



Why Bike Training for Police?

Written by Kirby Beck

It's been 21 years since the first mountain bikes hit the streets of Seattle with police officers on board. Since then, police bike officers in the United States and around the world have continued to put their mettle to the pedal in fighting crime and protecting their communities.

With the unpredictable cost of fuel and budgets stretched to their limits, it is likely that bike patrols will continue into the future. As fuel prices rose, many departments started and expanded their bike units. As they go "green," they are rediscovering what bike patrol veterans have known for decades—bike patrol cuts down on crime. Remarkably, despite two decades of experience with specialized bike units, some police administrators still don't believe bicycle patrol officers need specialized training. "After all, it's just a bike," they say. "Everyone learned how to ride a bike as a kid, why do they need special training?" The answer to that question is often "liability reduction." That term has become ubiquitous but, it seems most administrators worry about liability as much as they fear getting pepper sprayed by a ninja turtle.

The argument "everybody knows how to ride a bike" just doesn't make sense, considering that every new recruit has had formal driver's education and knows how to drive a car. Plus everyone needed to have a valid driver license in order to get the job. Despite that, all are required to attend specialized drivers training. Why? Because law enforcement driving is different than civilian driving! Why, then, would anyone think that police bicycling is the same as the recreational biking they once did as a kid or may even do now as an adult?

Compare bicycling to hockey. Following the "everybody knows how" line of logic, one could easily say, "What's so tough about hockey? Lots of people know how to skate, and anyone can use a stick to hit a puck." Why not put them on an NHL team? Of course the trip to the NHL is a long and arduous one. Players work their way through youth leagues, into high school and even college ranks.

As they reach higher levels of the sport, players attend advanced hockey camps and receive specialized coaching. Practice is repetitive and tough. Their numbers dwindle as only the best and most skilled players are allowed to advance. By the time a player reaches the top level of professional hockey, he has thousands of hours of practice and coaching in basic and advanced hockey skills. That's a long way from "anyone can learn to skate and use a stick!"

Many people fail to realize that doing police work on a bicycle is among the highest levels of bicycling one can attain. That may surprise those who believe that bike races like the Tour de France are the highest level. The "Tour" is one of the world's greatest endurance challenges, to be sure. But tour riders aren't biking unsupported through heavy city traffic while wearing body armor, a gun belt and assorted weapons. They don't have to ride slowly and precisely down dark alleys or crowded sidewalks while approaching unknown people and threats.

They are not chasing armed suspects through traffic, or riding up and down stairways or through buildings. And they never have to bail off in one smooth motion to take down a suspect, draw a weapon, or move quickly to cover. Tour de France riders would need specialized training and practice to do that! Yet somewhere in the world, bike patrol officers are performing those tasks every day. Police cycling IS the "big league" of biking.

"Bicycling" magazine, a well-respected cycling journal, confirmed this in an article by an extremely experienced cyclist and writer Roy M. Wallack. In 2005, Wallack participated in an IPMBA Police Cyclist™ Course. He was amazed to discover that it was much more difficult and challenging than he had ever imagined. In the article, "Can



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You Pass the Bike Cop Test? ([Bicycling magazine](#), October 2005, www.bicycling.com), he questions whether Lance Armstrong himself could perform some of the skills bike cops do every day!

Combine the required skill with the risks of the job, and biking doesn't get any tougher. Riding and surviving on a bicycle, while effectively performing police duties, is a difficult job. As Wallack discovered, it is a task that requires a set of skills that far exceed that of the recreational riding enjoyed by even the most experienced adult cyclists.

Bike patrol training isn't about conditioning officers to ride fast like the Tour de France. It's as much about learning slow-speed balance and ballet-like precision for riding through crowded areas. It's about getting up and over obstacles that are part of the patrol area, looking competent and being safe and controlled while doing it. It's about learning specialized survival tactics to operate both day and night in safe, yet stealthy ways.

Unlike recreational cyclists who can choose safe, low-traffic routes, police cyclists have to ride where they are called or where the need for police service is greatest. That is likely to be where cycling conditions are less than ideal. That's an environment where police bikes usually work best. The officer's ability to ride in complex traffic and around obstacles won't come from their experience as a child.

It will come from learning the rules of the road affecting cyclists, how to ride and communicate with traffic in a predictable manner, the common mistakes motorists make that endanger them, and how to avoid or deal with threats when they occur. This type of knowledge can only be gained through specialized training and a lot of practice. Whether an NHL player or a police cyclist, learning means getting out and practicing in a game-like environment with a knowledgeable coach.

Police officers are provided with specialized drivers training to reduce crashes and protect both the officers and the public. Police cyclists operate in the same traffic environment, albeit at lower speeds, but without the barrier of the car's body to protect them. Like motorized officers, they need information to anticipate problems and special skills to avoid them. Officers operating police cars are not expected to learn those on their own, but too often officers operating bikes have to.

Officers in police cars use them for cover, as shelter from the weather, and even protection from hostile crowds. The patrol units offer several means of reliable communication, including mobile radios and sophisticated computers. Most cruisers are equipped with a shotgun or rifle.

Most important, patrol cars come equipped with a powerful engine and a reverse gear to get occupants away from trouble in a pinch. Bike officers come equipped with the tools on their belt, portable radios (of sometimes dubious reliability), their bicycles, their wits and their training. When sent out without training, a bike officer is missing a key survival tool.

Recreational cyclists have the luxury of being able to watch the surface of the road or the trail ahead of them. Should they spot a hole or other surface hazard, a recreational cyclist can usually avoid it with room to spare. Bike cops, however, are expected to perform police work and keep their eyes on the businesses, traffic and people around them. They often detect hazards at the last instant.

An officer needs to be able to react quickly and appropriately to avoid falling and injury. That comes from developing maximum braking skills, knowing how to turn instantly to avoid objects and vehicles, and learning how to fall when the inevitable happens. In hockey, anyone can skate down an empty rink and shoot into an open goal. The pro has to be able to do it with a rink full of defenseman and a determined goalie in the way. Bike officers,



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unlike pro hockey players, will need more than good padding to prevent an injury when they encounter an “obstacle.” Coach Mike Babcock, of the Stanley Cup Champion Detroit Red Wings, wouldn’t consider for an instant putting an amateur in a game who only played hockey through high school. The coach realizes that at the highest levels of this sport, only the most skilled, experienced and conditioned players will do. Yet some police administrators send their police officers out on bike patrol to do some of the toughest police work in the community with far less skill, coaching and experience in their activity than a typical high school athlete would have.

It is theoretically possible that an amateur hockey player could skate with the pros during a NHL game. He would, however, likely have a difficult time keeping up with the action. More important, the instant the player got in the way or tried a play on the puck, his lack of skill, strength, and experience would soon find him left behind, checked into the boards or flattened on the ice.

In policing, untrained bike officers could certainly ride around looking like they know what they are doing. However, the instant the traffic gets complex, a chase ensues or higher level skills are required, the officer would soon find himself out of the action or lying flat on the pavement. Unlike the ice rink, falls and crashes occurring in traffic can be fatal. A fall in a crowd of people can injure both the officer and the public. In that instance, liability should be a concern, and the plaintiff’s attorney will gladly tell you why.

Comprehensive training programs in police bike patrol training are available and proven. The IPMBA Police Cyclist™ Course is one such training program. A quality bike patrol training program will require four to five days to effectively communicate the necessary information and to allow officers adequate time to practice and develop competence in the necessary on-bike skills. Testing is an important part of the process so the trainer can try to confirm that the officer will be capable, effective and safe while working the street on a bicycle.

As police bike units grow, the additional advantages of stealth and positive community contact will become increasingly apparent. The personnel who are assigned to the bike unit should be good, hard-working officers first, and athletes and cyclists second. It’s hard to teach the innate qualities that make a good proactive police officer. That’s an internal drive.

It is, however, possible to teach quality officers how to perform effectively and safely on police bikes and to make the most of their natural talents and abilities. Learning what they are capable of doing with this new tool can be highly motivating. It can make them eager to go out and use that bike in new, exciting and productive ways.

Sending a quality officer on the street without specialized training can make the officer unsure and tenuous and lacking the incentive do anything but pedal around where he feels safe, essentially confined to public relations. Before long, without a comprehensive understanding and comfort with the tool they are using, many will quit enlisting for bike duty and will return to the car where their training has conditioned them to perform. If that’s the case, it isn’t bike patrol that failed; it’s the refusal to properly train the personnel that has failed them.

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