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[news](#)

[back issues](#)

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Le Tour: signposting a better way

With the Tour de France returning to the roads of Britain, Peter Treadgold considers the lessons that the professional peloton might offer to those working to make cycling a greater part of the national transport system.

Cycle racing on our streets is a tricky thing to understand. At first sight you just sit on a frame and wheels, turn cranks and cogs with your feet, and the bike moves forward with surprising speed, taking you with it. But after that it gets tricky.

With speed comes risk, usually from other things, such as motor vehicles, dogs and lamp columns in the middle of cycle-friendly off-road tracks. That is why when the Tour de France arrived in Britain for its Grand Depart in Yorkshire, plus a stage from Cambridge to London, the roads were well and truly closed, with all risks managed down.

Some people struggle with the concept of multi-stage, on-road bike racing. Question: why isn't all sport in a stadium or velodrome? Answer: so you don't have to pay £100 per ticket. They also wonder why the winner isn't the one who crossed the line first. And then there are the points jerseys, king of the mountains prize and the best rider blindfolded. Sometimes the riders even wait for each other. Why does a peloton that has been mired in cheating and drug use show so much consideration for each other? This tells us everything we need to know. Frankly and simply, their work is risky. The riders live (and sometimes even die) by their wits and the compassion of their fellow riders.

It is very unusual for the press to find a row, debacle or hissy fit between professional bike riders. There is no road rage on the parcours. However, this consideration and responsibility does not translate into real life for people who ride a bike for leisure or utility and have to share the road with vehicles.

Most bike riders are not cycling gods. We mortals have to use the roads and mix it with motor traffic. With bikes and vehicles there can only be one winner. The occasional marginal gain achieved by the green 'bike-box' at traffic lights, a bike lane or a cut-through, is generally resented by other road users. Vehicle drivers generally find it difficult to adjust their speed and position to reduce the perceived risks felt by a bike rider.

A bike rider is seriously threatened by a vehicle trying to snuggle up too close. When I am passed on a street by a vehicle doing more than 5 to 10 mph above my speed, I feel intimidated, and frankly scared. As Dr Hutch in Cycling Weekly magazine puts it: if cycling fast in London is unnerving then cycling slowly must be terrifying.

So it comes down to degrees of separation.

Vehicles do drive too fast for the road conditions and other vulnerable users. Political conflicts can stall 20 mph limits and their compliance. Not enough vehicle drivers are bike riders so they do not appreciate how it feels to be 'buzzed'.

Physical separation on the roads can be achieved in many ways. Cycle symbols on the road do help but real separation is provided by lanes, www.theleisurereview.co.uk

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tracks, stepped kerbs and special cycling traffic signals. People who do not ride a bike much ask for fully segregated bike lanes, “like they have in Holland”. Frankly, while that may be possible in some places in Britain, it will not be viable as a comprehensive solution. And segregated lanes do at some stage have to end, and that presents real risk. Evidence shows that conflict points at the end of segregated tracks give additional risks and collisions.

There are other ways to separate bikes from vehicles – by considerate riding and driving, by information, by care and compassion on all sides – but just at the moment that seems to be too big a step for politicians to address as they avoid accusations of nannying. It is quite apparent that the best way to make our streets safer lies in our own skills and behaviours but this shall not be spoken. Instead politicians and the public cry out for more heavily segregated infrastructure with all the complexity and severance this entails. We could spend many years working towards the holy grail of segregation.

Don't get me wrong: give me a segregated track anytime when I am the one on the bike. I love the paths through Hyde Park and the canals of Camden in north London but liveable streets are not built on selfishness. It is surely better to 'get real', get trained and get competent, whether that be in a motor vehicle, on a bike or on foot.

So when you look at the Tour de France and enjoy the free-viewing of the competition on our streets and doorsteps, showcasing the Yorkshire Dales and the villages of Essex, please consider how these riders do it.

Yes there are infrastructure changes for the Tour – traffic islands are removed and roads closed to separate riders from exceptional risks – but, by and large, the riders' safety is maintained by their own great skills, and by giving care and consideration to each other.

I do hope that the British public, now declared to be the most aggressive of road users, may consider that they hold the solution to the miseries on our roads in their own hands, their handlebars and their steering wheels.

Don't get cross: get considerate.

Peter Treadgold is a transport consultant specialising in sustainable modes. He worked with the ODA delivering sustainable transport to all 2012 venues and recently completed a period as road danger reduction programme manager at the City of London Corporation. He also serves as the active transport correspondent for the Leisure Review.

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