

A biker to drivers: Let's call a truce

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STEVEN ELBOW | Posted: Wednesday, July 28, 2010

It was one of those days when everything fell into place. I wheeled out of the driveway of my east-side home and picked up Winnebago Street from Fourth Street. The wind was at my back. I made the lights at Atwood, First Street and Riverside, and I was on Williamson Street. Before me was a line of lights, and with a little luck I could make them all. I was cruising at maybe 20 mph, the same as the car in front of me. Six blocks to go and the last light went from red to green, and the traffic speeded up. The car in front pulled away, and another one squeezed by, then cut me off with a right turn.

I skidded to a stop, staring straight down at the guy's rear bumper as he squealed around the corner. I contemplated chasing down the jerk, but I was wheezing like an 80-year-old emphysema patient without his oxygen. So I sat there and stewed. Then it dawned on me that I could have died.

A few days later, at almost the same exact spot, a pickup passed by, a guy in the passenger seat yelled, "Get on the f---ing bike lane," then launched ice in my direction from his supersize PDQ soda cup.

That was in April, shortly after I cleaned the winter grunge off my Raleigh Sport for an eight-month bike-to-work season. And it was the last time I took Williamson Street during my morning commute. Since then I've rerouted my ride down Jenifer Street, a block to the south. There's light traffic and only two stop signs. It's not as fun, but it's a nice, uneventful ride.

I still like to take Willy Street home in the afternoon. It's a fast, gritty experience, and I like being part of the off-beat street scene. And for some reason, drivers aren't as mean when they're on their way home.

Some tell me it's reckless to bike down Willy Street, but I've done it for years, and I feel comfortable doing it.

While I might have bent some rules in the past, now I follow all the laws. And I'm proficient enough to navigate the flow of traffic in a way that minimizes any inconvenience to my fellow vehicles on the road. In other words, if I'm

holding you up, check your speedometer — you might be speeding.

But I still catch a lot of flak.

I've been biking to work for about seven years now. I've been honked at, yelled at, spit on, squeezed to the curb until I've lost my balance. I've been cut off repeatedly by right turners. Drivers sometimes stop at a stop sign, look straight at me as I pedal their way, then bolt, forcing me into a skid. One driver last year pulled in front of me into St. Vincent DePaul and I hit her passenger-side door — luckily no damage. When confronted, she pretended she didn't hear me and marched into the store.

I know what some of you are thinking: If it's so bad out there, why don't you take the f---ing bike path? The Capital City path is just a block and a half away, and we paid for it with our tax dollars, so use it!

Well, I'll tell you why. Just like when I'm in my car, I like to take the fastest route to work, and the bike path gives cars the right-of-way at every intersection. For someone who wants to make time and get a good workout, the Capitol City path sucks.

It's nice for a leisurely ride or for a slow commute downtown, but I like speed, and I go far beyond downtown. After I get through the isthmus, I hit the John Nolen bike path around the lake, pick up the Wingra Creek path at Olin Park, and from there head to Capital Newspapers headquarters on Fish Hatchery Road, dripping with sweat and road grit. It's about seven miles in all, and if the wind's with me, I can do it in under 25 minutes, only a few minutes more than if I had taken the car, and nearly 20 minutes faster than if I had taken the bus.

And besides, the only time I've ever gotten injured I was on a bike path. A guy turned into a driveway right in front of me and hit me head-on.

Bottom line, I'm going to use the road when I want to. I have a legal right to be there, to use "your" lanes. You might not like it, but I'm afraid you're going to have to get used to more of us. By all accounts, bicycle ridership is up, both locally and throughout the state. A "complete streets" provision in the current state budget requires any street funded with state money, with some exceptions, to accommodate bikes and pedestrians.

Milwaukee unveiled a plan a couple of weeks ago to increase the city's bicycle network from 116 miles to 295 miles. Last spring, La Crosse announced a 25-year effort to turn city roadways into "multimodal" streets, friendly to cars, bikes and pedestrians. Dane County is looking at both short- and long-term efforts to make county roads safer for bicyclists and to increase bike path miles.

And Madison — currently rated gold by the League of American Bicyclists for its extensive network of bike lanes and bike paths, and its efforts to encourage bicycling — wants to win the elite platinum status now enjoyed only by Davis, Calif.; Boulder, Colo.; and Portland, Ore.

Madison has had a complete streets policy for years, and bike lanes, "bike boxes" at intersections and bike boulevards, which restrict motor vehicles to local traffic but allow bicyclists a throughway, are destined to become more

and more a part of the streetscape.

So if you think there are a lot of bikers now, just wait. Mayor Dave Cieslewicz has embraced a goal of seeing the percentage of commuter trips made by bike, estimated in the 2000 census to be about 3.2 percent, ramp up to 20 percent by 2020.

But sharing the road with bicyclists really ticks some of you off. And the prospect of sharing it with even more of us sends some of you off the deep end.

"It's got to stop," declared local radio talk show host Mitch Henck last week. "It's time to fight back."

A small but significant percentage of motorists harbor a visceral hate for cyclists. Sure, a lot of us do stupid things. Some do them on purpose, some through negligence, some because they're just, well, dumb. They'll never learn. But I think most of us ride responsibly, follow the rules of the road, and still, you hate us. You lay on the horn, you yell, you throw things. Sometimes you even run us off the road.

Ask almost any government official, cop or bike advocate, and they'll tell you 95 percent of drivers are courteous, conscientious, law-abiding citizens who willingly share the roads with bikes.

"You don't want to over-focus on the 5 percent who don't," says Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk, an avid bicyclist and advocate who wants to see Dane County become a top destination for cycling enthusiasts. And for planning purposes, especially as the county and the city draw up plans to make the Madison area the best darned biking Mecca in the Midwest, maybe even the nation, it's probably not a good idea to let a few bad apples muck up the agenda.

But I want to focus on that 5 percent, because they're the ones who scare me.

I spent about five minutes the other day Googling "I hate bikes" and "I hate cyclists." Here's a brief sampling of what I found on the many bicyclist-hating web pages. (To be fair, I also Googled "I hate motorists" and "I hate cars." There really wasn't anything comparable.)

"You have no idea how much every non-cyclist hates you."

"Bikes have had it too good too long."

"I know that we are supposed to share the road...but I still don't like to."

"I hate bikers on the road with a fiery passion that cannot be described through text."

"I hate bikers. I wanna take all their bikes and run them over with a semi!!!"

"Saw a guy in USA spandex riding a bike get hit by a car 2day. Def 100% the bike guys fault! It was AWESOME! Hate bikers. Think they own the road."

Did you find yourself nodding in agreement to any of these statements?

If so, we need to talk.

You may not like sharing the road with pedalers. But you have a legal responsibility to give us our space. If I abruptly swerve to the left, it might be because I'm a lousy bicyclist, or maybe I'm dodging a rock or a pothole that could send me over my handlebars and under your wheels. You have to remember that you're driving around in 3,000 pounds of glass, steel and metal. I'm on a 20-pound bike. If you push me into a curb, I get hurt. If you hit me, I get hurt.

I realize that some of you don't care. Like this caller last month during a bike-hate segment on Henck's talk show on WIBA/1310. As Henck spewed outrage about what he sees as preferential treatment for cyclists in this city, the caller related that "I've been hit opening my door." It was in the winter and the cyclist fell in the snow. "He got back up, he just looked at me funny and drove off. I was like, 'Hey, hey! Come back here,' 'cause I had a dent in my door. Can you believe that?"

I admit that cyclists don't always help their cause. Some dart in front of cars and then have the audacity to flip you off. Some of us run red lights and stop signs, particularly on the UW campus.

"There is no question that traffic control seems to be a non-issue with many bicyclists," David Noyce, a UW traffic engineer who counts human factors as one of his fields of interest, told me in an e-mail. "Rarely do bicyclists on campus or other roadway facilities stop at a red light or stop signs."

Clayton Griessmeyer, a competitive cyclist, Ironman competitor and Verona attorney who specializes in bicycle injury law, says: "Some people who ride their bicycles take advantage of the position they're in and do things they shouldn't do and upset drivers and create problems. From my point of view, it's more prevalent in terms of drivers creating problems for cyclists. But I do recognize that it goes both ways."

Although I bike to work, I usually drive on the weekends, and bikers who dart in front of me, don't use lights at night, take up the lane by riding two abreast, or swerve in front of me while talking on a cell phone tick me off, too. And you guys riding on the county roads in a lane-clogging herd, you don't even have a concept of what sharing the road is all about.

But the anger it generates from some motorists is way out of proportion. When we post a story about cyclists on madison.com, the comment board reeks of vitriol. Bikers are lawbreakers, they should be ticketed, banned. One writer wanted them Tasered.

It's to the point where just the sight of cycling attire is enough to throw some people into a rage.

"If one of these spandex clad clowns puts me in a position where it's a choice between hitting bozo or a car....the spandex clown loses," says one writer.

But chances are those commenters routinely break the law, too. When they see other motorists break the law, it's an annoyance. When a bicyclist does it, it's a personal affront.

Dave Schlabowske, Milwaukee's bicycle and pedestrian coordinator, says he's done plenty of traffic studies that show that at least 60 percent of the cars on the road at any given time are speeding. When it comes to stopping for pedestrians at crosswalks, 90 percent don't.

"But they see this bicyclist roll up to a red light and then just roll through it, to them it seems so obvious and so egregious," he says. "But they never think, 'Well, I was just breaking the law for the last eight miles.' They're not thinking about their own behavior."

Schlabowske began biking years ago. He wasn't worried about the environment, he wasn't a fitness freak. He wanted to be able to go to the bars and not worry about drinking and driving.

But he always followed all the rules. Still, he says, "I was constantly getting cut off and flipped off and horns honked at me, and I thought, 'What's the deal? When did I become this evil guy?'"

Madison bike cop Chris Masterson, who is training for an Ironman competition next year, usually stays on the bike paths when he rides his bike to work from his east-side home. But not always.

"If I hit traffic lights right, I'll end up taking Atwood to Williamson, and I'll actually ride on the road," he says. "I guess since there's a bike path there, people don't feel like you should be on the road. I don't know what that's all about, but I've definitely been cursed at, honked at. People will barely change lanes to pass me."

Griessmeyer says hostility toward bicyclists occurs more often than most people would ever imagine.

"I run into a lot of people who want to know what rights they have against someone who threw something or spit on them, or reached out and slapped them on the back of the head from a window," he says. "Things like that. It's unbelievable how often it happens."

So where does all the rage come from?

Bob Mionske, a UW-Madison alumnus, two-time Olympic cyclist and now a lawyer who blogs for Bicycle Magazine, contends that some motorists believe they have more rights on the road because they're licensed to drive and cyclists aren't.

"Many motorists – specifically, those who refuse to share the roads – mistakenly believe that their possession of a driver's license gives them a superior claim to the road," he writes in a recent post. "These are the motorists who exclaim that, 'Until cyclists are licensed and insured, they don't have a right to the road.'"

In exploring the topic, I got the impression that right-wingers are more likely to carp about bicyclists than are left-wingers, who make up most of the hard-core bike advocates.

Exhibit A would be Whitewater Republican Rep. Steve Nass and his recent, notorious rant on downtown Madison bike boxes, which allow bicyclists to

wait out red lights in front of cars.

"It's basically about liberal extremists in Madison who hate cars and think everyone should bike to work," he said in a press release in which he vowed to introduce legislation to ban them.

And here's Rush Limbaugh weighing in last year about a proposed Madison city ordinance that would fine drivers \$100 if they nail a bicyclist with a car door: "Frankly, if the door opens into a bicycle rider, I won't care. I think they ought to be off the streets and on the sidewalk."

But there are plenty of Republican cyclists; remember George W. Bush on his mountain bike?

State Rep. Spencer Black, an avid biker who's been responsible for numerous bike-friendly initiatives, says: "Probably there are more Democrats than Republicans, but I think there are people from both parties that really enjoy biking and ride bikes for transportation."

"In my district we're trying to build bicycling as a tourist draw," says state Rep. Joan Ballweg, R-Markesan, the lone Republican to co-sponsor a state dooring law last year.

Partisan politics aside, there are those who see cyclists and bicycling advocates as elitist, Brie-eating, Chablis-sipping snobs who want to ram a pro-bicycle agenda down everyone's throats.

"I do believe that bikers think they are secularly, divinely ordained to save the planet," says Paul Schlecht.

"They seem to forget how their Brie and Chablis get here. They seem to forget that evil motor vehicles and evil gas-guzzling machines have erected those bike paths and keep them clean, cleaner than my street."

Schlecht, who has written letters opposing the city's commitment to improving bicycle facilities to the Cap Times and the Wisconsin State Journal, has a talent for pithiness, dubbing Mayor Dave Cieslewicz "Mayor Bike Shorts," and the pro-bike crowd the "bike reich."

He says he has no problems with cyclists. A lot of his friends are cyclists.

"I don't like the ones with attitude," he says.

What is this attitude? Schlecht walks on the Southwest Bike Path near Odana Road daily, and he greets every bicyclist he passes.

"Well over half don't even acknowledge the fact that I've said 'hello.'"

I didn't do a count, but in reading comments complaining about bikers on our website and others, I think attitude came in second only to lawbreaking.

West-side Ald. Thuy Pham-Remmele, who has opposed one bike path in her district and who cast the lone vote against the city's long-range bike plan, bemoaned at a City Council meeting last year "this attitude among some bikers that because you are fitter than me, you are better than everyone else."

I called her up to see if she would elaborate. She didn't take the bait.

"Spare me. You want me to be hanged out to dry, or what?"

Sadly, there might be some truth to it. In the scorching back-and-forth that stinks up our comment board when a story on bicycling is posted on madison.com, someone always manages to bring up the fitness issue. "I got a couple comments to my letter that said, 'You sound fat,'" says Schlecht. "I run eight miles a day."

Other motorists simply see bicyclists as a road hazard.

A recent poll of Washington state drivers revealed that 43 percent are somewhat uncomfortable, and 20 percent are very uncomfortable, with sharing the road with bicyclists.

West-side retiree Jim Batt thinks bicyclists should be banned from riding where they pose a danger to themselves or to others.

"To drive down University Avenue when it's slushy and snowy and have a bicycle just a few feet to your side, it's terrifying," says Batt. "They may slip and you may injure or kill them. I try to do my best to accommodate them, but it's really irritating."

Then there's the feeling that bicycling advocates are taking scarce resources to further a frivolous agenda. As Cieslewicz pushes recommendations from his Platinum Bicycling Committee Report to make Madison a bike-friendly city by increasing bike lanes, bike paths and re-working intersections so bikers can better claim

their share of the road, there's a feeling among some that it's just not worth it.

"Recent tension has come from the addition of red bike boxes and other bicycle facilities on the roadway when other needs are perceived for these dollars," says Noyce, the UW professor.

Ald. Pham-Remmele says the platinum recommendations are just another thing that pits biker against motorist. "We want to be friendly to bikers," says Pham-Remmele. "But not to that degree."

My opinion: Some people are just bullies, and bicyclists are easy targets. The same drivers who honk at cyclists, yell, scream, cut them off, are probably the same drivers who honk, yell at and cut off other motorists.

That said, I think we've been conditioned in this country to think of the car as king, and its kingdom is the road. Some drivers just refuse to see bikes as anything but usurpers. They don't belong on the street.

I also think that the motorists' anger toward cyclists is way out of proportion with bicyclists' anger toward drivers, not because bicyclists are better people, but because almost all of them also drive cars. Maybe things would get better if more motorists got on a bike.

Amanda White, who heads up the Madison office for the Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin, says it's all about educating both drivers and bicyclists. The federation is set to launch a "Share and Be Aware" campaign that aims to do just that by setting up educational programs throughout the state with

cycling groups and community organizations.

"The most important thing for both drivers and bicyclists to improve the problems on the road is for everyone to understand the rights of motorists and the rights of bicyclists," she says.

Ultimately, Cieslewicz says, improved street infrastructure for bicycles will give both motorists and cyclists clear indications of where they should be.

"We're after peaceful coexistence," says Cieslewicz. "As we get this significant and I hope growing increase in bicycle traffic, people are just going to get used to it."

If we're to find common ground, there has to be better behavior all around. The 5 percent needs to stop looking at bicyclists as annoying insects on wheels, but as human beings who want to enjoy a ride, get some exercise, or just get to work. And cyclists need to step up to the plate.

Time was, I'd run red lights; I'd stop, take a good look, but then I'd go through. Now I stop and wait. I stop at stop signs, sometimes it's a rolling stop, but I take a long look to make sure it's safe, even if the intersection looks deserted and I'm pedaling uphill. Just in the course of researching this story I've learned a couple of things that will make me a better cycling citizen. For instance, I used to pull up alongside the cars stopped at a stop light to get to the front of the line. According to Arthur Ross, Madison's bicycle-pedestrian coordinator, if there's no bike lane, that's a no-no. Now I wait at the end of the line and breathe fumes.

In short, I try to follow the rules. I'm also trying put my anger at hostile drivers behind me. I can't tell you the last time I flipped someone off or cursed out loud.

"I think we have the opportunity to work as ambassadors for our cause, and maybe sway more people to say, 'Why not? I don't ride a bike, but those guys are out there and good for them.'" says Schlabowske. "But it's hard to do that if people are looking at you and they're seeing you as a criminal."

I'll do my part. I've broken a lot of bad habits. I'm pushing 50 and I don't want to watch my kid grow up from a wheelchair because somebody decided to get back at me by cutting me off as I barrel down the road at 20 mph. So whaddaya say? Let's call a truce. I'm doing my best to get along with you. But don't tell me to get off the road.