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Pedal pushers

For bike couriers, it's better to be the boss of your ride than to have the boss riding you

By: Carolin Vesely

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Natural Cycle courier Caroline Barrientos makes her way through the streets of the Exchange District. (KEN GIGLIOTTI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS)

On a good day, it's a dream job. The sun is in your face, the wind is at your back and you're essentially getting paid to engage in the recreational pastime that made time stand still when you were a kid.

Now let's look at a bad day in the life of a Winnipeg bicycle courier: The clock is ticking, you've got a bagful of time-sensitive documents and packages on your back and both the wind and an angry motorist in your face.

"I got a half-full beer can thrown at me today from a passing car on Isabel," says Corinne Klassen at the end of a recent nine-hour shift at Natural Cycle. "They just called me a bad name and drove off."

Kelsey Clifford has been hit by a car three times during her two years with the courier co-op, located in Winnipeg's Exchange District. She was also involved in a two-wheeled,

four-legged pileup during rush hour on Broadway Avenue.

"These two guys were running through traffic and we all collided, went flying and landed on the curb," says Clifford, who has also been chased by dogs and recalls using her bike as a shield against one that managed to catch up to her.

Klassen and Clifford, both 24, are among the 14 "riders" -- five are women -- at Natural Cycle, where pedal power has prevailed as an eco-friendly, cost-effective, time-saving form of conveyance for more than a decade.

Neither snow nor rain (even the frozen kind) nor wind (bane of their existence) nor road rage stays these couriers, ages 18 to 32, from the swift completion of their appointed rounds -- between 60 and 120 kilometres per day. After all, Natural Cycle is an all-season service that guarantees on-time delivery anywhere in the city. (They used to have a client in Headingley.)

In case it isn't obvious yet, pedalling fast is the easy part of the gig.

Make that constant pedalling.

More and more messengers are using track bikes with single, fixed gears, meaning their trusty steeds can be ridden backwards but they can't coast. Most of them also lack brakes, so the rider must slow the bike by resisting rotation of the pedals, which does not result in an immediate stop.

"To stop really quickly, I hop my wheel up and skid," says Clifford, who has never had a driver's licence but does own five bicycles. Her stripped-down-to-the-essentials "fixie" might not be pretty, but it's practical.

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"The simpler the better, just because the risk of something breaking down is so high and the wear-and-tear is intense," Clifford explains. "If you're at a red light you don't have to put your foot on the ground; you just balance on two wheels.

"Efficiency, that's what this whole job is about. You don't want to waste time or energy."

And if you do want to put your feet on the ground because, say, the streets are slippery and there's a car in your path?

"You become very good at bailing," says Cory Bellhouse, 28, referring to the sudden-dismount manoeuvre he found handy during the recent ice storm that turned the city into a skating rink.

"I was on a side street and the bike went out from under me and I ended up in a surfing pose."

OK, so we're not talking Quicksilver here. (The 1986 flick stars Kevin Bacon as a Wall

Street wunderkind who, after losing it all, trades his three-piece suit for a used 10-speed and finds his true calling darting through New York traffic. Heck, the guy ends up dancing with his bike.)

Bellhouse laughs out loud at the reference. (Apparently movie nights are one of the messenger community's many "bike-related" events.)

"It plays into a lot of stereotypes," he says. "Just the idea of total freedom, riding on the open streets and not being accountable to anyone and then walking into offices where people are chained to desks. It's silly."

On second thought...

"OK, it's kind of accurate," Bellhouse says after a long pause. "But it's a pretty extreme interpretation."

Fair enough. But beyond the obvious perks -- no boss looking over your shoulder, fresh air, fit bod, helping save the planet -- what keeps this modern-day, urban Pony Express galloping into the future? No one was disclosing wages, but considering that Natural Cycle will deliver, ASAP, anything smaller than a binder all the way out to the Perimeter for \$18, and a letter anywhere downtown (which is where half of the clients are) for \$3, it can't be the money.

"This is a love job," says Bellhouse, who has degrees in conflict resolution and international development and plans to go to grad school when the bloom fades. (It's been nearly four years.) "Most of us have other jobs."

He teaches part-time in the University of Winnipeg's psychology lab, Klassen is taking international development studies at Central Mennonite University and Clifford also works at Mountain Equipment Co-op.

And they're all die-hard bike geeks.

"I like the unpredictability and the physical challenge of it," Bellhouse says. "You never know what adventure you'll be led to next."

And as Doug Grant points out, really bad days are in the minority.

"It's only the negative things that stand out," says the 20-year-old, who also works at a grocery store. "People move out of the way for you all the time."

And when you're riding NC's relatively new cargo trike -- a three-wheeled, customized recumbent cycle that pulls a flatbed trailer for larger deliveries (Grant used it to haul three industrial-sized sewing machines) -- they even treat you like something of a celebrity.

"I always feel like I'm in a parade when I'm on that thing," says Clifford, adding that onlookers will often applaud and cheer the rider on.

Biker messengers, incidentally, aren't always carrying top-secret documents and blueprints in their shoulder-slung satchels. This gang has delivered frozen turkeys, bottles of wine, potted plants, bags of candy, fake, severed hands and condoms -- a case of 5,000.

Remember that the next time you cuss out a cyclist. You never know whether he or she is "on duty" and what might be at stake.

For more information about Natural Cycle, check the web at www.naturalcycle.ca

carolin.vesely@freepress.mb.ca

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