



It is About the Bike

by Sgt. James T. Donaldson, PCI #984
Covington (KY) Police Department

IPMBA has not yet approved “cross bikes” for use in IPMBA training, but does not rule out the possibility that they may be practical in some situations, or something to that effect.

“Do more with less.” Sound familiar? If you are a police administrator or supervisor, you have either heard it or said it. If you are a police cyclist, you should embrace it. Now is the time, more than ever, to show your administration, and more importantly your city leaders, what you can do with a well-trained, well-equipped bike unit. Now is the time to push the boundaries.

I won't bore you with fuel saving studies or drone on about community relations. I won't even touch on the physical benefits and the savings in sick time. These are all things that you and hopefully your administration already know. What I would like to do is tell you about a program that was started in our city about six years ago and has surpassed every expectation and hope. The program was our effort to replace our mountain bikes with cyclo-cross bikes. Oh yes, we did!

The challenge we faced was that our administration didn't understand what we were capable of and would not direct the dispatch center as to how to utilize us. The bike program was treated as a novelty. We were a 120-person department with two bikes on each shift (six total), all of them mountain bikes. “Ride when you want. Don't break anything. Get back in the car if we get busy.” That was our bike program. That was also eight years ago, when the bike spots were given out to the most senior officers who put in for it. No interviews, no prior experience, no questions asked. There was neither direction nor expectations, and nobody wanted to rock the boat.

The change started when a new sergeant who knew a thing or two about bikes was put in charge of trying to make the program useful. There were several openings at the time and the officers who got picked were avid tri-athletes and cyclists. The perfect storm was brewing.

Our city is truly diversified in that it has a large urban core, several “downtown” neighborhoods, a dedicated business /entertainment district, and some seriously sprawling subdivisions. We are located in Northern Kentucky, so very few of our 13.75 square miles are flat. We have several large parks along the rivers that comprise our borders, and the crown jewel of the county, Devou Park, is located on top of a small mountain inside our city. This park alone encompasses about 800 acres. All of the parks contain hiking, running, and cycling trails, both paved and unpaved. There are also a number of trails in our wilderness areas throughout the city and along the rivers. With the exception of the two weeks a year when we get substantial snowfall, it is the perfect cycling community.

So now everything is in place. We have a great town for bike patrol. We have a supervisor willing to push the envelope. We have dedicated officers willing to do what it takes to extend the bike time. How do we become more useful? Or better yet, how do we become



indispensable? Enter the cyclo-cross bike.

We were fortunate that as one chief left and another took over, we ended up with a bike-friendly administration. We used this and the fact that our citizens and businesses loved the bikes to pitch a plan to make our bike guys accountable for assigned sectors. That's correct; we made them responsible for a beat. "Never gonna happen," they said. "Can't cover the territory...you will be worn out running call to call...you're never going to be fast enough to cover another car on a hot call!"

What the naysayers didn't know was that when they approved four new mountain bikes, we built two cyclo-cross bikes instead. (*You don't want to do this unless you have the support of your administration and you are pretty sure you can sell it.*) We went from pushing 25 mph on the flats to 35 mph. We started pushing 47 to 50 mph on downhills. We learned to climb like roadies and absolutely enjoyed crushing the leftover mountain bikes when we had to climb up into the park or go over the flood wall. Getting through traffic was easier and foot/vehicle pursuits were ended in short order because of our speed and responsiveness. Parking garages were cleared in half the time, and when some of the larger businesses had to be cleared, we rode through them. We became indispensable. We also grew to four on a shift for a total of 12 plus a supervisor, all on cyclo-cross bikes.

By now the hardcore mountain bikers are getting bored and starting to thumb through this article, looking for pictures. There aren't many, but maybe I can answer the questions that are going through your mind right now. Can you ride them up and down steps? Absolutely! When we train, we do steps. However, when we are working the street, they are forbidden. Why? Think about the times that you or someone you know got hurt or broke something while riding steps. How bad are you going to feel when you are on your way to an "officer needs assistance" call and pinch flat, blow a spoke, or just flat "yard sale it" because you were distracted for one split second? Now there are two of you that need help. During the 2007 Instructor Course in Baton Rouge, I saw two frames get cracked, both from riding steps. At the 2008 IPMBA Conference in Indianapolis, I saw several bikes get flats while trying to climb steps, and these were ridden by accomplished riders.

Be honest with yourself and seriously answer the question, "is it worth the risk when its 'go time'"? Go to YouTube and type "cyclo-cross bikes climbing stairs" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BoOhi05bm8Y>). The pros dismount and run up the stairs faster than you can climb them on your bike. That's why we teach the dismount and the remount. The answer to your question, however, is "yes"; we can and do ride stairs successfully. Just because we don't have that protective high volume of air that mountain bike tires have doesn't mean that we are fragile. Quite the contrary. The wheels are very robust, yet typically weigh in at less than 400 grams. This is a substantial weight savings that also gives us one-third of the rolling resistance.

Another reason we were told they would never work is because they can't handle mud or snow. This statement was made by people who have no idea why the cyclo-cross bike was invented – wintertime racing in Europe. The bikes typically are raced on courses encompassing sand, gravel, single-track dirt trails, paved roads, and open pastures or grass fields. We very much



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enjoy riding them through the mud and snow and can absolutely burn up the top of the levee, which typically is grass about eight inches tall. Drop down over the levee and you are riding along the Ohio or Licking River – take your pick. The trails along the river are single-track dirt with lots of rocks and wash outs, as well as the occasional downed tree. Do we launch the bikes and jump over and off of everything in our path? No, we are at work and the goal is to answer the call or patrol the area. Do we push it and bunny hop over stuff to see if we can? Hell, yes! We are still police cyclists.

Maybe you have looked up cyclo-cross bikes by now and discovered that there is no suspension. Those who already knew this are dying to yell, “You can’t ride at work for eight hours without a suspension!” We work 10-hour days, and yes, you can. Our bikes are Surly Cross-Checks and they are full steel, including the fork. This helps dampen the vibration immensely, and the bikes are still substantially lighter than mountain bikes. We also have three different handlebar positions from which to choose.

The very nature of the bike gives us an advantage in the nine-foot box and other cone courses because there is no loss of power through the drive train, the center of gravity is lower, and we are not pushing around a front shock. Because we are not fighting the flex in the shock, we are more responsive. We routinely ride these bikes on one of our professionally designed wilderness trails, and you do feel it in the shoulders during the downhill, and you do have to occasionally dismount to run over an obstacle. The pro downhillers do it also if they judge the risk to be too great.

Does it require more skill to pass the IPMBA Police Cyclist practical tests? Not really. You can’t wheelie loft as easily, but we routinely clear the same obstacles. Is the lower bottom bracket a problem? No. It is typically only 1.75 inches lower, but the stability you get from lowering your center gravity even just that much is unbelievable. It actually reduced the crash frequency. Ask yourself, and answer honestly, how often do you get a pedal strike because of your bottom bracket height?

When building our bikes, we selected a compact crank set up: two chain rings in the front and ten in the back. The big ring is huge and the front inner ring is bigger than most mountain bike big rings. We ride a 50-34 in the front and a 12-27 in the rear. No granny gear. We didn’t use them anyway, and it cuts down on the weight. We also didn’t see a need for them. If you need a high bottom bracket and a little bitty chain ring in the front then you are at Moab or the Shenandoah 100 and not at work....or a member of the Albuquerque, New Mexico, Open Spaces Division. Does our gearing give us the flexibility to start fast and climb? Absolutely. Does it require a little more effort to climb big grades? You bet. Do you practice with your firearm?

Now you may be wondering about the durability of cross bikes. I can describe it with one word – phenomenal. The first one we built six years ago is still in service. It looks like somebody used it to build a house, but it is still on the road. We have re-cabled it four times, put four chains on it (that I know about), re-taped the handlebars a couple of times, and replaced the cassette and bottom bracket once each. Since we have at least one festival per month in our city, we use these bikes to fight with a lot. If something gets bent in the pile-up, we bend it back and get to it. If an officer takes it to the races, we hose it off and go to work, just like a mountain



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bike, the only difference being a catastrophic crash where the fork gets bent severely. When that happens, we're out \$125. How much does your front shock cost?

I am certainly not going to try to convince you that cross bikes are the panacea of law enforcement. I will tell you that once our officers ride cross bikes, you can't get them on mountain bikes unless they are off-duty. Are cross bikes big, burly, gnarly vehicles of mayhem? No, they are not. They are skinny, sleek, and inspire an emotional response when you see them moving, like cheetahs. Cheetahs, built for speed, efficiency and durability over the long run. Are cross bikes the complete package that have no equal and should be looked upon as the "be-all-end-all" of police cycling? Absolutely not. Several years ago, when patrol rifles came into the law enforcement environment – which many resisted – we did not get rid of the shotgun. Both are now considered indispensable. We now have options. You can call me a heretic if you like, but look at our success and ask yourself, "is this a viable alternative?" Who knows, maybe we can save some money on letterhead and drop the M...

Want to see a cool video produced in support of this article? Contact Jim at jt10x@insightbb.com.

James is a 14-year veteran of the Covington Police Dept. He has been on bike patrol for seven years and was certified as an IPMBA instructor in 2007. He is a graduate of the Park Tools Mechanics Course and is a devotee of cyclo-cross bikes.

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