BICYCLES FOR CROWD

It is October, the air is cooler, and the World Series is getting underway. The baseball fans gather as the innings draw on and the soon-to-be champs are swinging at the plate. The extra innings pile on and not only does the excitement build but so does the crowd rooting for the underdog. Officers are ready as the last out is played. The crowd cheers for its champions and heads to the streets. The throngs of people spill out into the roadways, causing chaos and mayhem. As local patrol units attempt to direct the masses, the crowd is obviously getting out of control. Believe it or not, this may be an ideal time to bring in the bicycle unit.

A large crowd can be quelled and moved by a properly trained bicycle officer. A well-tuned unit with proper training can reduce the amount of patrol resources needed for any given task. It is always the command staff’s responsibility to assess what resources will be used for different types of incidents, but a well-trained bicycle unit can be an effective tool in a variety of situations, including those in need of crowd control.

THE BIKE FENCE

The “bike fence,” as the International Police Mountain Bike Association training refers to it, is the basic maneuver in any bicycle contact. The bicycle is simply placed between the officer and their contact. The officer stands on the non-drive side of the bicycle. The bike can either be positioned with the kickstand down or up, with the officer maintaining control of the bike with both hands. If the officer is placing the kickstand down, they can move laterally to keep the subject at bay. It provides a safety barrier for the officer and an increased reactionary gap for any potential threats. The officer then can move the bicycle itself, laterally or forward, to escort the subject away or direct the subject by mirroring the subjects’ actions. The bicycle can be placed down on the ground to create more distance with an aggressive suspect.

The bike fence is also the legal boundary between you and your contact. An appropriately outfitted bicycle with police insignias and markings can serve as more than just a mode of transportation. When placed appropriately, the bicycle can serve as a clear demarcation of where not to go. If bicycle officers use good communication and properly articulate that the line is not to be crossed, anyone who might pass through a bike fence could possibly face arrest for entering a crime scene or disobeying police commands.

You can add to the bike fence by overlapping the front tire of one bicycle with the rear tire of the bicycle in front of it. This can be accomplished with as few as two officers but can be greatly effective with multiple officers overlapping their wheels to create a larger barrier to move in front of large crowds. The number of officers is dictated by the size of the crowd and the environment it is in. Maneuvers are done in either a static or moving position.

MOVING OR STATIC DISPLAY

The static use of bicycles is usually seen at the end of roadways or at large intersections. They can be placed across roadways, placing the bikes front wheel over rear wheel, in solid formation that allows for a skirmish line to be created in a mobile field force situation. As long as the integrity of the formation is maintained, a unit can conduct arrests and maneuvers behind the line of bicycles effectively and safely. Mobile field force units that deploy accessory weapons or those that are on foot can move through the skirmish line to effect arrests. The static line of bicycles can be much more effective than patrol officers standing shield to shield. A group of bicycles can be placed front tire to rear tire, the officers can move back several feet, and the integrity of the line is still maintained.

A moving group of bicycle officers can be used in the same manner as most mobile field force formations. They can be positioned in a wedge formation, forcing groups to move laterally
or pushing the group back. A clear command of “move back” must be used in time with moving the bike fence back toward a group or subject.

Bicycles can also be used in columns to prevent moving subjects from gaining access to a particular area. This is the easiest and most effective way to move a group of bicycles. Once in a column, officers can turn and form a barrier between the intended groups. Officers can then be placed away from the crowd to quickly respond only when needed. This provides a swift movement of officers to one location with little disruption of a crowd.

These columns can also be used to protect dignitaries and move them through a crowd. The columns will ride on each side of the individual with a point officer directing the group by clearly communicating turns and parting the crowd.

In 2016, thousands of people attended the Republican National Convention. Some were supporters while others were attending in protest. In anticipation of the large crowds, the organizing bodies elected to use bicycle officers instead of patrol resources for security. This was because bicycle officers are more mobile and can react more quickly to the movements of the protests. They are also less assuming and have a less threatening effect on most crowds. A concern in any moving protest is how to maintain professionalism and effectiveness, without sacrificing the safety of the group. As a moving unit of 20-30 bicycle officers per group, 300 bike officers were able to surround entrances and seal off corridors to raucous protesters, which were constantly moving back and forth. They did so by positioning their bicycles in a proper bike fence with overlapping tires.

**TRAINING AND EQUIPMENT**

The greatest asset in moving crowds is proper training and equipment. In field force and crowd movement situations, wearing long sleeves and pants is best if munitions are being used. Wearing padded sleeves or shoulder pads has been found to be effective against crowds that are violent. The use of downhill riding gear has shown to be effective due to its reduced weight and ease of maneuverability in it.

Officers must practice using specialty equipment to create a professional and effective response. Riding while wearing a gas mask can cause some officers to panic. Mimicking riot-like atmospheres in training can reduce the risk of panic during a real incident. The use of smoke canisters in training can also help practice the reduced visibility one might face in addressing an aggressive crowd.

Effective communication is also a must in moving crowds. The calmest crowd can be a chore to control when the group is not acting as one, or when the goal has not been properly communicated. The lead, or point, officer should be clearly identified prior to moving the crowd. Always assess the routes of escape for the crowd as well as potential hang-ups prior to attempting to move them.

To best prepare yourself to handle crowds as part of a bicycle unit, look for proper training in your area. The International Police Mountain Bike Association provides a 40-hour course covering basic police cycling. Additional courses provided instruction in the use of bicycle response teams. These courses focus on crowd control and dispersal techniques as well as quelling riot groups.

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