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Moving Targets

By JAN HOFFMAN

IT seemed like a good idea at the time.

Save gas money, be environmentally correct, lose weight — just by biking to work. And so after two decades, Dan Cooley, 41, saddled up a silver 21-speed Raleigh in April to make the daily two-mile commute to his nursing job at a senior citizen center in Louisville, Ky. In four months, he lost 15 pounds. Way to go, Dan!

Friday morning, July 25, around 6:50 a.m., he was pedaling on a residential street, wearing his green hospital scrubs, when a Volkswagen roared out of a driveway in front of him. Swerving to avoid the car, Mr. Cooley cursed loudly and rode on.

The driver and his passenger cursed back. As Mr. Cooley pulled over to the sidewalk, the car turned onto a driveway, knocking him off his bike. In Mr. Cooley's narrative, the passenger, swearing, jumped out and pummeled him. Then he got back into the car, which zoomed away. Mr. Cooley lay prostrate on the sidewalk, bloodied, with a concussion and a torn ligament.

"We've had a car culture for so long and suddenly the roads become saturated with bicyclists trying to save gas," Mr. Cooley said 10 days after the attack, still feeling scrambled, in pain and traumatized. "No one knows how to share the road." He doesn't plan to bike to work again this season.

Every year, the war of the wheels breaks out in the sweet summer months, as four-wheelers react with aggravation and anger to the two-wheelers competing for the same limited real estate.

This summer, the number of new cyclists has increased strongly across the country. In June, nearly 11,000 first-time riders participated in Denver's Bike to Work Day. Dahon, makers of folding bikes popular with commuters, reports a 30-percent sales increase from a year ago, with many models having been sold out since the spring. Transportation Alternatives, a bicycling advocacy group, estimates that 131,000 people cycle daily in New York, up 77 percent since 2000.

Like Mr. Cooley, the newbies are lured by improved bike lanes as well as the benefits of exercise, a smaller carbon footprint and gas savings. But talk about a vicious cycle! With more bikes on the road, the driver-cyclist, Hatfield-McCoy hostility seems to be ratcheting up. Cycling: good for the environment, bad for mental health?

Having noted the uptick in aggression, Michelle Holcomb, a cycling instructor in Dallas, now carries a secret weapon. Recently, as she cycled into an intersection at a four-way stop and began turning left, a driver at the cross street revved and shot through, laughing as he missed her front wheel by inches. "Smile for the camera," muttered Ms. Holcomb, who videotaped the incident with her new helmet

camera.

In this dogfight, bigger's impact is always much, much badder. But smaller is hardly better-behaved. It's especially true in city traffic, where pedestrians add a third volatile element to a compound already wildly unstable.

Last Thursday evening, at the peak of Manhattan rush hour, Howard Savery was crossing Broadway at 40th Street with fellow bipeds. Abruptly he reared back, just avoiding a crash with an impatient cyclist, racing through the red light.

"Well, that's a first!" remarked Mr. Savery, a banker, who was heading home to Staten Island.

First time he'd nearly been knocked over by a cyclist in Manhattan?

No, corrected Mr. Savery: "That's the first time one of them actually beeped at me. Usually they run you down silently."

In spot clashes around the country, the hostility this summer has erupted in baroque violence:

¶A Brentwood, Calif., doctor was charged with assault. Police say he intentionally braked in front of two cyclists, with one smashing into his rear window and the other crashing to the pavement.

¶In bike-utopia, Portland, Ore., where 6 percent of the people cycle daily — the national average is under 1 percent — a cyclist knocked off his bike clung desperately to the hood of a moving car. And a car passenger fought with a cyclist after yelling at him to wear his helmet.

¶Last weekend, Utah state police arrested the driver of a pickup truck, suspected of plowing intentionally into cyclists on a morning ride.

Isolated, freakish events, certainly. Indeed, some cycling advocates say that as riders in their communities have become a customary sight, civility by motorists has improved. But overwhelmingly, on blogs and Web sites nationwide, drivers and cyclists routinely describe shouted epithets, flung water bottles, sprays of spit and harrowing near-misses of the intentional kind.

Psychologists and traffic experts say the tension rises from many factors, including summer road rage and the "my hurry matters more than your hurry" syndrome, exacerbated when drivers feel captive to slower-moving cyclists.

And then there's old-fashioned turf warfare.

One recent morning, BikeSnobNYC, the cycling blogger, was riding to work in a downtown Manhattan bike lane. Suddenly, an S.U.V. pulled in front of him, reversed and slipped into a parking spot. Mr. BSNYC veered and took out a camera.

"I'm working on a project," he told the driver. "I'm taking photos of people who almost kill me."

Recounting the exchange during a phone interview, his dudgeon only grew. "He says I'm lucky he was looking out for me because I don't belong in the 'most busiest city in the world' on my bicycle," said Mr.

BSNYC, whose closely guarded identity is part of his mystique.

Red-flag words, and from a driver "with Jersey plates" yet? A provocation to any cyclist, especially one who later posted the photos on his blog.

Driver-rider hostility has become worse this summer because legions of cyclists are simply inexperienced. At least according to the drivers. "They say the cyclists are all over the road and don't know the rules," said Michele Mount, a spokeswoman for AAA of New Jersey.

"They pull out without looking at traffic," she said. "They don't signal. I get that there is safety in numbers and they're trying to protect themselves, but there's barely room for cars on the road, let alone a bike lane."

Even Mr. BSNYC piled on. "You can't ride a bike in the city as an adult the way you did as a 10-year-old in a suburban cul-de-sac," he said. "I see people riding like children on a sidewalk, or going the wrong way down a street." (Cyclists should ride with traffic, not against it.)

A pandemic of obliviousness — earbuds, texting — further ramps up the tension. Recently, Scott Diamond, ride coordinator for the Morris Area Freewheelers, a New Jersey cycling club, saw what he called a trifecta of irresponsible cycling: "A guy riding his bike without a helmet, talking on his cellphone, with his kid in the bike attachment behind him."

There's a whiff of class warfare in the simmering hostility, too. During morning rush, the teeth-gritting of drivers is almost audible, as superbly fit cyclists, wearing Sharpie-toned spandex and riding $3,000 bikes, cockily dart through the swampy, stolid traffic to offices with bike racks and showers.

On a Seattle blog, an observer howled: "Drown yourself in espresso and tears!"

AT the opposite end of the class spectrum are cyclists who can't afford other transportation: often immigrants on clunkers, without helmets or lights, heading to work at dawn or dusk.

"We need to find some way to let them know what the rules are," said Earl Jones, chairman of a bicycle task force in Louisville.

The ability of drivers and cyclists to trash talk and then disappear into the anonymity of traffic further poisons the atmosphere. Dave Schlabowske, the bicycle and pedestrian coordinator for Milwaukee, recalled a car pulling alongside as he pedaled to a meeting: passenger, a child of about 6, rolls down window. No seat belt.

Driver, male, fixes Mr. Schlabowske with a glare, and then gives instruction to small child. Obediently, child complies: he flips Mr. Schlabowske an obscene gesture, shouts complementary epithet. Looking triumphant, driver peels off.

To some extent, the hostility is a byproduct not only of the abdication of common sense, but of widespread ignorance of state and local laws. In every state, cyclists have the same rights and responsibilities as drivers of motor vehicles. But in the particulars, state vehicle codes and municipal ordinances vary. Consider the frustrated driver who shouts to a cyclist, "Get on the sidewalk!"

In Los Angeles, cyclists may ride on sidewalks unless they exhibit “willful” or “wanton” behavior. But in San Francisco, cycling on sidewalks is forbidden, except for bike riders under 13.

The anticyclist hostility even follows riders into court. Just ask a bike lawyer. For as surely as night follows day, with more riders on the road, there is a small but growing peloton of lawyers specializing in bike law, usually representing injured cyclists.

Gary Brustin, a cyclist and California bike lawyer, said anticyclist fervor makes jury selection daunting. “They are white-hot about us,” Mr. Brustin said. “They are seething.” In California, bicycle plaintiffs lose two out of three cases that go to trial.

The anger has not gone unnoticed by officials around the country. A dozen states now mandate at least a three-foot passing gap. In June, South Carolina passed an antiharassment law to protect cyclists. This summer, Washington, D.C., posted speed limits for cyclists on a popular trail. New York City has been painting a green-striped bike lane down Broadway, from Times Square to Herald Square. Complete Streets bills seek to require that roads be designed for all users.

But the bottom line, say driving behavior experts, is that the learning curve has just begun. Tom Vanderbilt, author of “Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do” (Knopf, 2008), said that because drivers do not expect to see cyclists, they don’t.

Therefore, said Andy Clarke, president of the League of American Bicyclists, an advocacy group, the turmoil will abate when enough cyclists are on the road, so that everyone learns to share the space. As in Amsterdam. Or Davis, Calif., where nearly 15 percent of the population cycles daily.

Will the Hatfields and the McCoys ever be able to coexist? Ground zero for such tensions may be Woodside, Calif. (population 5,600, 14 square miles), on the San Francisco peninsula, tucked in forested mountains. Its famous switchbacks are so narrow they are often unmarked by white stripes.

Woodside is host to hundreds of recreational cyclists on weekends. And on many weekdays, a peloton known as “the noon riders” — as many as 100 cyclists from Silicon Valley businesses riding during lunch break — blasts through.

“Mention the noon riders to anyone in town and you’ll see the blood pressure go up,” said Susan George, Woodside’s town manager. One day, she said, she rounded a bend and came upon them: “I slammed on the brakes and they swarmed around me, screaming and yelling obscenities. My heart was pounding. It was very scary.”

In September, Woodside will test a campaign known as Honor the Stop. It’s the brainchild of Marc Evans, a San Francisco endurance coach whose client was one of two cyclists killed this spring by a driver.

Honor the Stop features a pledge card and a two-tone wristband: black, for those killed or injured on the road, and red, to represent the wearer’s commitment to obey stop signs.

Woodside will distribute 5,000 bands. “It’s not a campaign just for cyclists,” Mr. Evans said. “It’s for all road users.”

Does Ms. George, the town manager, have a fantasy that the noon riders will wear the bands and politely stop at intersections?

“I have fantasy visions of the noon riders,” replied Ms. George, “but it’s not necessarily about wearing these bracelets.”

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