

Flying

without

Wings

BMX Trick 2: Back-flipping:
pulling up off the lip of a jump, flipping completely upside-down, and then riding away



BMX Trick 1: X-up:
spinning the handlebars of your BMX bike 180 degrees while you hop



By Margaret Ng Yee-man

“I feel like I’ve become a warrior or superhero of some sort. However, when we put BMX aside, we become ordinary people again.”

It is 7 p.m. on a Saturday at Mei Foo Skate Park. Minutes from rocketing up and down curving walls on a bike, a group of bicycle motocross (BMX) bikers pauses on a U-shaped ramp’s deck. Their next drop: seven feet from the halfpipe’s deck to its trough.

BMX started in California in the late 1960s. Back then, kids who were entranced by all-terrain motorcycle racing or motocross but could not afford the gear, used bicycles instead. It has since evolved into three streams: racing BMX, freestyle BMX, and flatland BMX.

The popularity of BMX in Hong Kong has grown enormously after

BMX racing cyclist Steven Wong took the gold for Hong Kong in the 350-metre BMX race in the 2009 East Asian Games.

The growing pool of local BMX bikers is accompanied by an increasing level of difficulty in the tricks they perform, such as **back-flipping** and **pole taps**.

On this Saturday night at Mei Foo Skate Park, there are more than 10 freestyle BMX enthusiasts practising different tricks. Among them are the two Cheung brothers, champions of various freestyle BMX competitions in Hong Kong.

“I can get a sense of satisfaction and achievement through freestyle

BMX practise. I feel proud whenever I mount my bike,” the 24-year-old Cheung Wai-hong says.

He was the champion of the Hong Kong BMX Freestyle Competition in 2006 and 2007. “I feel like I’ve become a warrior or superhero of some sort. However, when we put BMX aside, we become ordinary people again.”

He has been addicted to BMX since he was 16. He was deeply fascinated by a foreign BMX performance on television and was determined to give it a shot.

Cheung left school after Form Two and spent most of his time practising freestyle BMX. He entered some local competitions on his own,



Before mounting a BMX, make sure you have the following ready:

1. Full-face helmet
2. Long trousers
3. Covered shoes
4. Full-fingered gloves
5. Knee and elbow pads

and later he became a full-time freestyle BMX biker.

He is now the owner of Vision, a BMX store in Dongguan in Guangdong Province, and is invited to give performances. Cheung's store has become an important connection between Hong Kong and mainland China in freestyle BMX promotion.

"Extreme sports have brought me indescribable amazement and eye-opening opportunities. I once had chances to compete with many professional bikers all around the world, including Mat Hoffmann, who is known as the 'godfather' of BMX," he says excitedly.

Before each swoop from the halfpipe ramp's deck, the BMX bikers usually watch each other's performances carefully.

"We learn how to do the BMX tricks by watching online videos and getting inspiration from fellow bikers. We have no formal coaches," he says. "If

you have guts, you can even experiment with new tricks yourself."

Fortune may favour the brave, but injuries are inevitable. Scrapes and bruises are common. In 2005, Cheung suffered a serious crash at a playground in Tseung Kwan O. He was practising at night to promote BMX when in mid-flight, he lost control of his bike. Cheung hit his head on the ground and lost consciousness. When he awoke, he found himself lying in a hospital bed, bandaged and feeling pain all over his body. He could not remember anything that had happened two months before the accident. He was hospitalised for a whole month.

"I'm nervous every time I do new tricks," he says. "But anyway, one needs to keep trying no matter whether it turns out to be successful or not."

"I must be very well-prepared before each practice. I must try my best to protect myself and do a mental assessment of the trick I am going to perform," he adds.

Swooping up the other side of the scuffed, U-shaped ramp is the younger Cheung brother, 21-year-old Cheung Yui-fung. "With good body protection and proper training you can lower the risk of getting hurt," he says.

"BMX is fun. You'll definitely get addicted to freestyling and

desperately want to try your first x-up. So don't be afraid."

Like his older brother, Cheung Yui-fung is also an award-winning freestyle BMX biker in Hong Kong. He was crowned champion of the CX Elite National Classic Tour Competition in 2008 and still takes part in Hong Kong BMX competitions and various BMX performances.

The two brothers seldom see each other because of overseas competitions and when they do meet, it is usually at competition venues.

Freestyle BMX is also gaining popularity in other parts of Asia. The Thai brothers, Chokchai Wanitsaku, known as Keang, and Kiattichai Wanitsaku, known as Tee, are considered the best freestyle BMX riders in the Southeast Asia region. Their names have become so prominent in the field that they can always be admitted into BMX competitions dominated by western bikes.

Keang and Tee are also in Mei Foo preparing for their performance for a BMX ceremony to be held in Shenzhen the next day.

Tee, who is 21 now, started riding with his older brother when he was 11. There was a track just next to where they lived back in Thailand. After seven years, they became professional BMX riders.

"Riding a BMX bike successfully cannot be done overnight, but only



The Cheung brothers: Cheung Yui-fung (left) and Cheung Wai-hong (right)



The Thai brothers with their friend



George Jackson



Jimmy Mak Man-wai

after years of training. It demands determination, dedication and nerves of steel," Tee says.

He says he regularly practices four to eight hours a day. His efforts paid off in 2009 when he flew to Estonia and competed in an international BMX contest. He was the 18th in the finals, which was a good result for him.

"After I excelled in some international games, more kids in my village have become interested in learning BMX. It's a good trend that more kids are getting involved," he says enthusiastically.

Among all the Asian bikers in the skate park, there is also one rider with long, golden curly hair. His name is George Jackson, a 23-year-old Australian backpacker who took his BMX bike and travelled all the way from his home country to China to promote BMX culture.

He had stayed in Shanghai as a BMX instructor and announcer for X Games Asia before coming to Hong Kong. "I have stayed in Hong Kong for 10 months and all the bikers I met were excellent. We're all having a good time in learning from each other," he says.

To provide more venues for people to engage in this sport, Jackson has

helped to build the first Hong Kong BMX trail track in Sheung Shui, which has become a popular site for BMX bikers to gather. Currently, there are skate parks in Mei Foo, Tai Wo Hau, Kwai Fong, and Fanling.

DJBMX, a full service bike shop in Yau Ma Tei also provides a platform for BMX bikers to exchange their ideas. Its owner, 40-year-old Jimmy Mak Man-wai, is a seasoned cyclist who is able and willing to help customers select a BMX bike. His shop displays ready-made bikes, frames, and components for both beginners and experts. Mak also happens to be the bass player of local hip-hop pioneers LMF.

While all BMX bikes have a similar base specification, each one will be customised to meet the owners' preferences. Every component or even the angle of the frame of each bike can be adjusted to suit the individual needs of bikers.

"There's always a BMX bike designed to match how you ride," Mak says as he holds onto the handlebars of one of his bikes. According to Mak, a BMX bike for a beginner costs around HK\$2,000 and the ones for professionals may cost up to HK\$20,000. It costs about HK\$1,000 a month for regular maintenance.

It is now 10 p.m., and Mei Foo Skate Park is about to close. Cheung Wai-hong is in a philosophical mood: "After all, BMX is not a tool to achieve fame or show off. Instead, I hope the bikers can really enjoy the happiness and excitement BMX brings to them."

"Life is like a wingless bird. It has to keep flying," he says and then dives down the U-shaped ramp to enjoy his last trick of the night. ▣



BMX Trick 3: Pole tap: approaching the pole fast and landing with both wheels on the pole simultaneously

Halfpipe: a U-shaped ramp that many BMX tricks are based on