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MAGAZINE

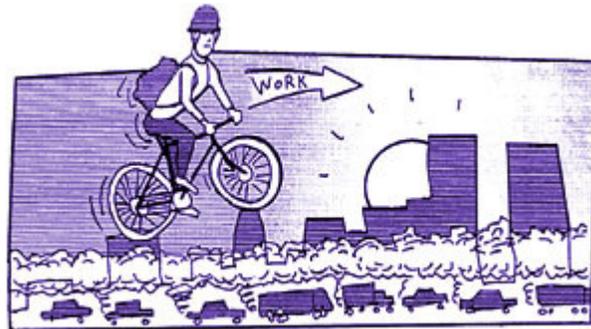
May/June 1993, p.8-9

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Guide to Streetwise Cycling in NYC (Part III): Rules of the Road (The Real Ones)

Story by Tom Hart
Drawings by KyleSkrinak

City Cyclist presents Part III of a cycling guide-in-progress by Tom Hart, a T.A. member who works at Metro Bikes' midtown store at 47th St. and 9th Ave.



In this part, we help you stay on the right side of the law and in possession of your bike.

Cycling Legally



One of the open secrets about NYC cycling is our flouting of the law. Running red lights, riding the wrong way on one-way streets and even riding on sidewalks are all common but illegal. In a just world, we cyclists would get special dispensation from the law for our non-polluting and relatively non-threatening ways (and more help in safeguarding our right-of-way from motorists). But as most of us have learned the hard way, life isn't always fair. The law requires cyclists to obey the same

rules as motor vehicles, or face the same penalties.

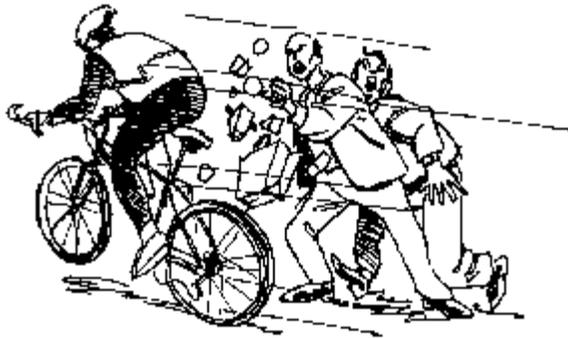
Traffic laws: Though traffic laws may have been designed for 2-ton moving boxes with limited maneuverability and visibility, they aren't all as useless as they may appear. Some laws actually do protect us as well as the general public.

Wrong-way riding on one-way streets forces everyone in traffic to give way, with risk to themselves. It's especially irritating to other



cyclists, whose turf is precarious to begin with, and it endangers pedestrians, who are looking only in the direction of traffic (if they're looking at all). Oncoming motorists have little option but to hope you don't run into them - they can't slide in behind you if things get tight.

Wrong-way cycling is doubly dangerous when you're rounding a truck or anything else that limits visibility - whoever's coming the other way isn't expecting you.



Riding on the sidewalk unnerves and endangers our cohorts in low-impact travel - pedestrians. Being the occasional lost-in-space ped myself, all too often I'm startled by silent cycles zipping by on sidewalks.

If you ever ride on the sidewalk, go extremely slow (slower than a runner) and be prepared to yield to everyone else, especially children, who move

quickly and unexpectedly, and the elderly, whom a fall can cripple for life. Since many peds look with their ears, the properly tuned (i.e., silent) bicycle may need to signal presence with polite bell ringing or "excuse me." Still, jam-packed or one-way streets aren't justification enough for hopping onto the sidewalks; they belong to pedestrians. You too can get off and walk. Remember: not only is riding on the sidewalk illegal, it is the one offense that can get your bicycle confiscated (permanently) in NYC.



Red lights are the city cyclist's biggest dilemma, since they are everywhere in NYC. Going through red does help the cyclist maintain a fast pace, and also offers a chance to spin easily without being hounded by packs of cars. But running reds is dangerous; and the faster you go through, the greater your chances of getting or causing hurt.

When you run a red, not only are you operating against traffic, you're also violating the crosswalk, where peds have complete right of way. So never treat reds as anything but a stop sign: slow down, take a good look, make sure it's safe, and scan the full intersection for peds. (In crowded NYC, it's easy to key on cars and miss the humans.) If a vehicle or person is crossing, try going wide and merging as far to the side as possible. If you can't do this without riding on someone's toes, come to a full stop and wait until it's clear.

If you do flout the law, be especially careful to avoid pedestrians. Not only does a ped in the front wheel send a bike down hard; but pedestrians have been badly injured and killed by cyclists who ran reds (they fall and hit their head on the pavement). If the wrong people get hurt or annoyed we could easily see another police crackdown against cycling. Every ped brushed by a cyclist is one less supporter for taming the real killers on the streets - motor vehicles. So think before you run reds or scare or endanger pedestrians because your actions could affect all of us.

Keeping Your Bike in NYC

In case you haven't heard, bike theft is a big



problem in NYC. We have the best bike thieves in the known world. Coupled with official indifference, this makes ours the only city where many locks are not guaranteed.

Bike muggings are rare. Of the thousands of cyclists I've talked to who have had their steeds stolen, only four have been mugged for it. Bike muggings usually happen in desolate hiking areas such as bridges and empty parks. You can minimize this by riding with others or using the speed and maneuverability of your bike to keep you away from those you don't trust. On bridges especially, where the cyclist is often unprotected in a confined area, try riding across with other cyclists; turn around if you see trouble, and be extra careful at night after rush hour.

Crimes of opportunity: Most bikes are taken when they're left alone, even for a few seconds. You lean it against a wall to dash into a store, and somebody grabs it and rides away. The best way to hang onto your bike is to not leave it alone. I'm pleasantly surprised at how many businesses allow me to bring in my bike (government institutions, pretentious office buildings and crowded restaurants are exceptions).

Many places you stop at when cycling, such as delis and bike shops, have no problem with bringing in your bike - they want your business. If they say no bikes, tell the manager politely that you can't or won't shop there unless you can watch your bicycle. That way they'll know they're losing your business for one reason only, and maybe they'll accommodate you. But be ready to take your business somewhere else; you're on a bike in NYC and the next deli is usually a minute's ride away.



Serious locking: If you do decide to lock outside, be serious. This means using at least one strong lock, locking or taking with you easily removable parts (wheels and seats), "distressing" your bike with tape or paint, and being really picky where and when you lock up. It's best never to leave alone a bike you truly love, as any lock can be broken.

The best locks currently are case-hardened chains and padlocks - the bigger the better. To tell if a chain or lock is hardened, run a file across it - files bite easily into mild steel but seem to slide off hardened steel; thieves' cutting tools will do the same. Chains and padlocks are hardest to break when locked high and pulled tight so that thieves can't stand on their clippers or get leverage for a sledgehammer.

Some of the new extra-thick U-locks rival the security of a chain, especially if you can minimize the space inside the U to prevent the thief from fitting in a thick pipe ("Bad Bones" work this way). Cables are OK if the bike isn't left for long, so a thick cable may make sense for a messenger.

Double your security. Better than any one lock is two completely different locking systems, which require the thief to carry two tools. A good combo is a U-lock and a chain or cable. In the City Cyclist reader survey, half of the riders who lock up said

they use at least 2 locks; more than 10% of these use 3 (see p. 12).

In general, the more brute force in your system, the uglier and less valuable your bike, the more parts you take with you, and the less often you leave it - the less likely your bike is to get stolen. It also pays to listen to trends (talk to your bike shop, read City Cyclist) because no system is foolproof and every lock could have a fatal flaw.

Insurance and Warranties: Some companies let you hedge the vulnerability of their locks with warranties, but you'd better be good with details. All companies insist on the broken lock as proof of fault; most also insist on both keys. Many require police registration and reports, and some don't apply in Manhattan or even all of NYC. Read the fine print and don't expect even the most reputable company to give you a cent unless you do exactly as they say.

You can insure your bike under your apartment insurance, though most policies cover theft only if your bike was at home. Check with your insurance agent, and even at home always lock your bike to something solid. Other theft-recovery strategies include: Photographing your bike and/or recording its vital statistics (to prove ownership to the police or on the street); registering the bike with your local police precinct (ditto); and slipping paper with your name and phone number inside the seat tube and bottom bracket (an alert bike mechanic servicing your stolen bike may call you). Each can be done quickly and will improve your chances of riding your swiped bike again.



What to Do if You're in a Cycling Accident



By Amy Weinstock & Barton L. Slavin

1. Report your accident to the police. If you are physically able, wait for the police to arrive and report the circumstances. Guard your words. Tell the police how it happened without placing any blame upon yourself.
2. Make sure the police tell you: the officer's name, the precinct and accident report number, the other party's license and insurance info, and names and phone numbers of witnesses.
3. Arrange for photographs. Get pictures, on the day of the accident if possible, of yourself, your bruises, the accident location, skid marks and anything else that might bear on your claim.
4. Get immediate medical attention. Go to a hospital emergency room or see a private doctor. Although you may feel fine right after the accident, problems may surface later. Get checked out by a professional.
5. Discuss your accident with an attorney within 1-2 weeks of the accident. Talking with a lawyer won't cost you anything. Find out how to file a claim.

Ms. Weinstock and Mr. Slavin, both bicyclists, practice personal injury and workers' compensation law in New York.

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