

Maddog Unleashed

A Conscientious Objector Addresses War Between Motorists and Cyclists



“There is a juggernaut out there—the tension between the cyclists and the drivers is so high that it’s become a war.”—triathlon coach Marc Evans, quoted in the *San Francisco Chronicle*

BY PATRICK O’GRADY

Much has been made of an article in the March 22 *San Francisco Chronicle* reporting that California Highway Patrol stats indicate cyclists were twice as likely as motorists to be at fault in a decade of collisions that left the cyclists either dead or severely injured.

This hits home, because the word “cyclist,” for us, describes a broad category of customers, acquaintances, family, friends and neighbors, with a number of subcategories predicated on enthusiasm, fitness and/or ability: roadie, mountain biker, downhiller, cyclo-crosser, freerider, trackie, single-speeder, fixie, messenger, commuter, recreational rider, juvenile.

To many a motorist, cop and reporter, unfortunately, “cyclist” means “a-hole on a bike.” Now, confess: Have you ever thought it (or said it) yourself—“Look at that a-hole on the bike!”—while watching someone on a two-wheeler performing some particularly stupid and/or dangerous maneuver in traffic?

Yeah, I thought so. Me too.

Just Riding Along. We are our own worst enemies. And by “we” I’m not talking about the poorly taught kids, homeless folk and lost-license lushes who cycle as though they were either invulnerable, immortal or inside some sort of protective bubble, like the shields keeping thirsty Klingons out of the Enterprise officers’ club.

These unfortunates get smeared into a thin paste all the time because they either don’t know or don’t care that a bicycle is a vehicle, subject to the rules of the road, physics and Darwinism, and best operated in a consistent, predictable fashion, being several thousand pounds lighter than the other vehicles around them.

No, I’m talking about those of us who should know better, yet insist on treating the traffic code as if it were merely advisory.

Possibly we feel morally superior as we bust that stop sign because we’re burning carbohydrates instead of generating carbon emissions (on a bicycle delivered via container ship from China). Maybe we’re training for a major race (La Vuelta del Parque Industrial) as we ride three abreast on a hilly road popular with tourists. Perhaps we’re merely taking some vigorous, healthful and very public exercise as we freewheel blithely through that red light (unlike the purple-visaged porker in the Escalade who just squats there, apoplectic, watching us do it).

Of Red Flags and Mechanical Bulls. Whatever. It helps enhance the perception of cyclists as Other—specifically, as “a-hole on a bike.” And I’m convinced that this impression makes it easier for enraged motorists to maim and kill us, overworked cops to give them the benefit of the doubt, and a jaded, lazy press to chide the entire cycling community for the clueless behavior of a tiny minority.

As a mostly law-abiding cyclist who nonetheless has become engaged in verbal and physical disagreements over what I deem my proper share of the street, I’m not suggesting that we surrender our rights to the road. I am suggesting we give the deranged fewer excuses to put us down on that road, hard. If you ride like an a-hole, stop it. If your friends, kids or customers do, call them on it.

Even assuming the best of intentions on both sides, accidents will happen when cars and bikes share the road. And as regards human stupidity, there is no known cure, though the merciless traffic will euthanize the most virulent cases. But at least we can show motorists, cops and the press the difference between “a-holes on bikes” and cyclists.

And maybe then we’ll get the respect we think we deserve.