



TRANSPORTATION
ALTERNATIVES

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Guide to Streetwise Cycling in New York City (Part II)

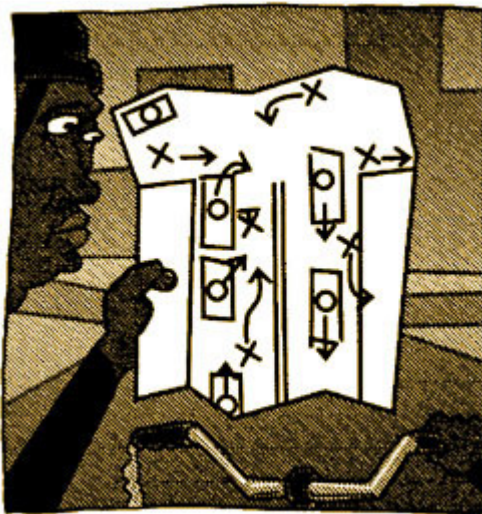
Story by Tom Hart
Drawings by Kyle Skrinak

In this issue, City Cyclist presents Part II of a new cycling guide written by T.A. member Tom Hart.



Riding a bicycle in New York City is different from riding in most other places. This guide concentrates on the skills needed to ride in Manhattan, though much of it may apply to any other crowded environment.

Cycling in Traffic



Try the left lane. On one-way streets, the left side is generally safer than the right. Drivers see you more clearly, doors are less likely to open, and you won't have to share the lane with a bus. Ride on the right just before or after a turn, or when the lane is free of parked cars.

Anticipate: As you ride, look ahead so that you can pull into the next lane whenever something blocks your lane. Keep glancing behind you, watching for fast or erratic vehicles. Drivers who come dangerously near can be slowed, at least for a moment, with a glare or a flat, open hand held up in their direction (the signal a traffic cop uses to stop cars). After passing parked cars or other

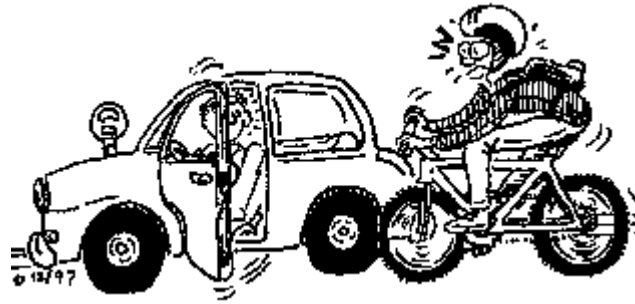
roadblocks, return to the now-clear lane.

Changing lanes is an art. Inexperienced riders too often wait until the last minute. This is a mistake. The secret to changing lanes is maintaining speed, which requires

looking a block or more ahead to see when you'll need to move. Before actually changing lanes, look behind and find an opening, gauging your speed relative to other vehicles, and picking a car to cut in front of. What? The driver you've picked doesn't want to let you in? Use the open palm and a glare, or else let him by and try the next one. If there are no cars right behind you, move over early.

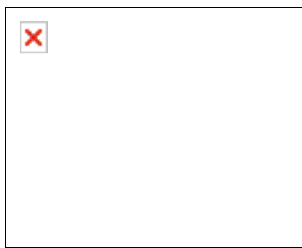
Obstacles

Parked cars: Cars change speed and direction slowly; not so their doors, which are quick, sharp and may open even when no one is in the driver's seat. The fastest speed for going through slow or stalled traffic is the fastest that you can come to a complete stop in less than three feet (the arc of a car door). The best path through stow traffic isn't a straight line; it's a series of swooping turns that seem erratic unless you visualize each car as having its door open.



Other cyclists: Treat other riders with caution. When approaching on a collision course, move to the side of the street you intend to pass on. Don't try to follow another cyclist closely through heavy traffic - she may block what you should be seeing. Often a gap between cars big enough for one will disappear before you can get through.

When riding in a group, give each other plenty of room. Signal intentions and call out road hazards. When passing, saying "on your right (or left)" alerts other cyclists to where you are and where you're going. Riding in NYC shouldn't be a competitive situation; if you want to find out how you fare against other cyclists, pick an organized race.



Motor vehicles: Inexperienced riders complain about taxis, but avoiding them is easy. If you're behind or beside an empty cab, scan the street for its next passenger - a cab will cut across lanes of traffic to pick up a fare. Also watch for taxis turning toward the curb to discharge passengers. Don't cut between a cab and the curb - the passenger may door you. Although the skill level of cabbies may be dropping with rising turnover, try to think of them not as crazies but as pros trying to make a living.

Buses and other large vehicles present another problem - if they hit you, you could fall under wheels big enough to kill you. When following a bus or passing on its right, watch for bus stops; since most of the right side of the bus is a blind spot, you have to watch out for yourself. Avoid getting caught between two big vehicles and finding yourself stuck between two converging walls of metal. The only sure way to avoid what messengers call the "suicide squeeze" is never to get into a spot that allows you no escape.

Pedestrians

Peds rate special mention. They're an underestimated NYC cycling hazard and also a P.R. problem for the bicycling community. Back in 1987, pedestrian anger at cyclists was so intense that the City tried to ban bikes from midtown Manhattan. It's taken a lot of work to turn that around. Good politics and common decency - plus your own safety - require constantly looking out for peds.



In stopped traffic, peds will often snake between cars in much the same way we do. Cars take awhile to pick up speed or change direction, and seldom move backwards. Not so for pedestrians. Give peds a wide berth, so you don't hit one who steps the "wrong way" in trying to avoid you.

Remember, a properly tuned bike is almost silent; those on foot may be listening rather than looking for trouble. Bells let people (including non-English speakers) know a cyclist is coming. But to get the attention of drivers and peds, nothing beats the human voice. "YO!" "Stop!" "Coming through!" or even a loud "Excuse me!" do the trick. The goal: Let them know where you are, where you are going, and what you want them to do.

Still, don't count on people responding. The law calls for using extra caution to avoid pedestrians, regardless of right-of-way. If things get dicey, hit the brakes. Hitting a ped will stop you just as quickly as hitting a solid object, and the repercussions are far more serious. Riding unnecessarily close to peds ("buzzing" them) scares them and endangers both of you and is the worst publicity cyclists can get. A slight miscalculation or last-minute move can cause a serious (and seriously stupid) accident.

Signaling



Drivers often complain that the hardest part of avoiding cyclists is figuring out what we're going to do. Signaling can help. Use the hand signals that traffic cops use (one cyclist calls it "directing traffic from a bike"). An open palm extended towards the motorist says slower stop. A beckoning signal says to pass. Don't try forcing cars past you. If they don't want to go by, they probably have reasons, like an upcoming turn.

Signal turns with a finger pointing your direction. Cars are limited to right or left signals, but you can communicate much more by pointing exactly where you want to go (even straight ahead if you're at a spot where most cars turn, such as a left turn lane). Most motorists will yield if they know what you want them to do.

On a bike, your exposure is both your greatest danger and your biggest advantage. You can gesture and make noise. Don't be afraid to take advantage of your freedom, even to the point of tapping on windows to get attention. This is NYC though, so be careful about venting negative feelings or tapping too hard.

Inclement Weather

Rain greatly reduces your bike's traction and visibility, as well as that of motor vehicles. **Extra caution** is a must in the rain. Another solution is to use an appropriate bike. **Fatter tires at lower pressure** increase traction, and brakes work far better on aluminum than on steel rims. **Fenders** will make your ride surprisingly drier and more pleasant, and **brightly colored rain gear** will keep you happier and safer.



Use special care crossing wet metal, especially the smooth metal plates that sometimes seem to pave Manhattan. In the rain, they are best avoided; bikes simply cannot brake or turn on wet metal. NYC cycling lore is also full of stories about falling into "black holes"-those rain-filled potholes waiting to eat a wheel or a cyclist. Avoid deep puddles, especially when you can't see the bottom.

If you ride in snow (or the salty slush that quickly covers streets after a storm), oil your bike thoroughly before and after. Streets with subways beneath them tend to be less icy since heat from the underground world speeds the melting along. Places where cars seldom venture (like bridge bike paths) may not be all clear until a real thaw.

Remember, not everything wet is water. Spilled oil can make mincemeat of skinny wheels, sending even the best cyclist down before she knows what the problem is. When it is wet where you don't expect it, avoid it. One final caution: When the temperature dips below freezing, puddles freeze, producing ice! Sounds simple, but make sure to remember this before you fall in a shady corner on a winter morn.

For more bad-weather tips, see Nov/Dec '92 City Cyclist, pp 8-9.

Night Riding

Most cyclists at night are black spots, visible only because they block the lights behind them. But a properly equipped cyclist can actually be more visible at night than during the day.



Reflective tape and clothing: The more the better, especially on the rear of the bike and your body. From behind the main hazard is vehicles that move faster than you, such as cars, which usually pack plenty of their own light. Reflectors on pedals, shoes, and legs bob up and down as you cycle. Reflective fabric on your fannypack or the lower part of your backpack or messenger bag is outstanding, as it is at eye level of most drivers. On all but the most upright of bikes you will be leaning over forward, so reflective gear on your upper back is fairly useless. If all this seems excessive, try driving at night and looking for cyclists. You'll be amazed at how invisible we can be.

Lights: Those new flashing red lights are also great at drawing attention from the rear. For the front, a headlight is a big help, not so much to see the road (seldom a problem in NYC), but to be seen by jaywalking peds and turning cars. Handlebar-mounted lights are good, but the best is a helmet-mounted head lamp. Properly aimed, even a low-powered one will direct plenty of light wherever you



look. It's wonderful to be able to stop speeding cars with a stare. See also: [The Brighter Side of Bike Lights](#).

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