill and cross-country courses a go.

But the chances are most of us will struggle to emulate the medal winners.

As well as practice and natural talent, there are skills to learn to become an accomplished off-road rider.

Al Gilmour, head of mountain biking at sportscotland Glenmore Lodge, near Aviemore, likens top-level mountain biking to skiing.

He said: "Most people can get out on the ski slopes or bike trails and

have a go. They will get so far and become fairly proficient through time.

"But to become really good and stay free from injuries, there are techniques to learn."

Glenmore Lodge is one of a number of activity centres that run mountain bike skills courses for riders of all abilities.

Al said: "You could be a complete beginner, a blue-route rider or someone looking towards challenging reds, blacks and remote singletrack.

"Whatever your current skill range, a dedicated mountain-biking technique course will take your riding to the next level and beyond."

On a Confidence Builder course, riders are taught skills such as effective

TESTING ROUTE The public can test their own skills along the Cathkin Braes course after the Games



GET ON THE RIDE

“After a few hours, I felt more confident on my bike than ever”



FIONA RUSSELL

braking, efficient use of gears and improved balance.

Jess Ridgway is a mountain bike skills instructor at Glenmore Lodge.

She said: "Simple tips, such as knowing how to feather the brakes – and when to brake and when not to – will help immensely with trail riding.

"It's also a great advantage to know how to position yourself on your bike in the ready position, so you can suck up the bumps and bounces."

For mountain bikers who want to take their riding up a level or two, a Shifting Gear two or five-day course is the ideal next step.

Al said: "Many riders want to go faster and harder on the trails, which means they need better understanding of how to handle the bike and terrain.

"We teach core skills such as effective climbing, descending, cornering manuals and bunny hops.

"It's incredible the difference these can make to riding tough off-road routes well."

I am keen to learn. At best, my mountain biking could be described as

enthusiastic. At worst, it's dangerous. On rocky sections, steps and over tree roots, I ride tentatively and often with one foot hanging off a pedal or touching the ground.

My eyes are constantly focused on the trail immediately ahead of the front wheel and I grip the handlebars with white knuckles.

Jess reports my "technique" is not an uncommon one. She encourages me to move my body around the bike as I tackle obstacles.

She said: "Moving back or forwards slightly and releasing the weight over the front or back wheel allows you to pop up and down rocks and steps.

She also explains that the trail ahead can be divided into three zones.

Jess said: "Zone A is in front of the front wheel, zone B is further ahead and zone C is in the distance.

"Try to flick your eyes between each zone and focus more on zone B than the others. That way, you'll be prepared for all that comes on the trail."

When I stall at a steep-looking rocky descent, Jess encourages me to "see



Three more to try

- Dirt School www.dirtschool.co.uk
- Ride Lines www.ridelines.co.uk
- Bottle Green Biking www.bottlegreenbiking.co.uk