

Dirt Analysis

Growing up on a farm and studying at an Agricultural College, I thought I knew all there was to know about dirt. Several years ago I took up trials and soon found that my dirt knowledge was sorely lacking. I needed some more tutorials at Traction College.

Soils vary all the way from course sand to pipe clay and as surfaces go, I can now say that in various trials I've ridden most every soil type including these two extremes. So in this tale I will be looking at the various soils encountered in a normal trial, if there is such a thing.

Sand: Apart from being the natural habitat of the West Ozzies, who love this stuff, sand can make a simple section a minefield of front end swallowing patches of loose grit. Short of using a paddle tyre, and besides its uses for smoothing wood, sand is not grippy. Sand is jolly difficult to turn on. The strategy for sand is go gun barrel, millimeter-perfect straight. Do not, under any circumstances turn. The clever swine who can hop love sand as it tends to gently cradle the wheels making balancing easier, whilst hopping can be used solely for any maneuvers required. The rest of us have put up with the interminable washouts as a combination of a front wheel plowing and rear end spinout, have us flip flopping from one end of the section to the other, invariably with feet down. A sealion lolling up the beach with flippers akimbo deals with sand much the same way as novice trials riders.



Sandy-loam: Here is the ideal soil. At least, for motocross tracks, for trials however, sandy-loam is best left alone as it is entirely predictable and therefore no fun.

Loam: This should also be an ideal soil for riding in if it doesn't get muddy and it doesn't get dry. In Australia at least, it tends to be most often dry. When bone dry, it can be extremely difficult to get any momentum in loam as the rear wheel spins up, digging forever deeper as it claws for some bite. Loam turns easily to dust and has a great propensity for following the riding line up and over rocks, coating them liberally as more and more bikes pass by. Experts know this well and have their minds scuttling about brushing and blowing rocks to clean the line. Minds would do well to have a pair of bellows and a dust-buster in their backpacks to save their precious lungs (which are also to be used for barking instructions and geeing up their charges) for a day out on loamy soil.

Clay: Who can say they don't love good sticky clay? I know of some fine pots made from the substance. For trials clay is probably the best for traction when dry, but when wet, well, that's a different story. To say wet clay is slippery is putting it mildly; it is slipperier than a butcher's block, more slippery than an eel in a Vaseline factory. I remember cresting a nice clay bank one day and thinking I was a star after easily conquering it. Some days later after considerable rain, I tried again. A big run up and there I was, wheels spinning, feet on the pegs, but actually going backwards, and fast. It is a funny feeling with mud splattering up around your ears, seeing tree trunks passing you from your back to your front. This didn't seem like a great technique, until I put my foot down. Feet and wet clay don't mix. I picked myself up and promptly fell down again as my feet slogged out from under me. Eventually, I was able to slide on my backside to the base of the bank, to where my bike was safely nestled, cocooned in a layer of red muck. Standing finally, but now 3 inches taller with the extra mud layer, I had now to contemplate starting the bike without having my boot skid off and cracking my shin on the footpeg. At this point, in sort of an epiphany moment, my insight into the finer points of soils was considerably sharpened. Further, it was, to say the least, testing my love affair with clay. Not to mention that a four and a half hour clean up afterward of both the bike and myself was required for my clay play. Clay sticks like poo to a blanket, and although blobby, seems to find its way into every nook and cranny of the bike and there it stays for the rest of eternity.

So here is a brief run down of the soils of trials, kind of dirt dimensions so to speak. So to trial organisers and section setters, it is my belief that the best real trial of man and machine should combine all the soil types in both wet and dry forms, except sandy-loam, which is altogether too boring.