

REVOLUTION IN KEY WEST

Tired of the nerd factor in safety education? A cure is hatching in the deepest South

by John Schubert

Kim Stamps, a Key West pedicab driver, spent a recent Saturday morning doing something you might not expect: practicing bike-handling drills on her purple one-speed cruiser. Instant turns, rock dodges, slow-speed figure-eights, shoulder checks — all the stuff we think coaster brake riders wouldn't bother doing. And, that afternoon, she was making left turns on

high-volume multi-lane roads, merging flawlessly across four lanes to a left-turn lane, twice in rapid succession.

For Stamps, it's not about becoming a bike jock. Her pedicab travels are confined to the Florida island's small Old Town area, a world apart from the four-lane roads and commercial district where she did the traffic drills. The cruiser is her only other bike.

Stamps was one of a group of people from Key West's city government and bicycle advisory committee who got schooled in traffic skills so they'd have that perspective to bring to their planning work on the island.

Key West is a cycling paradise with a familiar American problem.

The paradise part: a four-square-mile island with great weather, short distances, no hills, and probably the highest mode share in America. One figure I heard was 17 percent. On many streets, bicycles outnumber cars. People ride for transportation and some incidental fun, just like the rest of America should.

The American problem part: everyone still believes in the tyranny of speed. That's the presumption that a bicyclist should never be in the way of a motorist, not even for a few seconds.

The city wanted a fresh perspective on how it might improve cycling condi-



tions, and thanks to local bicycle rental outfit owner Eddie Marsh, it began with the fundamentals. How do you best operate a bike? How does that knowledge inform public policy decisions?

The city's need coincided with an opportunity from the Florida Bicycle Association (FBA). FBA had recently developed a new education program, taught it several times in the Orlando area, and was ready to roll it out to the big leagues.

Before you nod off to sleep, take heed. I am well aware of the bad rap education has received. Visualize a middle-aged guy with a pot belly filling out his jersey spending way too much time explaining gearing to a bored audience before launching into that overly sincere "bicycles are vehicles" speech. Now imagine

the gearing lecture all gone and the speech replaced by interactive teaching methods that truly engage the students.

"What we need to do is change the paradigm," said Keri Caffrey, the principal author of the FBA's new cycling curriculum. "We need to make people believe they have road rights." And she began the classroom session the night before with a few comments about road rights, including the "first come, first served" principle — that if you're operating a vehicle on a road, your right to continue on that road safely supersedes an overtaking vehicle operator's right to pass you. That operator can only pass you when it's safe to do so. "Many of us have been browbeaten into believing we don't have first come, first served rights," she said. "We need to take that right back for our safety."

Other safety programs hint at this, but it is emphasized with great clarity in the new FBA program. And it goes hand in hand with some very advanced thinking about how to handle intersections, how to influence the behavior of other road users, and why the logic of traffic rules keeps people safe without their having to think much about it.

Also uppermost in the new course's presentation is that it's not dogma.

"These are not absolutes," said Mighk Wilson, the bicycle planner for Orlando and co-author of the curriculum. "We all give and take in this culture," he said. Their goal wasn't to tell the students how they had to ride, but rather to show them the safest way to use the road-sharing option and to make the students articulate for themselves some of the counterintuitive aspects of it.

Chief among those is that claiming a lane is safe, and often the preferred way of riding. On four-lane roads, the students nonchalantly claimed the right

lane. On two-lane roads, in which the lanes were only intermittently safe to share, the students learned the "control and release" concept: they controlled the lane when safe overtaking wasn't possible and moved to the right when it was.

"The key to confident cycling lies in your powers of observation. The safest and most competent traffic cyclists are not necessarily bold or fast. They are observant. They identify patterns in the chaos, and they take advantage of them," Caffrey said. She noted that for some cyclists, it's a new concept to be thinking about a strategy to get through a complex intersection.

None of this prevents a cyclist from using a separated path (and Key West has some beauties on the oceanfront). The curriculum just gives the cyclist the tools to use every road on the island safely.

One of the first stereotypes to get slayed is the "cycling is dangerous" fear-mongering. Wilson dispatches the usual accident statistic discussion in one breath:

"When you measure on a per-hour basis of exposure, bicycling is actually safer than being an auto passenger, even considering all the unsafe bicycling behavior."

Then Caffrey launches into a presentation of how much a rider's safety is within the rider's own control. She begins with a pie graph of the frequency of known accident causes, throws out the Darwin Award candidates one by one, and is left with an eight percent sliver. And that sliver contains the accident causes they teach students to avoid during the on-road course.

Caffrey and Wilson also poo-poo the "we're so vulnerable" approach to safety issues. They turn that concept on its head and ask their students, "What are the safety advantages of being slow and exposed?"

The students quickly come up with a list. A slow speed is within the range of normal human perception. You can hear better. Your peripheral vision is better with no blind spots caused by roof pillars. Your narrowness and maneuver-

ability help you avoid crashes. You can communicate intentions with your body language and make eye contact. And if you do crash, the impact speed is slower.

By now, the class is teaching the instructors because the answers to these questions are self-evident. Caffrey and Wilson only need to guide the discussion.

Then the instructors ask, "What are the major causes of accidents?" At this point, I expected the audience to make the understandable mistake of blaming motor traffic. But nooooo, they get it right! They note that road hazards and loss of control form the bulk of reportable bicycle accidents.

Experience has shown that it's difficult to sell the concept of traffic cycling, but after seeing how Caffrey, Wilson, and the FBA succeeded in Key West, I dare say they have cracked the code. **AC**

Technical Editor John Schubert asks all of you to suggest ways for him to get another business trip to Key West. Send your best suggestions to schubley@aol.com and visit his website at Limeport.org.

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