

mountain bikes

Maybe you've chased riders of them off your golf course. Maybe you've seen them late at night on ESPN, fearlessly navigating down some ungodly incline with wicked switchbacks.

Ask the hardcore mountain bikers why they do that, and they'll speak of freedom, expression and the thrill of taking on nature. Ask the rest of us, who are a little less daring, and the answer is more simple, "Mountain biking is just fun."

Over the past 20 years, mountain biking has boomed, going from a small-time activity enjoyed by a few old road bikers to a worldwide phenomena that includes professional tours and Olympic respectability. But this isn't a sport for kids with blue hair, no fear and no hope for a real job. Mountain biking can be done by anyone, anywhere.

You do, though, need the right gear and mindset. So before you drop several hundred beans in your latest attempt at getting your butt in shape, there are a few things to know about buying a mountain bike, taking care of it and taking care of yourself.

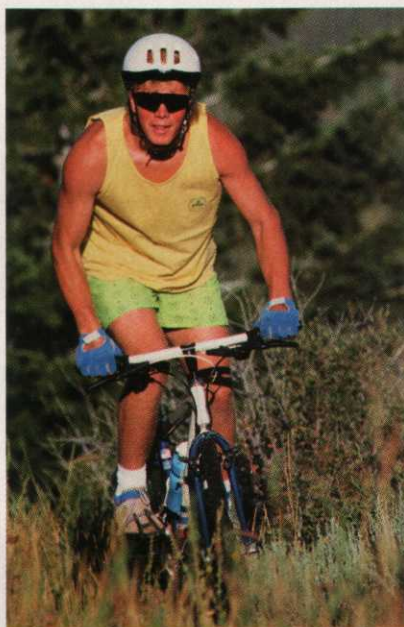
• **Frame it.** "The most important thing to consider when buying a mountain bike is picking the right frame," says Amy Price of the Sunflower Outdoor and Bike Shop, in Lawrence, Kan. "You can always build on your foundation and upgrade your components, but it's more costly to upgrade your frame."

Price says aluminum or carbon fiber frames are more durable and light.

• **Parts is parts.** Like a stereo, there are many parts to a mountain bike, and the flow in your ride depends on the quality

IF YOU'RE THINKING OF TRYING IT . . . LET IT RIDE!

YOU WON'T LOOK BACK. BY MARK LUCE



of equipment you have on your bike. Price says the following components are among the best available, and there are several gradations from low end to top of the line. Look for the following brand-name pieces: derailleur — Shimano; forks — Rock Shock, Manitou or Marzocchi; brakes — Avid; rims — Rolf or Mavic.

• **The whole enchilada.** A great starting bike is the Trek 4500, which costs about \$400. The bike's aluminum frame and Rock Shock Jett forks are all beginners need and can handle off-road abuse.

If you're looking for something more fancy, try a Cannondale — the Saab of the mountain biking world. Characterized by super-thick tubing (don't worry, it's still light as a feather), Cannondales will cost you more, but they are easy to

upgrade as your biking needs change.

Always test ride a bike before buying. Make sure you can handle the bike, and that you have 2 to 4 inches of clearance while straddling the seat.

• **A little TLC.** You should take care of your bike. Many bike shops offer maintenance clinics to help teach proper care. If your shop doesn't offer one, try reading *Zinn and the Art of Mountain Bike Maintenance* by Leonard Zinn.

• **Be prepared.** You also can't forget to take care of yourself. For starters, you'll need a helmet, water bottle and cage, tire tool, patch kit and spare tube, all of which can fit in an underseat pouch. You'll also need a pump. If you plan to ride at night, you'll need a headlight.

• **Water, water, everywhere.** If you aren't drinking enough water or eating enough, you may hit the wall, Price warns. So stay hydrated, and maybe take a few bananas or Power Bars with you on a ride to restore energy.

• **Learn from your mistakes.** You will crash, but that doesn't mean you'll get hurt. If you fall, go down with the bike and don't stick out your arms to break your fall. Your wrists are more fragile than an entire side of your body.

• **Kick it in.** Once you're geared up and ready to roll, let it ride. Watch your stress dissipate as you navigate rocks, buzz past trees and maybe catch some air. Repeat as necessary.

Mark Luce, a free-lance writer from Lawrence, Kan., can ride a mountain bike with no hands.