

Lessons Learned from a Mountain Biking Incident

Narrative

A group of school pupils were on a cycling trip with teachers from their own school. The intention was to make a journey using minor metalled roads from a local country park back to their school. The bikes they were using were on hire from a local operator and were issued to the members of the group at the departure point of the ride.

The early stages of the ride traversed a section of minor road which had numerous undulations and some short steep sections. This led into two long steeper sections, estimated by the police constable who attended the incident as being 1:8 (12.5%).

At the end of second steep section the road took a sharp left bend. One of the pupils failed to negotiate this bend. His bike hit the fence on the outside of the bend and he was catapulted over the handlebars and collided head on with a tree. The boy was subsequently taken to hospital in an unconscious condition and had to spend some time on a ventilator. He was released from hospital after approximately four weeks and has subsequently made a full recovery from his injuries. His parents later pursued a claim against the school. This claim was settled out of court.

It was reported that the teacher in charge had dealt with a "braking problem" involving the pupil's bike at an early point in the ride. A later inspection of the bike by a Licensing Service Inspector revealed that the bike was in good condition and appeared to be well maintained. The front brake was tested and found to be in good condition with adequate stopping power. However, the rear brake was poorly adjusted and was not capable of slowing or stopping the bike. It was noted that the adjuster on the rear brake lever had been screwed in tight to give maximum slack in the brake cable and maximum clearance between the brake block and the wheel rim. It was also noted that there was a very small buckle in the rear wheel that may have led to some rubbing between the brake block and the rim. It is assumed that this was the "braking problem" that had been reported. As it had not been reported that the teacher in charge had used tools to make the brake adjustment, it seems that the screwing in of the rear brake adjuster had been made by the teacher as part of his dealing with the braking problem.

Lessons Learned

1. The teacher in charge of the group was not a trained cycle leader. Whilst many may be aware of the mechanism for adjusting bicycle brakes the consequences of incorrect adjustment should not be under-estimated.
2. When equipment such as cycles are hired, the providing company has the responsibility for ensuring they are roadworthy. Any adjustment of the equipment should, if possible, be undertaken by the hire company. If there is any doubt as to suitability, the leader should insist on a replacement. This also applies, of course, to other hired equipment such as skis; it is not good practice to adjust anything for which you have not been specifically trained.
3. Normal good practice is that once any adjustment or repair is carried out on essential equipment like brakes, that a "test-ride" is carried out to test that the level of adjustment is appropriate.
4. It would be considered good practice to have an introductory period at the start of any trip, when the riding competence of individual pupils could be assessed against the demands of the planned route. During this period any necessary adjustment to the sizing and fitment of bikes could be carried out by someone competent to do so and any mechanical problems identified and dealt with.
5. The planned route back to the school was a challenging one that would have required the group to have good control of their bikes from the start. It would be considered prudent for leaders on such trips to attempt to gain some knowledge of the terrain or carry out a prior inspection of routes to ensure that they are suitable for their groups. ■

The Lessons Learned Group is a small group of professionals and enthusiasts in adventure activities, brought together by a common aim to incorporate any lessons that can be learned from accidents into ongoing good practice.

Our intention is to present an objective summary of an incident together with possible lessons. We do not aim to allocate blame or responsibility and our report represents the views of the individual members of LLG and not of any official body.

Information not currently available to us may render our comments inaccurate and the lessons identified may or may not have influenced the actual outcome. Any report published has been agreed by at least four individuals within the Group as meeting these aims.

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