

## Musing McKinney

### Power Trips -- Why drivers feel the need to honk, yell, and swerve.

**By: Scott McKinney**

In the space of an hour on a recent weekend bike ride, a friend and I had four run-ins with aggressive drivers. Just after we started the climb of Highway 49 toward Cool, a man driving in the opposite direction felt we needed to know that "this isn't an F'ing bike road you F'ers." As we did not see a sign indicating his assertion, we thought he should write his Congressman to change the law. Actually, his assertion was correct as proven by subsequent events. A few miles later, between Cool and Lotus, a car passed another vehicle coming toward us. For a split second, there were two cars side by side, approaching us head on. We held our line on the narrow shoulder while indicating his IQ with an internationally recognized hand signal. Then, mere moments later, a rider on a roadster-style motorcycle overtook us and revved his engine in our ear. Because he then pulled into the parking lot of a nearby bar, we were able to sarcastically express how cool we thought his actions to be. Finally, a few minutes later, another car approached from our rear, swerved at us with horn blaring, and passed less than a foot from our handlebars -- despite the lack of oncoming traffic and a clear opportunity to pass safely. By this time we were shocked and in awe of the stupidity expressed by the rednecks in these parts. These four incidents stand in stark contrast to the hundreds of other vehicles who passed us with a wide margin for safety, using the passing lane or waiting for a clear sight line on a narrow, curvy climb. What's the difference?

In 1887, Lord Acton wrote, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." This is proven almost daily in the disparity of power between bicyclists and drivers. In a car, the driver feels invincible surrounded as he is in a cocoon of steel and glass. This ill-conceived invincibility leads quickly and directly to a sense of entitlement. "This isn't an F'ing bike road you F'ers." Entitlement is the first step on a slippery slope toward aggression and action. Couple those factors with stupidity and/or youth and anything can happen. I've had cups of ice thrown at my head on several occasions. I had a fire cracker explode near my ear. I've lost track of the number of cars that honk, passengers that yell, and other similar events. Most of these this rarely flusters me any more -- after all, it's difficult to get worked up over a phrase that sounds like, "you waah haaa" as the car passes and the words are torn away by wind and distance.

A week or so ago, the disparity of power between car and cyclist turned upside down during the "Critical Mass" ride in San Francisco. Reports say several riders attacked a vehicle and driver who had conducted some infraction that endangered a rider. The riders allegedly smashed the vehicle's rear window with a bike (must not have been a carbon frame). The driver was in fear for her life (believe me, I know how she feels). Callers to talk shows were incensed that "those riders" had attacked a mother and her vehicle filled with children. Why was this news? It was only news because it was highly unusual that a bicyclist would have the upper hand. These cyclists, drunk with momentary power and emboldened by a crowd mentality, committed the very act that cyclists struggle to avoid every day. While callers to radio talk shows appropriately deplored the

actions of a few out-of control riders, they should know that in almost every other instance, in instances that occur daily on every street in the nation, some drivers and passengers of vehicles go out of their way to make a close call into a dangerous situation for the twisted pleasure they gain from trying to scare a cyclist.

While many bike versus car incidents are considered felonies by law (e.g. assault with a deadly weapon or throwing material from a moving vehicle), the vast majority of incidents are never reported, much less prosecuted. As riders, we know that we will most often never see enough license plate number to bother reporting it. Aggressive and irresponsible drivers operate under the same premise which further feeds their power trip. "If I am under no risk of getting caught, why not?" In fact the odds actually support this logic. In nearly 30 years of riding, I know of only one occasion where riders were able to prosecute an aggressive driver. They did so successfully and claimed a nice settlement. However, in the vast majority of bike vs. car collisions, the car driver is not prosecuted, even when the outcome is a fatality.

I'm not sure what drivers hope to gain from stupidly and purposefully endangering the lives of cyclists. Hopefully murder is not on their minds. However, if you believe that any driver automatically becomes "great" because they mistakenly believe in their invincibility, entitlement and ultimate power without consequence, then you will agree with the remainder of Lord Acton's thoughts on power. "Great men are almost always bad men."

While you can never fully protect yourself from all drivers, knowing the statistics and common causes of bike accidents may help you plan a safe route or cause you to be more careful at intersections. This web site (<http://www.massbike.org/info/statistics.htm>) has really great information and links to other data about when and how accidents occur. Educate yourself so you can live to ride another day.