



Stepping Outside the Norm of Bike Training: Mountain Bike Search and Rescue

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Early last year, I was contacted by Jim Rabold of Larimer County Search and Rescue (LCSAR). He asked if I would be interested in teaching a bike class to a group of his search and rescue team members. Jim had conducted extensive research on bike training programs and had determined that the IPMBA training program would best meet their needs.

Jim, who has been with LCSAR for three years, has a passion for bicycling. He was, therefore, very enthusiastic about the opportunity to add a bicycle response team to the LCSAR program. He believed that bikes would add a new dimension to their already diverse group and expand their ability to search larger areas in shorter amounts of time. Jim shared with me a variety of scenarios of the type that the team encounters and how a bike might have an impact that I had never considered. For example, the Alzheimer's patient who walks away from the nursing center or from home, the lost hiker in the back country, as well as routine patrols in the county and state parks that become congested with multiple users and vehicles.

The biggest obstacle Jim faced, as is the case with many volunteer and professional organizations, was funding. In addition, he needed support from his command staff and fellow team members. Jim convinced his command staff that bike team would be a huge asset for the search and rescue program, sold them on the need for training, and obtained funding for the class through a local bike organization. Even before he had secured the funding, Jim was able to get eight team members (each of whom is required to be an EMT or First Responder and a three-year LCSAR member) on board.

So in October, come rain or snow, we were scheduled for training. While Jim got his side of the plan together, I was challenged to develop a training program that would be consistent with the traditional IPMBA program, but also able to meet the unique needs of a search and rescue team.

Fortunately, the LCSAR headquarters is located alongside the Poudre River, and this provided ideal terrain for the class. Superb single track runs parallel to the river, and the trail has plenty of river crossings and other obstacles. What an excellent setting for bike training!

As I developed the program, I faced a potential problem in that the students would be riding their own bikes. As we all know, our rule is that each class participant must have a well-maintained bike from a reputable manufacturer, a helmet in good condition, and the rest of the mandatory safety gear. The team stepped up to meet these requirements; all participants brought good bikes in great condition. Everyone had an updated helmet except one – his helmet was about fifteen years old, a real "classic". It was awesome!

As the effort got underway, I could see every aspect was going to be a challenge due to the fact that LCSAR was building this program from its very foundation. Even though Jim had done a lot of research on bike teams across the country, he still didn't know exactly what this class was going to involve. The classroom topics took much more time to discuss than I anticipated because of the students' interest and their desire to know every detail about how to best structure the team.

The first order of business was to choose a helmet and uniform that would both look professional and provide adequate function for long periods in hot and cold elements. The next decision related to their bikes. Having a well-maintained fleet of bikes is sometimes taken for granted. The LCSAR riders



realized how important their bikes would be to their success, so they were eager to develop a maintenance program and obtain the tools that would enable them to keep their bikes ready for deployment.

The next subject presented a challenge all its own. While every bike team routinely carries first aid equipment, LCSAR team members also need to carry additional supplies for large area searches and possibly aid in a remote rescue; for example, ropes, flagging, and gear for extended stays in the backcountry.

Once we powered through the classroom material, it was time to hit the pavement. Okay, it was time to hit the dirt!

In our typical training program, we try to set up the cone course on dry, flat pavement. Well, with this team, our only option was uneven dirt with ruts, rocks, twigs, logs and mud. Oh, yes, and those pesky thorns known as “goatheads”! It was a technical challenge, and flat-fixing became the team’s specialty.

LCSAR had previously built a course for ATV training that worked equally well for bike training; it challenged even the most experienced riders. The rides through the ATV course, the serpentine and the nine foot box built the confidence of all the team members and the instructor, too! We continued to train mostly in this setting, because we as a group felt that this would be most similar to what they would face when they were called out for a mission.

As the team’s confidence grew along with their skills and ability on the cone course, I had to find new ways to push them. I added a log or two to a narrow cone course that I constructed with several switchbacks. To add even more of a challenge, one of the team members brought a bike cargo trailer that he wanted to put to the test. It took a few tries before we were able to get it through the serpentine and nine foot box, but we did it!

This group of students was awesome. As the training continued, I could see them really start to believe in their abilities, and to envision the huge possibilities that the bikes could bring to their organization. Having built a solid foundation, the team continues to grow. They are in the process of developing policies and procedures. They have secured more funding, which has enabled them to buy panniers for everyone and get team helmets. They are also working with a local bike shop to help them expand their knowledge of bike maintenance.

As an instructor, I believe that the Larimer County Search and Rescue Bike Team has stepped up and met the challenges that IPMBA and I set before them. This was a great learning experience, and I would welcome the opportunity to expand and develop new and more intensive training for IPMBA that would include these search and rescue challenges.

Robert has been in the EMS field for 28 years. He joined Denver Health Paramedics in 1994 as a paramedic/field instructor, became an active bike team member in 1995, and continues to practice for them on a part-time basis. He has been with South Metro Fire Rescue Authority (SMFRA) since 2000, where he works full-time as a paramedic/firefighter. He has been the Bike Team Coordinator for SMFRA for the last nine years and was certified as an IPMBA EMSCI at the 2007 IPMBA Conference in Baton Rouge. He can be reached at r.montoya@live.com.

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Larimer County Search and Rescue Bike Team Goals and Objectives

The goal of the LCSAR mountain bike team is to function as a hasty or confinement team for a lost subject or for reaching an injured subject faster. With the bike team, LCSAR enhances its versatility and augments the existing services offered. The primary reasons for adding mountain bikes to the rescue unit is the bike's ability to rapidly cover roads, trails and pathways in a search area. The bike team can provide radio relay in remote areas and assist with transporting essential gear to subject locations. In addition, because mountain bikes are quiet, riders are able to listen for sounds of the lost subject. These qualities make a mountain bike a valuable tool for wilderness and urban Search and Rescue operations.

Working in teams of two, bike crews are assigned by the Incident Commander to check trails during hasty search, effect containment using trails and roadways, and use bikes as a platform for visual tracking. Bike teams will check for signs of a person's passage (foot or bike tire prints, gum wrappers, cigarettes, etc.), and can rapidly follow footprints that may belong to the missing party. Team members can set up "track traps" in areas the subject might pass through to capture footprints and follow any leads gained from them. Bikes can also be used to jump ahead on a subject's track, or travel ahead to attempt interception once a probable direction of travel is determined. Once a subject is located, cyclists with medical and rescue training and equipment can reach him/her more rapidly than a team on foot, and begin rescue and/or medical stabilization efforts.

Team Selection and Training

Due to the physical demands placed on team members, and the unique nature of the missions covered, highly motivated and experienced LCSAR team members are required. To qualify, team members must:

- Complete the Larimer County Search and Rescue BASART Training.
- Be in good standing with LCSAR.
- Provide and maintain their personal mountain bike in good and ride-ready condition, as verified by a Bike Maintenance Tech.
- Complete the bike team tryout, which consists of the East, West and South Valley loops at Lory State Park, within time parameters specified by the team coordinator.

The following criteria will be used to evaluate team members for Bike Team rating:

- Ability to operate and ride the bicycle safely and proficiently so as not to endanger themselves or anyone around them.
- Physical fitness and ability to perform their duties.
- Team participation during training sessions.
- Compliance with policies and procedures.
- Successful completion of all mandatory team training, including, but not limited to: the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA) EMS Cyclist Certification Course; intermediate or advanced bicycle handling skills sessions; and monthly group conditioning rides.

Bike Team Instructors will be required to attend the IPMBA Instructor Course and maintain current IPMBA Instructor certification.

For more information about the LCSAR Bike Team, visit www.larimercountysar.org/mountainbike.htm.