

MACHO TALK AND WIMP TALK

Talking macho hurts cycling. So does wimp talk. Here's why.

by John Schubert

Cycling has a so-so reputation, among both cyclists and non-cyclists. You've seen it. I've seen it. Cyclists trade war stories about their exploits; non-cyclists hear that and believe that cycling is living-on-the-edge dangerous. In one typical instance, I rode my bike to the local polling place to vote. The judge of elections, a personal friend, queried me about traffic conditions. She didn't out-and-out say, "It's dangerous to ride, and I'm glad you made

those three miles okay," but I'm pretty sure that's what she was thinking. I, on the other hand, had just had a nice ride, with a level of personal risk not much different from what I'd be exposed to in my airbag-festooned minivan.

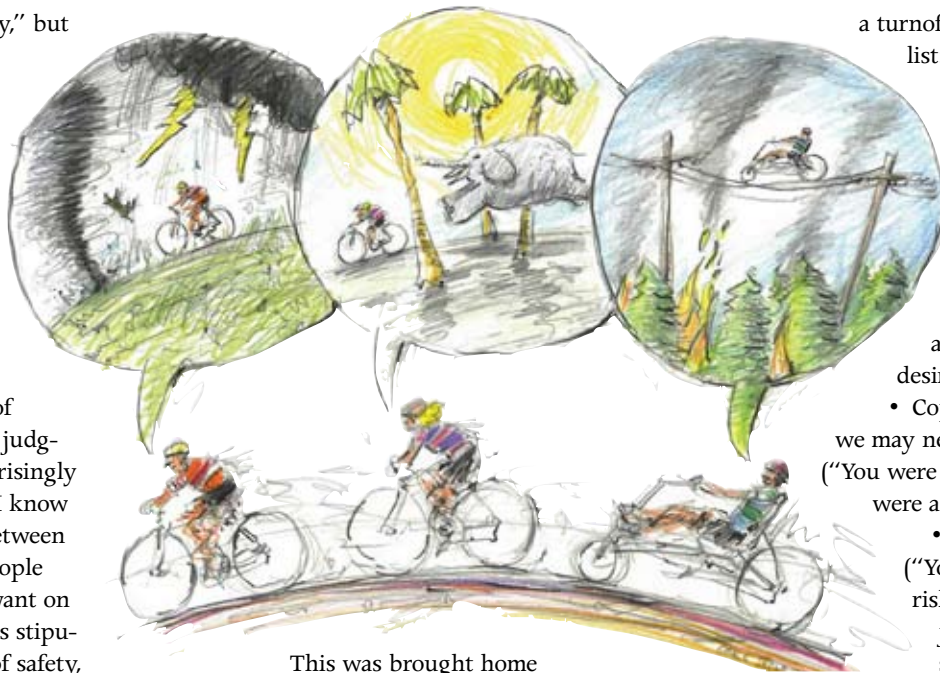
With a modicum of knowledge, skill and judgment, cycling is surprisingly safe. A lot of people I know have gone decades between crashes, and these people ride wherever they want on public roads. So let us stipulate: this basic level of safety, which takes all the macho edge out of the sport, is easily achievable for many riders.

(Please note my caveat about knowledge, skill, and judgment. I never said, nor will say, that a completely uninformed rider could expect to find cycling completely safe or pleasant.)

So what happens when our rhetoric diverges from this cycling-is-as-unmacho-as-scrapbooking reality?

It hurts cycling.

It can do so in either of two ways: the macho swagger talk or, the latest fad, the "we're so vulnerable" talk.



This was brought home to me a couple of months ago on the Internet's tandem@hobbes email listserv. The conversation had drifted to Lance Armstrong's broken collarbone. From there, a well-meaning guy said, "If you haven't broken a collarbone, you're not a real cyclist," and the war stories spewed through the ether. People described their crashes. They compared broken collarbones with ligament injuries. They compared cycling injuries with other athletic injuries.

And all I could think of was, "Oh my, what a turnoff."

To whom are we tough-talking dudes

a turnoff? Here's a partial list:

- Potential tandem companions. (This was a big consideration on the tandem listserv.)
- Neighbors whose social approval we may desire.
- Cops whose sympathy we may need in an accident. ("You were bike riding. You were asking for it.")
- Judges and juries. ("You assumed the risk.") Note that a judge in Florida said exactly that once, denying a cyclist recovery in a case that was clearly the fault of the motorist who smacked into him.

- Possible converts to cycling.

I posted this list of turnoffs to the tandem listserv and got a lot of response, most of it in agreement.

And to be fair, some people made excellent points that disagreed with me. One noted that some of the posts were in the laudable spirit of learning from one's mistakes. One person confessionally labeled his rather substantial injury as the result of "riding while stupid" (and

mentally preoccupied with a work deadline) in a parking garage, where he blundered into an obstruction. Some people pointed out that many of the broken-collarbone stories were from racing or technical mountain-bike riding, and that these riders accept a higher level of risk. One gentleman reminded us that if we portray cycling as safe no matter how ill-prepared the novice cyclist, we lure novices to a face-plant. One noted that “safe” means different things to different people — that to some, it only means you don’t die, and to others, it means you’ll never get so much as a bruise. A professor who teaches a course on risk at the University of New Hampshire wrote, “I try not to use the word ‘safe.’ Safe is impossible. Safe is free from all harm.” And one guy wrote, not entirely without foundation, that we’d just lost our sense of humor.

But still, a lot of the posts did have that football injury swagger to them, and a lot of respondents were like the one woman who wrote to say she “... was aghast when this whole macho bragging of injuries began.”

Now, what about the “vulnerable” talk? It sounds self-evident — after all, we don’t have airbags and protective steel cages.

But nothing is without its downside. In a general sense, the “vulnerable” label can be reinforced to strengthen the you-took-the-risk assumption. And the move to label bicyclists as vulnerable can have unwelcome consequences once the lawmakers get at it.

You need look no further than the state of Texas to see this. As I write this, the Texas House Transportation Committee is proposing that “vulnerable users” always stay within three feet of the right edge of the roadway. This roadway position invites close-skim overtaking maneuvers, renders the cyclist invisible at intersections, puts you where the broken glass is, and so on.

(This was in the context of a three-foot passing bill, which those Texas lawmakers decided should not apply on two-lane roads. I guess an overtaking sideswipe isn’t important if it isn’t on a four lane road.)

Lawmakers are like divas. You should exercise extreme caution when asking them to accept something new.

So what is my bottom line on risk?

Bicycling in the U.S. is surprisingly safe, given all the unsafe things we see people do. It’s easy for an individual cyclist to move his/her own risk exposure into the best category by learning how to make traffic law work for you by: learning to scan for conditions you need to react to well ahead of time, by learning to control other vehicle operators by your road position and signals, and by learning better control of your bike.

On the other hand, the careless and the macho have lots of crashes. We can’t do much about the macho, but many well-intentioned people are unwittingly careless, and I want to give them knowledge that will make them much happier on their bikes.

I suspect I know as much about the tragic exceptions to “cycling is safe” as anyone, since I work as an expert witness. But I want to keep them in context, for my own sanity and for accuracy in reporting. As I often remind people, we live in a big country. If something happens to one person in a million, it happens to 300 people, and 300 stories swarming over the Internet sounds like an epidemic.

The last two significant crashes I had were in 1977 and 1982 (knock on wood). Nothing since then has required so much as a band-aid. I assure you this isn’t due to innate athletic skill, coordination, or sense of balance. Nor is it a ridiculous level of caution. I think it’s because I’ve learned to couple a high level of alertness (thereby maximizing my genetically-crummy reaction time) with being able to relax while on the bike. So I can ride, seek tranquillity while riding, and still both anticipate and react to conditions that might cause a crash.

Be a lifelong student of ways to minimize your risk: watch the videos at cyclistview.com and dualchase.com; study bike handling and practice it so you are the master of your steed; keep your bike in good shape; and ride at 95 percent of your ability, not 101 percent.

And if you do all that ... there are still no guarantees. But the likelihood is that you’ll enjoy a lifetime of great riding. If you do break your collarbone, perhaps you’ll be able to tell your friends, “This injury was a data outlier.”



Regular readers of this space know my withering contempt for the industry trend of pushing bikes that will only accept skinny tires and no fenders, together with wheels with high-tech spokes that are so difficult and expensive to service.

It’s race gear, right?

Well ... not really.

Thanks to cyclingnews.com, I have learned that the real studs of the bike-racing world ride bikes much closer to ... touring bikes!

Cyclingnews.com dispatched reporter/photographer James Huang to study what the pros were really riding in Paris Roubaix, the legendary spring classic one-day road race. And Huang reported some interesting stuff:

- The Trek team bikes used by Team Astana are modified with more tire clearance. They have standard steel spokes and a standard tangentially-laced spoke pattern.
 - Caisse d’Epargne and Milram used Pinarello cyclo-cross frames — which have more tire clearance to begin with — and standard wheels.
 - Lampre and Katusha use Ridley cyclo-cross frames with extra tire clearance and standard wheels. They even used long-reach brakes and — get this — a brake assist lever on the handlebar tops!
 - Cervélo TestTeam’s special RS used special forks with additional tire clearance and long-reach brake calipers.
- Moral of the story: when someone tries to sell you a bike with those cafe-racer features, say, “No thanks! I only ride what the pros ride.” **AC**

Technical editor John Schubert urges you to drive up the traffic count at his website, Limeport.org.