

The terrible torture of riding a bicycle



LIONEL BONAVENTURE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Mark Richardson has a little ways to go to catch up to Lance Armstrong, but at least he's made a start.

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MARK RICHARDSON

For Father's Day, my cruel and unusual wife gave me a bicycle. To be accurate, she bought herself a new, costly bicycle and gave me her old 18-speed. She had it fixed up to fit my slightly taller size, gave it a wipe over, and she and our boys presented it to me with great love.

"Aren't you happy?" she asked. "Now you can get fit."

We went for a ride, a brutal 20 kilometres in gruelling 20C heat. Halfway through, while lying on a patch of barely shaded grass and gasping for breath, I reached to adjust myself within my shorts and realized that everything was completely numb.

Cycling, clearly, was not for me. I told her this in no uncertain terms and hung the bicycle in the garage to rot.

Wheels, after all, should have an engine. That's their pleasure: the surge of effortless power; the precision of the driving line; and the peaceful relaxation of the steady distance rolling past.

So for my birthday last month, my wife gave me a book, a spy thriller. It's great.

My 12-year-old son gave me a cycling shirt. My 9-year-old son gave me a pair of cycling gloves. And the dog, long ago castrated, gave me a pair of padded cycling shorts. His doleful brown eyes had a sympathetic look.

"We'll go a different route this time," said my wife. "For the ride home, the wind will be at our backs."

This time, I was slightly encouraged to try again. Not long before, she'd ridden to Quebec with some other cyclists along the Waterfront Trail, and when I drove there to collect her, it had felt good to enthrall her companions with my exploits.

("Do you ride?" they'd asked. "Oh yes," I'd replied. "I rode out to California last year, and I'm off to Washington soon." I stopped short of mentioning that my bike would need an oil change first.)

I adjusted the shorts, pulled down the bicycle from its grappling hooks in the garage – careful not to drop it on the Harley – and we set off, a different route this time.

I can't describe that ride very well: it was sweaty and laborious and lasted forever, but the ride home along the circle route was less exhausting with the wind behind. I've been out several more times since and it seems to be getting a little easier.

We've made a deal, my cruel and unusual wife and I: she'll ride with me on the motorcycle if I'll ride with her on the bicycles, country roads every time.

But now that I'm no longer so completely preoccupied with the sheer, unfair *effort* of cycling, I've started to notice the sheer, unfair *danger* of it, thanks to the slobs who pass in their cars without realizing their stupidity.

For example:

- The guy who overtook me on the hill outside Campbellville last weekend, who swerved in sharply to avoid the oncoming car and kicked up sand and dust with his slipstream into my panting mouth.
- The family who pulled alongside as we pedalled along, asking directions to the lake.
- The man who pulled out from the side road in his minivan as we coasted down the

hill toward him at 30 km/h, barely 10 metres away.

- And one driver after another, passing on the left without wanting to cross the yellow line, forcing us even more off the edge of the road into the cracks and bitumen tails and dirt and gravel.

It's got so that I'm worried to watch the traffic passing my wife as she pounds the pedals ahead of me, taking up just an arm's length of the side of the road but being granted even less space by the two-tonne metal boxes.

It's a very real danger. Three years ago, an off-duty OPP officer was killed while cycling on one of these same roads near Milton; he was clipped by the mirror of a passing dump truck.

Just last month, five Ottawa-area cyclists were seriously injured when a minivan slammed into the back of them as they rode single file in a dedicated bicycle lane. One of them is still in a coma.

There's no need for it – none at all.

For God's sake, next time you see a cyclist up ahead, please share the road, and give him or her plenty of space when you pass.

And if it's me, make it extra space. I'm already going through hell without you making it worse.

mrichardson@thestar.ca