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Trials on Trails

by [Joe Tennis](#)

MotoTrials may be the only motor sport in the world judged on skill, not speed.



Photography by Adam Ewing

Several times a week, Leslie Matheson of Bunn, North Carolina, leaves her day job as an engineer and heads out with her fellow members of the Carolina Virginia Observed Trials Club (CVOTC) to tackle large logs, rocks, steep hills, and rocky streams on motorcycles. The riders use balance, throttle and brake control, experience, and a good bit of courage to practice a hobby she calls “super fun, even when you’re just a beginner.”

Matheson, 57, is talking about the sport of observed trials, where riders use specially designed motorcycles to navigate outdoor obstacle courses. “There are not many things that you can do and play hard at when you get older,” she says. “It’s super challenging. It’s super addictive. It’s the most fun I’ve ever had, to be honest. And it’s a great family sport. You can compete at any age.” Riders literally range in age from 6 to 106.



Leslie Matheson

Rick Schill, a rider from Rougemont, North Carolina, and the president of the CVOTC, agrees. “It’s relatively inexpensive and relatively safe and really family oriented,” he says. A trials bike runs about \$7,500, he adds, so it “is not a huge investment and not a really big safety concern.”

Founded in 1989, CVOTC splits its 58 members—mostly men—between North Carolina and Virginia. Active riders range from 5 years old to 87. Longtime members like Schill, Gary Heyer of Chesapeake, 67, and club historian Jim Ellis of Bunn, 78, all began riding in the 1960s and ’70s, but Matheson cranked up this sport only in the past two years. “It’s a blast,” she says. “What attracted it to me was because I tried to find a sport that I could do in my later years.”

Not MotoCross



Matt Ennis's expert level teammates keep score and provide guidance on a steep incline.

According to the American Motorcyclist Association, observed trials, or MotoTrials, is both one of the oldest forms of motorcycle competition and one of the best for developing safe, well-rounded riding skills. Like motocross, MotoTrials evolved from the reliability trials manufacturers held to demonstrate their machines' durability. However, "MotoTrials puts no premium on speed whatsoever. The winner is simply the most skilled and (sometimes) luckiest rider on a particular course," states the AMA website.



Chris Buzzelli ducks under a fallen tree on an expert level course

This is not motocross, says Matheson. “Motocross racing is really dangerous; it’s high speed.” Heyer, who tried motocross decades ago, concurs. “It was way too fast,” he says. “And the actual riding and crashing—I realized that I didn’t like speed that much.” He bought his first trials bike in 1974 and joined the CVOTC in 1994.

And there are plenty of riders like Heyer. Schill suggests that observed trials attracts weary motocross riders whose bodies and bikes have been bruised. Matheson believes, “A lot of people come to trials events to improve their skills. Or they are tired of hitting trees at 50 mph; that stuff catches up to you.”

Stay Balanced



Club historian and vintage rider Jim Ellis rides over a log on an intermediate course.

So, if it’s not motocross, what is MotoTrials? “The idea is to ride the course without having your foot hit the ground,” explains Ellis. In fact, every time your foot touches the ground, you get a penalty; the rider with the lowest score at the end of the day wins. You go no more than 5-10 mph, riders say. “You’re using your riding skills, which, of course, include balance,” says Ellis. “It’s the ability to ride slowly and stay balanced, the ability to turn every sharp curve and stay balanced, and it’s the ability to use the front wheel.”



Jim Ellis

Riding skills are learned by trial and error, Ellis says, and riders are divided into five levels by experience rather than age: novice, intermediate, sportsman, advanced, and expert. “This is a game of precision riding. How you accomplish Corner A may set you up for a more favorable Corner B,” he explains. “There’s only one rider at a time, and the others are watching. And we like to see our competition do well, because it’s just as much a social event as it is a competitive event. You’re competing against yourself, and you’re competing against the terrain. It’s mostly low gear, first gear. And the top riders are so smooth that they make it look easy. It’s tougher than it looks—the balancing, the timing, the unweighting. People who get really good, they can balance the motorcycle while it’s standing still. And the slower your ride, the tougher it is to stay balanced.”

Funny Shape



Trials master Gary Heyer poses on his vintage Fantic motorcycle

In addition to skill and experience, riding slowly and staying balanced requires a specially designed bike. With brand names like Gas Gas and Vertigo, trials bikes are made for low speed and high torque, Heyer says. They are thin and lightweight, with small fuel tanks and high ground clearance. “The bike, it’s a funny shape. It’s made to climb rocks and go over logs. It’s made for balance. It doesn’t have a seat. And it’s cut real low in the center.”

Balance is key, he says. “You can lean the bike way over as needed to clear rocks and obstacles and regain your balance. Trials bikes are not made for speed. They are specific bikes built just for one purpose. And that is to ride trials, nothing else. And there’s not many of them made.”

That said, Ellis owns six trial bikes—an unusual number, he admits with a sense of humor. “Some people collect stamps,” he says. “But they don’t just collect one stamp.”

Rough Patch

CVOTC usually holds nine meets each year, often in remote corners along the Carolina-Virginia border. Riders haul their trials bikes by truck, trailer, or van to tucked-away sites like Bunn, where Ellis owns a tract of land, or Brunswick County, Virginia, just south of Lawrenceville.



Advanced level rider Mike Mazak performs a wheelie.

The latter is truly a rough patch for revving these engines—it has rocks, steep banks, log crossings, stream sections, uphill runs, and steep downhills. And while it can get muddy, Heyer says that mud just

makes it more fun. “The Lawrenceville trail is one of the harshest ones that we ride for the year,” he says. “But there are a lot of people. We have about 37 riding.”

Plus, the land is privately owned by a club member. It sounds funny, Heyer says, but club members want to ride on land that no one else wants. “We like more rugged areas that are not good for farming or building houses,” he says. “It’s usually steep ravines with streams, lots of rocks, a lot of hills.” That said, Ellis notes that trail builders sometimes throw down brush along the trail just to challenge riders.



In a trials course, riders follow a loop trail. Trail length is not as important as constructing challenging sections of loops, Heyer says. “Within that loop, you have sections. You have eight to 12 sections. And in that section is its own obstacle course, and it’s marked that way. You have a start gate to enter and an end gate to exit that section. The whole thing has a ribbon around it, so you know where the boundaries are.”



Course marker

This sport challenges you both physically and mentally, Ellis suggests. “What you’re trying to do is make a path over obstacles that are difficult, but not impossible. It has to be challenging, or it would be boring. But it can’t be impossible, or people would be totally frustrated.”

“It’s a competition not just with others, but with yourself,” Heyer says. “You’re competing against the natural terrain, plus your own ability to make it through. You’re not competing really against anyone else in the sections, since you ride the section by yourself.”

A Modest Surge

Although the sport is called “observed” trials, that refers to course judges, not audience. “We don’t have a lot of spectators,” admits Heyer. “A lot of spectators for us is, like, 30 people coming out. It’s the wives, the kids, and the curious neighboring landowners.”



And that seems to be true nationwide. Although there are about 50 [MotoTrials clubs](#) across North America and a [national championship series](#), founded in 1974, to determine the team that will represent the United States in the international Trial Des Nations competition, fewer than 6,500 people follow the [North American Trials Council Facebook](#) page. The [U.S. TDN team](#)—basically the Olympians of MotoTrials—has 1,500 followers. “It does not receive television coverage. There’s no money in the sport,” says Ellis. “The whole thing is based on volunteers. And enthusiastic volunteers are the backbone of the sport.”

Even so, Ellis insists, “The trials sport is enjoying a modest surge in popularity. It’s not going to knock your doors down. But I think it’s growing, and we’re getting new people in.”

[Facebook.com/groups/CVOTC](https://www.facebook.com/groups/CVOTC)

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