On the Topic of Flow

"Flow" we use this term to describe those addictively fun experiences in mountain biking, and it comes up in psychology a lot too. So how can looking at the books increase our appreciation of days on the dirt?

Kath Bicknell

MT BULLER
AUSTRALIA'S FIRST MBA RIDE CENTER

The International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) Ride Center program identifies world class mountain bike facilities. As the first IMBA Ride Center in the country, Mt Buller has been recognised for the high-quality experience it offers all riders, including:

- Stoorely - Mt Buller's signature 10km endurance trail and one of the best XC trails ever built by Glen Jacobs and the World Trail Team
- Copperhead - Australia's first flow-down trail
- Over 100km of XC terrain including 10km of dedicated single track and two skills parks

You've heard the hype, now come and check it out for yourself!

mtbuller.com.au

Photos: Sterling Lorence

flowmountainbike.com
TO US MOUNTAIN BIKERS, THE WORD ‘FLOW’ CONJURES UP IMAGES OF SMOOTH, WELL-BUILT SINGLETRACK, FAST AND SKILLFUL RIDING, FEELINGS OF EUPHORIA AND THAT HAPPY SATISFACTION THAT COMES FROM MOMENTS IN ‘THE ZONE.’ IT IS AN EXPERIENCE SO GOOD THAT IT DRAWNS US TO THE TRAILS MORE TIMES THAN WE CAN COUNT.

The concept of flow is also an important one in psychology. Here, the term is used to explain similar feelings to what we talk about while mountain biking - but in a way that links these to experiences in a broader number of other activities too.

Both uses of the term ‘flow’ describe an optimal, idealised state of experience. There’s no guarantee you will have these feel-good sensations every time you jump on a bike, but the promise that they are never far away makes them well worth the chase. And a better grasp of the psychological components means more chance of riding into them. So what are they? And how can understanding the psychology of flow make riding even better?

**Psychological components of flow**

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is the big name in the psychological literature on flow. He and his wife Isabella have defined nine characteristics that are typical of a flow-type state. These are:

1. **Challenge-skills balance**
2. **Action-awareness merging**
3. **Clear goals**
4. **Unambiguous feedback**
5. **Concentration on the task at hand**
6. **Sense of control**
7. **Loss of self-consciousness**
8. **Transformation of time**
9. **Autotelic experience**

Number nine, autotelic experience, is the one that most people have to grab a dictionary to understand. It means doing things for intrinsic (or internal) reasons, such as pleasure or because something is simply good fun. Being motivated by extrinsic (or external) reasons like prize money, fame and glory tends to arouse flow-killing negatives like pressure or worry.

For example some riders report that if they try to win a race, they often more skilfully than we can when it is easy. Flow helps us to ride faster, smoother and with increased awareness, concentration and expertise, riders become better at assessing the conditions they’re faced with and acting, or reacting, accordingly. As riders add dealing with change or problems-solving on the bike to their skills, they get better at maintaining flow, as opposed to being knocked out of it easily by some type of disruption.

**Quite the package**

Flow helps us to ride faster, smoother and often more skilfully than we can when it is easy. In order to ride at your best then, it’s important to train your thinking to stay focused on what matters at each moment, increasing the likelihood that these elements of optimal experience will interact. Good preparation and post-ride reflection is important too, because it helps us troubleshoot things that are getting in the way of the sensations we’re seeking on the trails.

So really, flow’s not just about how we think while we ride, it’s a cohesion of attitude, skill, equipment, trials and enjoyment at every level of the sport. And if it’s something that makes it a great name for new mountain biking media endeavour as well as.