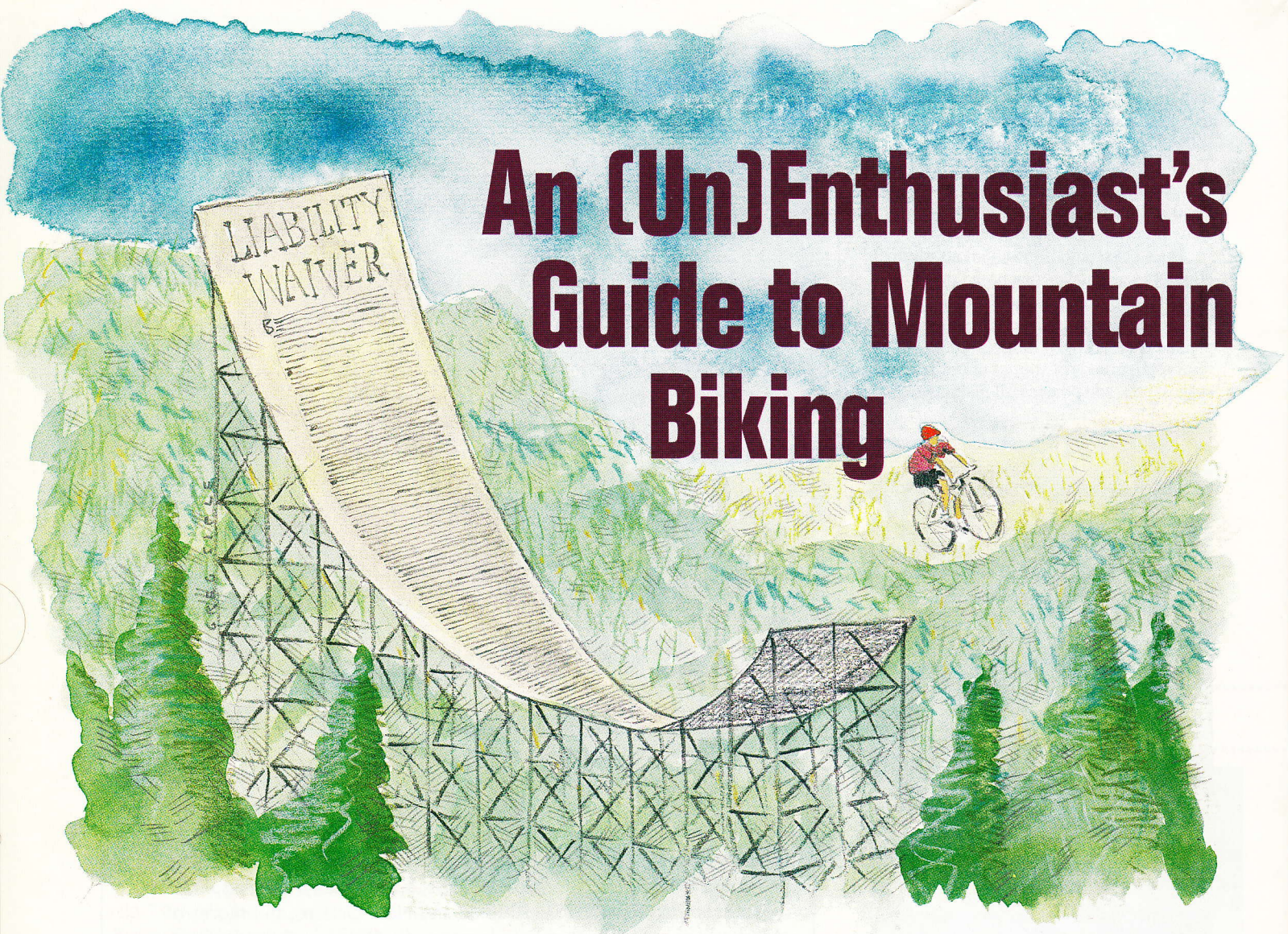
An (Un)Enthusiast's Guide to Mountain Biking



When Ed Grasso launched himself into mountain biking he didn't expect a legal document as a launching pad.

Like many people, I've purchased numerous toys and appliances in the past few years that for some reason I felt I couldn't live without. I own an espresso machine that makes brewing bad coffee easier than ever before. There's an electronic organizer that I seem to have misplaced. And I have several Windham Hill CDs that … well, I don't really know why I have those. I also bought a mountain bike. And I've been very happy with it, primarily because I haven't used it. Nor did I plan to. It was to sit conspicuously in my apartment so health-conscious friends would think I was exercising and stop pestering me during re-runs of "Cheers." I thought if I left it out in the rain a couple of times and neglected it as much as I've neglected my health, who would know?

Then I let those same people invite me on a weekend mountain-biking trip through Maine's scenic foliage. It sounded like an awful lot of work to look at the same dead leaves I would soon be able to see all over my yard, but they insisted it would be fun. Whenever a group agrees on anything — especially something being "fun" — someone's lying.

From the name, one would think mountain biking involved little more than buying a bike and finding a mountain. Not true. No matter how much money you spend on a mountain bike, you can't really ride it until you spend more money on it. Not only do you need a small shopping cart's worth of extras for your bike, you need a few for yourself as well.

I own what I consider to be the basic blue blazer and khaki pants of exercise wear: old gym shorts and a college sweatshirt. Official mountain bike attire is more akin to that powder-blue, synthetic ensemble you danced to "Night Fever" in back at the ninth-grade formal. Despite all the "Up With Nature" rhetoric bikers espouse, their attire would not even exist on this planet without the help of a petro-chemical engineer.

Not all mountain biking equipment is created to protect the plastic and Spandex industries however. Some of it, like the helmet, is actually designed to protect the rider. Virtually every park, reservation and mountain requires you to wear a brain bucket in order to ride. Still, I have a hard time believing people who hurdle down mountains and weave through the woods on a consortium of metal and plastic weighing less than a Calvin Klein model have any real concern with safety.

A friend of mine whom I'll call "Lucky to be Alive," apparently broke his concentration (not to mention his shoulder and a nice pair of Bolle sunglasses) early on in our ride. I found him sprawled on the side of the trail 30 feet downhill from his bike. He looked like a guy who'd somehow managed to get beaten up and then thrown from his bicycle. Fortunately we were near the bottom of the trail and I was able to signal for help. The lift operator radioed for the EMTs.

By Ed Grasso

Fate had seen to it that Lucky wouldn't be seeking health care alone. Another member of our party had dislocated her thumb in a fall. And while their mountain biking was scrapped for the weekend, they had plenty of time to enjoy the scenic Maine colors on the ride to the hospital.

The only people really protected in mountain-biking are the ones running the mountains. And they trust their security to legal paper, not styrofoam. We were biking at a popular ski area that became a mountain biking park in the off-season. The biggest obstacle at the park was an 8 1/2 x 16" liability waiver with print the size of obituary type and packed as tightly as the mosh pit at Woodstock II. It required my initials in six separate places and my full signature at the bottom.

This document not only held the ski mountain operator blameless in the event I injured or killed myself, it also indemnified two towns and several abutting landowners. It went on to list various natural and man-made hazards like fallen trees, open water, drainage ditches, authorized and unauthorized vehicles, and perhaps the most dangerous of all — other bikers.

Riding at a ski area, every trail requires as much braking as you can generate before your hands cramp. This is because all the trails run downhill. The majority of the survivors in my group were males pushing 30, pushed past 30, or — in my case — having 30 push back. Like most men, we are extremely insecure about growing old. And like most men our age, we never talk about it. We don't have time. We're too busy trying to prove how young we think we still are. That's why we took the hardest, most difficult trails down the mountain.

The easiest trails were marked with circles. Those weren't for us; perhaps the roundness reminded us too much of our own settling shapes. Intermediate trails were designated by a square. That seemed more like me, especially when you considered my record collection. But no, we went for the most challenging trails: the black diamonds. As far as shapes go, a diamond is nothing more than a square with poor balance, which gives you some idea of how I looked.

Each trail also has a name that is supposed to give you a visceral idea of what it's really like. The black diamond names tried to sound as miserable, threatening and tortuous as possible: *Agony, Widow Maker, Kurt Cobain.* But these were mere annoyances when compared to the last trail we took: *Look Ma, No Trail.*

Look Ma, No Trail followed a river bank, unless there was a more difficult way to go. Even a casual adherent to the laws of nature will notice that nothing follows a river bank with ease except a river. And rivers are usually cold and wet, as are the mountain bikers who try to follow them too closely.

As it turned out, the last thing I needed on that trail was a bike. I wound up humping 40 pounds of equipment through muck and mire and I don't ever remember signing up to Be All I Could Be. But after a sufficient amount of whining, things got better — we stopped riding and repaired to the local brewing company. Here, I began to reflect.

A weekend of seemingly passive leaf-peeping had produced a 20 percent casualty rate after only the first run. This was significantly higher than what was experienced in the Gulf War, but well below the current divorce rate. All of which would seem to indicate mountain biking is more dangerous than engaging the world' fourth largest army, but not quite as hazardous as simply being engaged. ●

Ed Grasso has returned his mountain bike to its place of honor in his living room.

