



Races and Rides: Bike escorts make a difference

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A request for information through the IPMBA Listserve prompted me to write an article about police or public safety cyclists escorting foot races, bike rides, and parades. IPMBA has often helped me avoid re-inventing the wheel, so I'd like to share my experiences riding escort for these special events.

The first thing to understand is that parades, rides, races, and runs have historically been handled by motorcycle officers, with traffic-cop and citizen-volunteer assistance. Your agency may not even realize how effective you can be on bicycles. Just because public safety cyclists have been around for a while doesn't mean that our commanders have figured out how to utilize us. It is up to you to educate them.

Many years ago, on my first ride down to the U. S. Capitol on Police Memorial Day, I joined almost 100 police cyclists from 25+ departments for a leisurely 22-mile ride into Washington D.C. The first half was 11 miles, all downhill. The involved agencies provided two motorcycles and two traffic officers in police cars to escort our "parade." We'd pick them up as we entered Rock Creek Park and they'd block intersections for us all the way downtown. The plan was nice, but it didn't work. They did not anticipate our ability to travel at an average speed of 22 mph and ride four abreast, blocking a full lane for more 400 feet! On a winding two-lane road, through a heavily forested park, it was impossible for the police cars to get back in front of us. They blocked the first two intersections and then, trapped in the rear, followed us all the way into the city. Not even the motorcycles wanted to try to work their way back to the front; there was no room and we were too fast. We immediately improvised and, at each intersection needing traffic control, we dropped the front 2-4 cyclists to handle traffic until the whole group had passed. The dropped cyclists just jumped back onto our parade as the last cyclists passed, and then slowly rotated back to the front. After about 25-30 intersections, the first dropped riders were back at the front!

The best way to demonstrate how effective bikes can be is to get involved in the planning and operation of those events that we're ideally suited to handle. These include parades, recreational group rides, fun and charity runs, foot races, and any other event needing escort service that moves at a speed that bike officers and medics can maintain. Obviously, anything that has a "foot" or "bicycle" component can be escorted by public safety cyclists, but you have to plan ahead!

There are two equally important aspects of preparing to escort a special event: **pre-event planning** and **event day operations**.



Pre-event planning, if done properly, will minimize the inevitable “sudden emergency” needs of the event organizers and make your job a lot easier. Make sure that you’re included in pre-event planning with the event sponsors and organizers. Get a simple event check-list from your Special Events Unit or go online and take a look at this detailed check list: <http://twincitytc.org/Resources/RaceCheckList/tabid/113/Default.aspx>.

You need to be included in what the event sponsors and managers do, and you need to be there when they meet. If it is a small event, you may be their only exposure to the realities of road conditions, traffic flow, detours, parking, crowd control, restroom access, security, etc. Don’t forget that you bring expertise and local knowledge to the table and don’t be afraid to ask questions. You may see potential problems sooner and a lot more clearly than they do, especially after you work a few events.

There are also two basic types of events: those you control and those that move at time and speed dictated by the event. If you’re escorting a parade through town on closed roads or leading a recreational bike ride, you can often control the exact starting time, the speed, the rest stops, and the length to which you allow can allow the group to stretch. If you’re escorting a footrace or working traffic for a bike race, you will have to adjust to the speed and duration of the event and the fact that it could stretch out over miles. For example, the “Bike D.C.” bike ride has over 10,000 cyclists, spreads out over 20 miles, and has staggered start times throughout the morning, but is still heavily assisted by cyclists serving as marshals.

ESCORTING FOOT RACES

There are many factors involved with using bike escorts for foot races. This section describes a few of them.

Make sure the race has medical support. When we work foot races, we have an ambulance follow the slowest runners through the course. If you’re an EMS cyclist or have access to EMS cyclists, you can provide a service that an ambulance will never be able to provide; you can move through the runners to reach an injury without disrupting the race.

Nothing wrecks an organized run more quickly than vehicles on the course. Secure your course from uncontrolled vehicles.

Most courses are loops, with the start and finish lines fairly close together. This allows you to use bike officers to dismount and direct traffic at more than one place during the race, which can be an excellent staffing multiplier. If you choose to do this, time each bike officer’s route to their second traffic post very carefully. They may not be able to leave their first post until most of the slower runners have passed, and they need to know exactly when to leave their first traffic post in order to beat the lead runners to their second one.

Your lead runners will be able to finish a 10K in about 30 minutes. The organizers should be able to tell you the fastest times of the best runners so you can be prepared. Normally, that’s around 13 mph (21 kph) of sustained speed. That speed is significant in two important ways.



First, runners don't have gears to use on the uphill and they don't slow down much. If your escort riders gear down to spin as they climb, they'll slow down, which can be a problem for a bike officer whose job is to lead the race. Lead escort riders have to be fit enough to use their big gears on the hills or they have to get a head-start; if they don't maintain their speed on the hills, the runners will overtake them. This causes problems and looks bad. Second, once the race starts, don't expect that any riders that start in the rear will be able to "sprint" to the front. On a flat road, you can probably hold 22 mph (35 kph) for awhile, but at that rate you are only about 8.5 mph (14 kph) faster than the lead runners. Since you are only about 50% faster than the runners, by the time you "sprint" to the front, the race is more than half over and you're exhausted.

Your lead rider/vehicle needs to have the course memorized and stay alert. If they go off the course, the run is ruined and a lot of people want refunds. Flag-people, chalk markings in the road, signs, and barricades are all helpful, but if the leader goes off course, the runners will probably follow. They're honed in on the run leader and the slower runners follow the runners in front of them. I prefer that the run organizers provide a lead vehicle. We ride with it, but they carry the burden of remaining on the course. And I always make sure all the runners at the starting line know what they're following.

We usually use a motorized vehicle as the "rabbit." The runners are briefed to follow that vehicle through the course and we give the driver of that vehicle a spotter, who never takes their eyes off the lead runner. Their job is to never allow that runner to get within 30-50 feet of the back bumper of the vehicle.

If cyclists are leading the racers, they need to have their heads on swivels. They can't be too far ahead, but if they slow down at all, the lead runners will overtake them in mere seconds. Lead runners aren't there for fun; they're competing, often for prize money, prestige, or times that get them entry into more prestigious races; they can get quite upset if you impede them. They'll bang on the trunk lid of any lead vehicle that doesn't stay far enough ahead of them or slap the door as they go past. They'll pass your escort riders without a second thought. Imagine the problem that will occur if they start to pass your lead escort rider just as that rider swerves to miss a pothole!

Most runs or walks are over before you have a need for extra supplies, or even extra hydration. By the time you fix a flat or a mechanical problem, the race is over or out of your reach. Make sure your equipment is ready to go; the race won't stop for you. The only extra preparation you can have for this is redundancy. A couple of extra riders can be ready to fill in if you have a mechanical failure or if an officer needs to leave the course to take police action. Of course, your extra riders have to start (and stay) in the front of the race. If your lead rider gets a mechanical, it is impossible for riders at the rear to pull up and sub for them.



If you are working a distance run, you will need to ensure adequate hydration and energy. You can calculate your needs by knowing the speed of the runners. Figure out how long the race will take and remember that if you're escorting from a moving bike, you'll be moving 10-15 mph (15-21 kph) for the duration of the race. If you're working from stationary posts, a short sprint between posts might be all the officer needs to do, but be realistic about officer fitness when you select your riders and escorts. If you have a couple of less-fit riders, they might not be able to keep up with elite runners.

In the same vein, make sure your riders are warmed up before the race starts. There's no time to warm up after the start. You'll be sprinting if you're working more than one traffic post and using big gears to climb if you're the ride leader or riding escort. Make sure your riders have taken a bathroom break before the race starts. Once you're involved in managing a race, there's no time for that either.

If you can get good communications with the managers of the race and with the EMS team, you'll be able to tell each other how things are going and where the problems are. We have our leader's spotter call out the location of the front-runners every 30-45 seconds. This helps the other participants know what's happening and it tells your other cyclists when they have to move to their next post if they have multiple posts to staff. It sounds like a lot of radio-time, but you'll be amazed at how fast the front of a footrace moves.

Remind your officers that they can do their jobs and still be verbally supportive of the runners. Surly officers don't make a good impression. The lead runners won't care, but many of the slower runners are actually out there for the charity or to have a good time. They appreciate your support and aren't afraid to say thank you.

Lastly, the organizers will love you when you do your job well. They'll feed you, hydrate you, give your officers t-shirts, be vocal with their thanks, and send thank you letters or plaques. It can be a sweet feeling of a job well-done!

ESCORTING RECREATIONAL RIDES, WALKS, AND PARADES

Escorting a recreational group of riders or a group of walkers can be much more relaxing than a race or run, but the bigger the group and the fewer public safety cyclists you have as escorts, the more challenging it can be. Walks and parades are a lot easier to handle than bike rides, so most of these suggestions will relate to rides, but they can be applied to walks and parades as well. Here are a few things to consider.

Encourage your ride organizers to start and end their ride at the same location. Most recreational riders will transport their bikes on their cars and they aren't interested in a one-way ride that leaves them stranded, miles from their cars, at the end of the ride. The organizers should pick a place with adequate parking for the participants' vehicles and room to line the riders up at the start of the ride.



Bike maintenance must be offered on-site. Recreational riders often don't maintain their bikes as well as competitive or professional riders. Be sure that your public safety riders have spare tubes and know how to change tires. The lead riders can slow the pace or take a longer rest break to allow the rider whose bike broke down to catch up. If it was you who changed their tube, they should have a new appreciation for the myriad skills of the public safety cyclist.

Make sure the organizers plan for bathroom access at the beginning, middle, and end of the ride. The organizers should also supply water at the ride site and at each rest stop (energy food is good, too). Encourage people to eat and drink, and make sure they have water bottles. If you're escorting a 20-mile bike ride, riders who lack any method of hydration may be problematic. Encourage them to remedy the situation before starting the ride or you may be dealing with their health issues later.

Recreational group rides tend to spread out. That will be one of your biggest challenges, or headaches, if you don't manage it well. There will usually be a group of highly motivated riders at the front and groups of social riders and un-fit riders at the rear. If you don't control the speed of the riders at the front, your "parade" will stretch out for miles. If you're expected to handle traffic control at intersections, you'll have to kill yourselves to meet their expectations. If your group spreads out over half a mile and is going 10 miles per hour, you'll need to sprint at 20 miles per hour for a minute and a half to get from the rear to the front; over and over. Of course, that's made more difficult by the fact that you're passing all the riders at double their speed; not exactly an ideal situation around novice riders. You'll need a strong-willed officer at the front. That officer needs to rein in the speed demons or make it clear to them that they're on their own if they speed ahead of the group. Be sure to control the "spread" of the group. Getting back to the front of a group ride that spreads over a mile can be a daunting task for even the most fit public safety cyclist.

If you will be stopping traffic at intersections (particularly against the light patterns), wear traffic vests over your uniforms. Depending on the size an intersection, it can take 1-4 officers to fully stop traffic and clear your group. Ride the route ahead of time, at roughly the same time of day, and pay attention to which intersections will need officers to control them. Measure the distance between them and decide how many officers each intersection will need. Officers can control intersections as they arrive at them. Once the group passes through, those officers can slowly overtake the group's riders. When they arrive back at the front, they handle the next intersection. If the intersections are close together, you'll need to keep your group close together or have a lot of escort riders. It takes time to safely return to the front after you've been dropped at an intersection.

If the organizer hasn't already done so, involve EMS cyclists. Most recreational rides won't have ambulance support and it pays to have someone on your team who can drop back to handle minor medical problems or stabilize bike crash victims until an ambulance arrives. If you don't have EMS riding with you, carry a substantial first aid kit and enough first-aid trained escort riders to leave one or two behind if necessary.



If you'd like to tow an equipment trailer for energy foods, hydration supplies, tools, etc., try a single-wheel trailer, like the B.O.B. These tow and track directly behind the bike so you won't bang into things like the passenger trailers usually do.

ON BEING THE WATER BEARER

I've been asked to supply water on a number of speed-controlled events, like the Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics. I've tried saddlebags, bolting on plastic milk crates, a combination of duct tape and a bread rack, and a few others. Each had substantial drawbacks; most got me wet, some left my saddlebags full of spilled water, and most left a trail of used cups or plastic bottles strewn along the route, which needed to be cleaned up. I finally found a method that worked better than all the others. I bought a B.O.B. trailer. They tow straight behind a bike and are simple and quick to install and remove. The trailer attaches to a replacement skewer that they provide with the trailer, so all you have to do to switch towing bikes is exchange rear skewers. A quick ten-second switch-over and you can move the trailer from one bike to another. This is a huge advantage if your "water" bike gets a mechanical or a flat.

I equip the trailer by using bungee cords to tie two 18" inch tall trash cans down on the deck. The front trash can holds the full water bottles. I can get it quickly refilled by pulling up next to the SAG vehicle and pacing them as people in the back throw more bottles into the front trash can. The rear trash can is used for empty water bottles. I line the rear trash can with 3-5 trash bags and pull out each successive bag as it fills with empty water bottles. I toss the full bags into the SAG vehicle for post-race recycling. Before each run, I take a moment to address the assembled runners and tell them how they will be supplied with water and how they can return their empties. We hand (or toss) water bottles to them, and they can throw their bottles back when they're empty.

I start with a front can full of water bottles and an empty rear can for trash. I start handing out water about a half-mile into the run. At that point, I pull to the side of the runner's column and dismount. I usually have one or two other cyclists dismount with me and we each grab 5-6 water bottles and start yelling, "WATER ... WATER ... WATER" as the runners pass us. We then hand (or toss) bottles to every taker until the last runner passes. At that point I pedal like crazy until I'm back in front and then I stop on the other side of the column and hand out more water. When I need to be refilled with more water bottles, I pull up alongside the lead SAG vehicle for a supply. When I'm full again, I drop off and keep repeating until the run ends. It means doing repeated sprints with a loaded trailer, so you better be in decent shape, but the runners stay hydrated and don't leave a trail of trash. I ask the runners to toss their empty bottles in the direction of my parked bike, but they usually get a contest going on how many of them can actually land their bottles right in the trash can. The more accurate they are, the fewer bottles there are to pick up each time. If you have a few other cyclists assist you, you can get back to the front more quickly.



Well, that's the "short" version. If you benefit from anything I've written, I've met my goal of keeping IPMBA members from having to re-invent the wheel.

Good luck favors the prepared. Stay safe.

John has served as safety advisor for the College Park Area Bike Coalition, escorted dozens of recreational bike rides on roads and trails, escorted parades, and functioned as escort, leader, and traffic manager for many 5- and 10K runs, including the Special Olympics Torch Run. He has had the pleasure of riding with, and helping to escort, groups of 50-100 police cyclists as they ride to the Police Memorial in Washington D.C. He can be reached at jbrandt@umpd.umd.edu.

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