Today's bicycle patrols are more than community relations experts; they are tactical advantages for any department

Super heroes swooping in

By Joanne Heinecke

Swoop! Zoom! These action words may conjure images of comic book heroes. Instead, they are part of the everyday language of real-life heroes — bicycle patrol officers.

Contrary to the more common image of a bicycle officer handing out trading cards to small children, officers are just as likely to be used in undercover surveillance, drug interdiction and riot control. Bicycle officers use their stealth mobility to swoop in on a drug deal or isolate an agitator in the middle of a demonstrating crowd.

Working the shadows

Open almost any modern comic book and the pages are covered in shadows. Perhaps the villains are conspiring in an alleyway, or the hero is hiding in the shadows, waiting to pounce. Police cyclists working surveillance and drug interdiction use the shadows in parking garages, stairwells and alleys to their advantage.

“We will set up in a parking garage where you can see a known drug area,” explains Lt. Roy Waldhelm of the San Antonio (Texas) Police Department Downtown Foot and Bike Patrol. “We have officers on street level ready whenever the spotted sees a deal going down. He will notify the other officers, and they will swoop in on the bike so fast, from two or three different directions, and make the arrest.”

The Seattle (Washington) Police Department has taken this type of surveillance one step further with the use of cameras. Various cameras are positioned throughout downtown known drug areas. According to Sgt. Ashley Price, Seattle PD Bicycle Patrol, while one officer monitors the cameras, others hide in the alleys.

“Then when the officer watching the cameras sees a narcotics transaction go down, other team members zoom in on the bikes,” explains Price.

With this quick strike tactic, the goal is to get the dealer out of the area as soon as possible so local residents and shoppers do not get scared and other drug dealers in the area do not see the activity. “If drug dealers see the police coming in and swoop, they know we have to do paperwork. So, they will typically come right back out,” explains Price. “If we can go quickly enough, maybe the dealer a half-block over won’t even see it happen.” Then the patrol can be even more effective.

Sometimes just the stealth nature of the bike makes it possible to bust drug dealers and users without the cover of shadows. Officers can often ride up behind people without them noticing.

“[Bicycles are] not strictly a mode of transportation and far beyond public relations tools.”

— Maureen Becker, International Police Mountain Bike Association

“They will be smoking marijuana or making a heroin deal without ever realizing you’re there,” says Waldhelm.

Price has had the same experience. On one occasion, she saw a man take out a crack pipe, put a rock in it and begin to smoke. Price rode up to the man, and in a state of panic, he put the entire pipe in his mouth and began to chew. “He was getting ready to swallow it until we ordered him not to,” she explains. “It is just a panic thing. All of a sudden the officer is there, and they don’t have that ‘spot the patrol car and drop something out’ or ‘drop it and run’ opportunity.”

“Bicycles are definitely a highly effective tool in enforcing narcotics,” although bike patrols are very effective at making arrests, they are not the ideal mode of transportation following the arrest. In Seattle, the bike patrol has an assigned transport, but still calls for a patrol vehicle when that transport is not available. Officers with the Ann Arbor (Michigan) Police Department Mountain Bike Patrol, who work outside downtown, drive patrol cars equipped with bicycle racks.

At the time of arrest, one officer will stay with the suspect while the other returns to the car, picks up the detainee and transports him to the station.

The element of disguise

Batman has Bruce Wayne. Superman has Clark Kent. Dual identities can work to a super hero’s advantage. In the case of police cyclists, undercover operations are an...
Maintaining order
In cases of large crowds or areas with potential for problems, Super- 
man can monitor from above the crowd. When problems arise, he can 
rush to the emergency and provide a 
barrier between the villains and the 
public. Using his super speed, he can 
leap in and extract villains “faster 
than a speeding bullet!”

During peaceful demonstrations, 
police cyclists can monitor the crowd 
from the slight elevation of the bicy- 
cle. But when demonstrations turn 
violent or chaotic, bicycles are espe- 
cially advantageous for speed and 
maneuverability in deploying conven- 
tional crowd control equipment.

One of the primary tasks of the 
Seattle PD bike patrol is maintaining 
orde at all demonstrations, protests 
and marches in the downtown area. 
Bicycle use in crowd management can 
be separated into static and moving 
maneuvers. Static maneuvers include 
creating fence lines, barriers and gates — maneuvers in which the officer 
is not riding the bicycle but using it as a 
directional, defensive device.

When patrolling the crowd or arrest- 
ing or rescuing people in the crowd, the 
Seattle PD uses moving maneuvers, 
such as the Crossbow Movement. 

According to Price, riding into the 
crowd in two lines, they use 10 bikes to 
make the perimeter of the arrest. The 
two lead bikes will grab the arrestee 
while the remaining team members encircle the suspect in a cone line fac- 
ing the crowd. The bikes are used to 
hold back the crowd as the lead cyclists remove the suspect from the situation.

In order for this technique to work, 
the team must work quickly so the crowd 
does not have time to react.

Besides bicycle maneuvers, the 
Seattle bike patrol is allowed to use riot 
control agents, such as OC, in crowd 
control situations. But, Price cautions, 
“Those are deployed not to move crowds 
but to get people in compliance, effect an 
arrest or aid someone in immediate 
danger.” When moving the crowd, it 
relies on its rapid response tactics.

Crimes that don’t make the headlines
When Spiderman finally defeated 
the Green Goblin, his arch nemesis, it 
made huge headlines. When he 
stopped a purse-snatcher, it didn’t. 
Although it may not be as exciting as

A cop’s best friend.

Officers perform stationary dismounts and quickly fire at targets (above). Shooting 
from less than ideal positions is another training exercise: as this could likely happen 
on patrol (left).

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swooping in on a drug deal or controlling an unruly crowd, traffic enforcement is a large part of the bicycle patrol officer's daily routine.

Bicycle patrols are ideal for traffic enforcement in downtown, congested traffic areas. Under these conditions, traffic is moving at speeds at which the bike can compete. Officers can move ahead of traffic by utilizing sidewalks, bike lanes or the ability to weave through gridlocked vehicles.

Two- or four-man teams are very useful in traffic enforcement. When using battery-powered radars, one officer can position himself at one end of the street, sometimes in an obscured location, and radio the officer located at the opposite end with vehicle information and the speed of the violation.

When cracking down on stop sign enforcement, Vork recommends using teams of four officers. As she explains, officers "set up fixed posts to keep traffic moving and prevent cruisers from making little turns that allow them to keep going around the downtown area," says Walden.

Gadgets
Most super heroes have a signature gadget. Daredevil has his multipurpose cane, and Batman has a cave full of gadget-rich vehicles. Bicycle officers also carry some useful, crime-fighting gadgets, and ride the most important one. When it comes to gadgets, police cyclists are limited to what they can carry on their person — firearm, baton, pepper spray, handcuffs, ticketing materials, etc. But, they can also use their bicycles as offensive or defensive weapons.

A technique used in riot control is the Bicycle Fence Line — a maneuver that utilizes the bicycle as a defensive tool. As Price describes, the officers line up the bikes, chain-side-out, and stand behind them. "If people start to rush the bikes, we then have an approved tactic where we pick the bikes up and take a giant step forward," explains Price. "We will say, 'Move back!' and use that to move crowds.

Bicycles also can be used in one-on-one situations. "We recommend that if an officer is working alone, and he makes contact with a suspect, to use the bike as a barrier between the officer and the suspect," says Vork. "If the suspect initiates contact, the officer should try to clear the bicycle first, and fast.

If the officer is already off the bike and a suspect advances, one maneuver Vork recommends is to hit the rear brake and pull the front tire into the air so it is between the suspect and the officer while the officer stabilizes the bike on the rear tire. "It is a distraction to give the suspect something to negotiate," says the police. "In this situation, the officer can disarm the bike and move to another force option.

Generally, it is not recommended that officers make physical contact with suspects while riding the bicycle. If possible, officers should try to drop the bike 10 to 15 feet away and then move into the situation on foot. Even though the bike can be a handy gadget for the officer, at times it also can be a detriment. "If you are on the bicycle, you're a police cyclist," says Vork. "But once you're off, you're a police officer. Keep the bike out of the way because it can be an obstacle to the officer as well as the suspect."

Under the cloak of darkness
More often than not, super heroes work beneath the night's sky. Most time spent on bike patrols is during the daylight hours, so evening patrols provide challenges not only in equipment and lighting needs, but also the type of criminal encounters. Interrogation, drunk driving and gang activities are just a few of the suspect trends that occur more frequently at night.

When riding at night, officers are encouraged to stay out of the street because of poor visibility and drunk drivers. When it is necessary to ride in the road, officers must have proper rear lighting, even when riding stealth (without a headlight). In fact, accord-

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Cultivating super hero skills

Unlike Spiderman, bitten by a radioactive spider, or Superman, granted extraordinary powers because of the yellow sun, the everyday heroes of police cyclists must consistently train to hone and expand their defensive and offensive skills.

Before an officer can apply various crime-fighting tactics, he must have a command of the bicycle. "The base line foundation of training is essential regardless of how you are going to utilize the bicycle," says Maureen Becker, executive director of the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA). Once riders are able to control the bike at slow speeds, negotiate obstacles including curbs and stairs, and ride with confidence so their attention can be directed to crime fighting rather than riding, then they can integrate principles specific to the type of patrol. "If it is drug operations or surveillance, you take those principles and put them on top of the bicycle training," says Becker.

IPMBA offers three levels of police riding training: Basic Cyclist, Intermediate Police Cyclist, and Survival Tactics and Riding Skills — besides specific technique courses. Officer Kathleen Vork of the Ann Arbor (Michigan) Police Department, and an instructor of the Survival Tactics and Riding Skills Course, gives traversing tethered teeter-totters, angled cone courses, doorframes and other obstacles as examples of the way this course tests basic riding skills. Although these are not typical on-the-job obstacles, "They develop your skills to the point where where riding becomes second nature," explains Vork. "Now you can concentrate on the police aspect of pursuit rather than the bicycle aspect."

Bicycle training can also be more complex than an obstacle course. Off-road riding can provide great training experience.

"Anything you encounter on the trail, you probably will not encounter in your beat," says Vork. "If you have mastered, or at least experienced, certain obstacles on a trail, you are confident that whatever you negotiate on patrol, you've already done that and more."

Besides bike-handling skills, firearm training is a large part of the advanced course. To test these skills in tandem, Officer Lou Ann Hamblin of the Van Buren Township (Michigan) Department of Public Safety has officers ride a timed obstacle course with intermittent shooting requirements. "We pay just as much attention to accuracy in shooting as we do to the Bicycle skills," explains Vork. "Anybody can go up there and shoot really fast, but if the rounds aren't on target, it really does no good other than acting as suppression fire. I think it is important to be able to hit what you are shooting at and hit it fast."

Long-range shooting is another important firearm skill that should be developed and tested by bike officers. Inherent with their mode of transportation — lack of cover and reduced speed — bike officers cannot get as close to the suspect as a patrol vehicle can. Police cyclist firearms training continues as officers move from 75 to 100 yards to shoot with just a pistol, typically in the more static prone position. "Officers don't know what their skills are until they try them from a distance," says Vork. "Most of the time they are surprised that they are fairly good at that range."

Beyond the police cyclist courses, IPMBA offers the Maintenance Officer Course, Bicycle Rapid Response Team Training, Security Cyclist Course and IPMBA Instructor Training as well as numerous specific technique classes at its annual conference. For more information about IPMBA's programs, visit www.ipmba.org.

Private security cyclists are becoming more prevalent at shopping malls, businesses, sports facilities, amusement parks and more. Bicycles are advantageous at these locations because they can traverse parking lots rather than following the typical traffic flow.

"It is important for administration and departments to realize a bicycle is an extremely versatile tool for law enforcement," says Becker. "It is not strictly a mode of transportation, and is far beyond a public relations tool. When opportunities arise to address certain crimes, they should not be left on the shelf; rather, they should enable the bike officers to devise solutions themselves."

Look out Superman and Bateman, there is a new super hero on the streets, and he is swooping into your neighborhood.