

Take Charge

As a bicyclist you have virtually all the rights and responsibilities of motorists. You belong on the road.

But you have certain disadvantages, chiefly that if you collide with a car, you will likely be injured. In fact, in a crash where the car is going 40+ mph, you have only a 20% chance of surviving.

Communicate

So you need to take charge. Put another way, you need to communicate what you are planning to do and what you would like motorists to do.

We've all seen motorists stopped at stop signs as a bike approaches. Although the motorist might have the right of way, he will not move. Bicyclists too often take this as a sign that "the driver is letting us go." No, it's more likely that the driver doesn't know if you're one of those cyclists who ignore stop signs. They may not want your blood and guts spattered across their windshield. So you need to communicate to them what you want them to do.

Nothing will get you more consideration (and consideration for all cyclists, in our opinion) than to wave your arm to tell the motorist at the stop sign to proceed. You are yielding the right of way. If you were last to the stop sign, it is your duty to yield. But often, two vehicles arrive at about the same time. It's a kind act to yield the right of way and to let them know you are by waving them through.

The same is true in similar instances:

- At a stop sign or even a green light where it might be safe to wave an oncoming car waiting to turn left to proceed.
- At a driveway, when a motorist wants to enter the road.
- Always use your arms as turn signals to indicate your intention to turn.

Control Cars Behind You

While you can't prevent a careless, thoughtless or distracted driver from doing something stupid, you can help them know what you are doing and what you expect of them.

Motorists often react reflexively. The best example is the hand stop sign, where you put your hand by your side with the palm facing to the rear. This is often necessary when a motorist thinks she can get around you, but you see a reason she shouldn't. For example, once a rider climbing a mountain road had a motorist behind him looking for an opportunity to pass. But the bike rider saw around the curve that another car was coming in the opposite direction. The cyclist put his hand down using the "stop" sign and the driver abandoned temporarily his effort to pass. A few yards down the road after passing the cyclist, the motorist pulled over. As he exited the car, the

cyclist was passing. The driver called out, “Thanks” for letting him know about the oncoming car.

This same “stop” sign can be useful approaching intersections where the cyclist is going straight. A motorist passing at an intersection may then turn right. As a cyclist, you don’t know what the motorist’s intention is. Better you stop him from passing and executing a “right hook” in front of you, where you crash into the turning car.

Ride Big

By ride big, we mean in the middle of the lane where possible and legal. (It is legal on most roads without a bike lane.) Motorists are looking for big chunks of metal in the middle of the road. You can’t mimic a car on your 20 lb. bike. But you can ride where motorists expect to see traffic—in the middle of the lane.

In Florida, a cyclist is allowed to ride in the middle of the lane when it is too narrow to share. Unfortunately, too narrow is not defined in the statute. But the Florida Department of Transportation, in its “Greenbook” or road design manual, strongly suggests than any lane less than 14-feet wide is too narrow to share. So take the lane unless there is a safe bike lane on the road.

When you ride big, you signal to cars behind you that they must change lanes to pass. And studies show that when you ride in the middle of the lane, motorists tend to see you more as a car and most often will change lanes completely to pass you. When you cower on the extreme right-hand side of the road, motorists tend to give you less clearance when passing. They will attempt to pass even if there is traffic in the adjacent lane. And if that car comes close to the car passing a cyclist, the motorist will swerve into the cyclist rather than risk a head-on collision with another car.

When approaching an intersection where you have the right of way but a motorist is waiting to enter the road you’re on from a side road or parking lot, wave your hand high above your head. The motion might help them see you. If necessary, put your hand out in the universal stop signal, letting them know they should not enter the roadway.

When you sense a car behind you wants to pass, wave them around you when it is safe to do so. You might even pull towards the right-hand side of the lane, if it’s safe to do so, meaning no cars are coming in the opposite direction or are in the lane to your left. Never jeopardize your safety, but be thoughtful when you can.

Taking control is not done out of arrogance or aggression. It’s assertive and communicative. There’s no need to be passive with your safety.