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Cars vs. bicycles: The struggle to break a fatal cycle

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A bicyclist rides by the Ghost Bike placed at the side of Santiago Canyon Road in memory of Joseph Robinson, who was killed by a hit-and-run driver in 2014.

By [DAVID WHITING](mailto:dwhiting@scng.com) | dwhiting@scng.com | Orange County Register
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A 9-year-old Irvine boy pedaling his bicycle on a Friday afternoon. A woman in Orange riding inside a crosswalk. A 13-year-old Santa Ana girl bicycling to school.

Each one was killed last year by a motor vehicle. Yet the three represent only a fraction of the cyclists killed. In a county that until recently averaged one cyclist killed a month – still a shocking figure – fatal accidents over the past two years are up 50 percent.

While the number of cycling deaths fluctuated, the county for seven years averaged 12 a year. Three years ago, eight people were killed. But two years ago, 18 bicyclists died in accidents. Last year, coroner records show that 17 were killed.

In a county where nearly every city is encouraging more bicycling as well as taking measures to ensure increased cycling safety, the trend is alarming.



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We drive while sipping coffee, eating fries, texting and watching videos and forget to look for anything other than motor vehicles on the road.

Yet we advocate for clean air, healthy lifestyles, less traffic.

CULTURE COUNTS

At least we mean well. In the past decade and especially in the past five years, the Orange County Transportation Authority as well as cities throughout the county have made inroads into making our streets safer for cyclists.

With 1,000 miles of bikeways, OCTA is wrapping up a four-year study. Significantly, more cities are adding more bike paths and bike lanes.

Cities such as Newport Beach, Santa Ana and Laguna Beach painted “sharrows” on roads to make it clear certain routes are recommended for cyclists and that drivers should expect to see more pedal power.

In the past year, I've interviewed nearly every city manager for my "What Matters" series and found each one planning a future with people living closer to work and more commuting by bicycle.

Still, there is much work to be done. Pete van Nuys is executive director of the Orange County Cycling Coalition. He recalls recent bicycle vacations in Italy and Switzerland, where drivers were especially courteous to cyclists. "It's a profound cultural difference."

Van Nuys said the culture is changing in Orange County, but slowly.

"There are towns that are now making the best effort they can to become more bicycle friendly," van Nuys says. He gives a shout-out to San Juan Capistrano, Costa Mesa and the sharrow cities for making what he calls "real good-faith efforts."

But van Nuys says the only way to effect a sea change is if Sacramento gets behind a sustained safe-cycling campaign at the level of its drought-fighting movement, "Brown is the new green."

TROUBLING TREND

After riding thousands of miles on asphalt in Orange County, I gave up road riding Christmas Eve two years ago.

That afternoon, a good friend I'd dubbed "the toughest cyclist in Orange County," was killed in a collision with a car while riding his bicycle in Aliso Viejo. Pete Tomaino left a wife, a daughter, a grandchild.

In 2006, at least 18 people riding bicycles were killed in Orange County. I hoped that repeat in 2014 was an anomaly. It wasn't.

Nine-year-old Kevin Jiang died Nov. 20 after he was hit by a van at the intersection of Roosevelt and Bay Tree. The woman in the crosswalk, Kathleen Walker, 44, was struck Sept. 27 by a pickup truck near West Chapman Avenue and North Flower Street. The girl, Priscilla Vallejo, was killed July 13 when a truck hit her on Edinger near Center Street. Her bicycle was found under the truck.

All were killed near intersections, especially dangerous areas. But other cyclists were killed by swerving cars, cars parked where they shouldn't have been, cars shooting out from intersections driven by people who underestimated the speed a bike can travel.

Riding on the road and going downhill, a friend recently clocked 42.8 miles per hour – on a mountain bike with fat, knobby tires.

The next time you think about racing a cyclist to make a turn, give the rider the right of way. It's only two seconds off your life and it may mean a much longer one for the cyclist.

RIDES OF SILENCE

Over the years, I have written columns asking drivers to wait those two seconds instead of cutting off cyclists, told cyclists to never ride two abreast and suggested roadies stop scaring drivers by riding bunched up in what's called a peloton.

Cyclists who blow traffic signals alienate drivers and contribute to an us-versus-them mentality.

Drivers who think cyclists shouldn't be on the road are worse.

Bill Sellin is founder of the Bicycle Club of Irvine and every year organizes that city's annual Ride of Silence, a ride in May to memorialize cyclists killed. Hundreds of cities all over the world join the effort, and this year, Sellin says, more Orange County cities than ever plan rides.

Irvine, Fullerton, Santa Ana and Orange have committed to Rides of Silence. Costa Mesa and Huntington Beach are considering.

The rides are a small step toward the cultural change van Nuys envisions. But they are a step.

Sellin recently rode 59 miles to celebrate his 59th birthday. On his route, Sellin passed several places where cyclists have been killed. One was where Pete Tomaino died.

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[David Whiting](#)

David Whiting is the award-winning Metro Columnist at The Orange County Register. He also can be heard on radio, has served as a television news anchor and speaks frequently at organizations and universities. He previously was an assistant managing editor and has received Columbia University's Race and Ethnicity Award, National Headliner awards and Sigma Delta Chi's Public Service Award. He recently was invited to participate in an exchange program with Chinese journalists. He earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Michigan and his master's from Columbia University's Graduate School for Journalism. He is a two-time Ironman, a two-time Boston marathoner and has climbed the highest mountains in Africa and North and South America.

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