



Live Strong, Ride Safely

By LCdr. Kirk Volland

This year, millions of Americans tuned their televisions to the Tour de France to watch Lance Armstrong race to his sixth victory in this century-old event. Whether he was charging up the Alps or rocketing along on a solo time trial, Lance's exploits likely will motivate many Sailors to head out for a ride.

Cycling is great, but it isn't without danger. Six hundred sixty people died in the United States in fatal bicycle accidents in 2002. Even a casual Tour viewer probably can recall several spectacular crashes that marred the first week of this year's race, including one that briefly brought down the man from Texas. Whether you're a pro or a novice, everyone wins if you follow these safety tips:

Bicycles are vehicles, not toys. Sure, you can buy a bicycle at a toy store, and there may be ones for kids in the toy section at the NEX, but bicycles are transportation. Don't believe me? Ask any one of the millions of Chinese who get from point A to point B by bike. OK, so you're an American. One of the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA's) goals is to double the percentage of trips made by bicycle to reduce traffic congestion.

Ever get miffed at some guy on a bike for slowing you down—the one you couldn't get around because he was taking up space in *your* lane, instead of riding on a sidewalk? Stop and imagine how absurd, not to mention hazardous,

it would be if Lance or one of his U.S. Postal Service teammates tried to ride 18 to 25 mph on the sidewalk, dodging pedestrians, kids, and joggers. It would be a disaster.

Distracted by talking on cell phones, wearing headphones for MP3 players, enjoying the scenery, or engrossed in conversation, people on the sidewalk just aren't attentive enough. Neither are they expecting to need to dodge vehicles like a bike. That's why traffic laws grant cyclists the same rights to use the road as motorists, while requiring they abide by the same laws governing other vehicles.

While many people innately fear bike-vs.-automobile collisions, studies have shown that 70 percent of bicycle accidents don't involve cars at all. Rather, they are the result of falls or collisions with pedestrians. The FHWA's bicycle-injury study of emergency-room visits shows that 60 percent of bicycle-pedestrian crashes occur on sidewalks, which isn't surprising because that's usually where you find pedestrians. Bottom line, bicycles belong on roads, where they are less likely to run into pedestrians and safely can maintain higher speeds.

Don't ride on the sidewalk. Riding on the road reduces the potential for pedestrian-vs.-bike collision and avoids one of the frequent car-bicycle collision hotspots: driveways. It's easy to see how this kind of collision could happen; just think about how you leave your driveway at

home or pull out onto a street. You look left for approaching traffic as you pull out because you're driving a car and don't want to hit another one.

Wham! Didn't see that guy on the bike on the sidewalk, did you? Of course not; you were looking in the direction of the oncoming cars, not to the right for someone riding the wrong way on the sidewalk. Why do bicyclists go the wrong way? Early education provided to children to walk facing traffic translates into wrong-way bicycle riding as they grow and take up cycling. It's well-intentioned guidance but dangerous. Driveway accidents like this account for two-thirds of the car-bike injury accidents that occur off-road.

At some point, sidewalks end—when they cross a street, for example. That's when sidewalk riders ride across crosswalks. A driver making a right turn at an intersection has little time to brake to avoid hitting you because he's likely scanning left, again looking for oncoming cars.

Ride where you'll be seen—in the street, where motorists look for what matters to them: cars. Riding in the same direction as traffic on the right side of the road improves the odds that motorists will see you before they pull out of a driveway.

Don't drink and drive (or ride). Even though Lance may hoist a ceremonious champagne toast while cruising to victory on the Tour's last day, cyclists never should ride under the influence of alcohol. Amazingly, 23 percent of the 660 fatal cycling injuries nationwide in 2002 involved bicyclists who were legally drunk (blood alcohol concentration at or above 0.08). A Johns Hopkins study of bicycle accidents in Maryland backs this finding, while showing that only 5 percent of intoxicated cyclists wear helmets.

Intoxicated cyclists also are likely to be repeat offenders, with a history of automobile DWI infractions—that's why they're riding a bicycle and not driving anymore. Even if you're not riding under the influence, be alert for drivers who are. In one-third of fatal cycling accidents, either the cyclist or the driver legally was intoxicated. Ride defensively. Whenever you expect more intoxicated drivers out on the roads (e.g., evenings and weekends), be especially wary.

Avoid riding at night; use lights if you do. Injury rates climb in the late afternoon and into the evening, with the peak fatal-injury rate occurring between 6 and 9 p.m. Why? The



These bicyclists are enjoying a ride in the country. But, what's wrong with this picture?



left and right, and never assume that, because the light is green for you, a car approaching the intersection from the right will actually stop at the red light. Obey traffic laws and signals. If you don't, you'll look pretty hypocritical on the pavement after you expected a motorist to obey the law.

If you're driving, slow down, relax, put down the cell phone, and appreciate the speed and power you have under your control. Once you've ridden a bicycle somewhere, you'll instantly appreciate just how fast you can get anywhere by car. A 45-mph speed limit seems pretty fast, compared to the 12 mph you could manage on your mountain bike. Driving safely is a huge responsibility; that's why there's a licensing process.

Although none of us mortals likely will approach the cycling greatness of Lance Armstrong or his supporting cast of U.S. Postal Service teammates, each of us can enjoy it at our own pace. Setting out on the road, under your own power, lets you experience life and your environment in a way that's impossible from within the confines of an automobile. Regular bicycling is a great way to fight obesity, a far greater danger to Americans than anything associated with riding a bike. 🏆

LCdr. Volland flies with HSL-47.

From FY00 to FY04 Sailors and Marines had 76 bicycle mishaps, six were fatalities.

The author is an avid cyclist, who frequently commutes by bicycle and logs an average of 4,000 miles per year. He's been involved in two accidents in eight years, both of which happened when he fell over after failing to unclip his shoes from his pedals.

Here are a couple more safety items, as recommended by the Bicycle Helmet Safety Institute, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and National Safety Council, to think about when it comes to riding bicycles:

- *Riders should wear reflective clothing during low-visibility conditions (e.g., rain, fog, at night). Other times, you should wear light-colored clothing.*

- *Although there is no federal law in the United States requiring bicycle helmets, states and localities started adopting laws in 1987. Parents should remind their kids always to wear helmets, and, if you're out pedaling with them, wear one yourself—to do otherwise is an example of poor parenting.*

Head injury is the leading cause of death in bicycle crashes; it's also the most important determinant of permanent disability. Bicycle helmets have been shown to reduce the risk of head injury by as much as 85 percent and the risk of brain injury by as much as 88 percent. Non-helmeted riders are 14 times more likely to have a fatal crash than bicyclists wearing a helmet.—Ed.

increased traffic volume during rush hour may cause the peak, or it might be due to decreased illumination as dusk turns to night. State laws like those of California require not only side and rear reflectors but also a white headlight when riding at night. Without lights, you're virtually invisible, so don't be surprised if some S.O.B. in an SUV turns left across your path; chances are, he really couldn't see you.

Ride defensively, always. A left turn across oncoming traffic, where the motorist fails to yield the right of way to an oncoming cyclist is one of the classic and most frequent bicycle-vs.-automobile accidents. It accounts for half of car-bike collisions. Alarmingly, 21 percent result from motorists who fail to yield at a traffic signal, often when they simply violate the law and ignore the sign or light (e.g. they run a stop sign). What can you do?

First, if you're riding, stay alert. Never wear headphones. Ride predictably, just as if you were another vehicle, albeit a slower one. Make eye contact with drivers, but be prepared to react. At intersections, scan