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The San Diego Union-Tribune.

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Bumper crop of bicyclists

As gas prices increase, so do safety concerns

By Michael Stetz
STAFF WRITER

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It seems a fantastic way to go to work, particularly now, with gas prices so high.

Hop on a bike. Suck in fresh air, get the heart going, gander at all that scenery.

But the reality can be a bit less rosy.

Cars and SUVs and trucks and buses whiz by. And a collision with a vehicle can be deadly, as San Diegans were reminded recently when a Marine captain was killed while riding his bike on Kearny Villa Road.

Experienced cyclists worry that such clashes could become more common as the price of gasoline continues to soar and people look for alternative ways of getting around.

Since the spike in gas prices, the San Diego County Bicycle Coalition has received more requests from people asking for bike routes to their workplaces, said Kathy Keehan, the executive director.

Biking is an attractive commuting option in San Diego because of the beautiful, year-round weather, she noted.



SANDY HUFFAKER
Members of the biking club San Diego Cyclo-Vets maneuvered along East Mission Bay Drive yesterday. More weekday commuters and weekend exercisers are taking to two wheels, and biking advocates are concerned about road safety.



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But there are concerns that, for some, the ride won't be smooth because it takes savvy, experience and education to handle the roads, Keehan said.

Some bikers don't know or flout basic rules. They drive against traffic and run red lights and stop signs. They don't wear helmets.

Still others drink and ride. And even experienced bike riders, hardened by close calls and nasty yells from motorists, can be combative.

Bicyclists, meanwhile, say living life in the bike lane tests one's fortitude.

Drivers don't watch out for them, they say.

Drivers veer into their lanes to purposely send them off course.

Drivers fling open car doors without looking – sometimes right into a biker's path.

"I think drivers think bicyclists are riding for recreation and that they shouldn't impede" motorists, said Allen D. Zwan, who bikes twice a week to work along the route where 29-year-old Patrick Klokow died.

"But it's becoming a regular method of transportation."

■ ■ ■

Riding a bike is actually safer today than ever before. The number of fatalities has dropped nationally nearly every year since 1993, when 816 people died riding bikes. In 2003, the latest year for statistics from the National Center for Statistics and Analysis, 622 people died.

In San Diego County, 12 people died riding bikes in 2002 and seven died the next year. Last year there were nine deaths, according to the California Highway Patrol.

Chances are most of those dying were middle-aged and male. In 1993, the average age of those killed in bike accidents was 27.8. By 2003, it had risen to nearly 36 years of age.

Experts can only guess why. Perhaps Lance Armstrong, the seven-time Tour de France winner, has inspired more adults to ride. Fitness is one big benefit.

Or maybe a federal investment of more than \$1 billion in pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure has spurred an increase in riding, said Craig Raborn, program manager for the Bicycle and Pedestrian Information Center in Chapel Hill, N.C.

And, now, the rising price of fuel is another incentive. According to a program called Bike To Work, it costs \$3,000 annually to keep your car

Remembering a rider

Bicyclists who want to take part in today's "Silent Ride" in honor of Patrick Klokow can leave from four locations:

8:15 a.m. Del Mar Starbucks on Coast Highway

8:30 a.m. Mission Bay Park Visitors Information Center, at East Mission Bay Drive and Clairemont Drive

8:30 a.m. West Hill High School, 8756 Mast Blvd., Santee

9 a.m. Adams Avenue Bicycles, 2606 Adams Ave.

running. A bike costs less than \$300 annually, according to the organization's Web site.

Some are combining bike riding with public transportation. Brent Spirnak, 21, lugs his bike on the trolley to get to San Diego State University from Mission Valley. He's seeing more people doing the same.

But many people hopping on bikes today, particularly middle-aged folks, didn't grow up having the level of education about bike safety that kids get today, noted Raborn.

"People may have entrenched habits and are not changing them."

They may remember their carefree days of riding as a child and scoff at the idea of wearing a helmet. California has a helmet law, but it doesn't apply to those over 18.

They may also combine biking with partying. Almost a quarter of those killed last year had a blood-alcohol concentration of .08 or greater.

Many bikers complain that roads are built for cars, and it's tough to find bike-friendly routes.

Kearny Villa Road, where the county's latest death occurred, is the only way bikers can go north and south along the Interstate 15 corridor. And even experienced riders say some spots aren't for the faint of heart.

Cyclist Ray Ramage said Klokow was hit at a particularly perilous location, where riders have to clear a huge stretch of the road at a point where motorists are entering and exiting ramps to Route 163.

Those motorists are often flying, said Ramage, who's been commuting on Kearny Villa Road for six years. He lives in North Park and works in Scripps Ranch.

"I've had such close calls there. It could have been me."



Reports indicate that when Klokow died he was doing everything right. He wore a helmet and bright-colored clothes and his bike had reflectors. He was hardly a novice, having been a member of the All-Marine Triathlon team.

Police have arrested the driver of a minivan in connection with the hit-and-run accident. Police believe that the Iraq war veteran was also hit by two other vehicles.

This morning, several bike clubs plan a "Ride of Silence" to honor Klokaw. Riders will leave from a number of locations. Motorists need to learn that bikes are not "toys" but legitimate means of transportation with the same right to the road as cars, said Ken King, a longtime bicyclist and a member of the Knickerbikers, a local bike club. He said motorists tend to watch for other motorized vehicles, not bicycles.

"It seems as if they look right through us," King said.

Just about every serious biker has had a close call – or worse. Jim Simmons suffered breaks to his back and neck when living and bicycling in Hawaii. A motorist fell asleep and ran into him.

Still, the Encinitas resident rides.

"It's good for fitness. It's gets you out of the house."

Some argue that bike riders contribute to the problems. Some sport expensive bikes that can easily overcome speed limits on some roads. Some also ride three, four and five abreast, spilling over from the bike lane and into the main road, where they may meet up with frustrated drivers.

Ramage, 48, the veteran bicyclist, believes more aggressive law enforcement and better road engineering would help.

He took up biking because he couldn't handle driving through the increasing hectic traffic. "I ended up at work shaking."

But biking has given him tense moments, too.

A truck once crossed into the bike lane where Ramage was riding and edged him over to the guard rail. "And he was smiling about it," Ramage said, still sounding incredulous at the memory.

Ramage is heartened by a possible offshoot of people switching from gas guzzlers to bikes, though. Studies show that if more people are on bikes, motorists learn to better deal with them, he said.

In Europe, where bicycles are widely used, conflicts are rare, he said.

"There's safety in numbers."

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