

HOW TO SURVIVE YOUR NEWLY DISCOVERED LOVE OF CYCLING IN FLAGSTAFF: PART ONE

STORY AND PHOTO BY KYLE BOGGS



Before I get on my high horse about what it means to be a safe, responsible cyclist in Flagstaff, this essay must necessarily include an open apology to a woman cyclist I collided with on Northern Arizona University's campus in early July. But I'll get to that.

If you are new to Flagstaff, you are probably already realizing how beneficial it is to ride a bike in town and on campus. And I'm not just talking about the obvious health benefits, although there are many. After all, beyond getting fit and feeling strong and confident, recent psychological studies have demonstrated that spending some time on a bike results in decreased levels of depression and anxiety. After riding for 30 minutes, people score higher on tests of memory and reasoning as well.

But the benefits you might already be realizing as a new cyclist in Flagstaff are even more palpable than this: In many cases, it's actually quicker to get to your destination by biking rather than driving, especially after parking is all said and done. In the same way cyclists are privileged, in that we're able-bodied and can therefore take advantage of cycling as a viable commuting option, we're also privileged to live in a town with a centralized location, where everything we might need on a day-to-day basis can be found within a five-mile radius. Despite some harsh winters, most of the year the weather is very bike-friendly. It's also frankly cheaper. Flagstaff is increasingly expensive and regularly driving a car can really add up. But you already know all of this.

After riding my bike in Flagstaff for a decade, I wish to impart some wisdom to rookies. It is my hope that such insights will help you buy and maintain a good bike, keep it from getting stolen, keep you from getting seriously hurt (or seriously hurting others), or losing your dignity by getting pulled over.

Choosing a bike is a delicate, but rewarding art. First and foremost, it is important that the bike you choose is one you enjoy riding, and one that suits the kind of riding you do. Each rider has different priorities as it relates to speed, utility, and comfort. The way these categories are prioritized will help you choose your bike.

Most folks come to Flagstaff and the first thing they do is buy a mountain bike. This is understandable; Flagstaff is a mountain biking utopia. People come from all over the world to mountain bike here, and there is a great community for it. The wide, knobby tires with full suspension, however, is quite heavy and slow going on the roads. The right mountain bike, however, can be made more nimble for the road if you can swap out the tires, and lock out the front suspension. If mountain biking isn't your thing, but you'd like to try it out, you can always rent one for a day from one of our many fantastic local bike shops.

If you plan on carrying bags on your bike, make sure it can accommodate a rack. If you plan on carrying a lot of weight, a carbon-fiber racing bike is going to be very uncomfortable. Did you know they make bikes specific to women's bodies? Do you plan on riding long distances, or going over 5 miles an hour, or going up any hills? If that's the case, a beach cruiser is not the best option for you (as super cute as they are!). None of this is to say that riding these bikes under these conditions cannot be done, but if you hate the experience, you'll be less likely to keep doing it.

THE DEAD KENNEDYS SAY, "TRUST YOUR MECHANIC!"

The best place to start hashing out these kinds of questions is at your local bike shop; there is nothing more valuable to a new cyclist than a mechanic you trust. Start visiting places and don't be shy to ask questions. As I type this, there are a large percentage of you — especially new NAU students — who are about to stop reading this article. "I just want a cheap bike that will get me to English class," you say. Indeed, I have no doubt that when this article hits the streets Wal-Mart and Target have already started selling out of bikes, and there are a lot of hardcore cyclists who will hate on these cheap bikes. I am not going to be one of those people, but if you get one, I have a responsibility to tell you what you're in for.

These bikes — **Magna, Huffy, Schwinn, Roadmaster, Mongoose** — are assembled by under-paid retail employees in the back of the store, who are doing the best they can with little know-how or resources. Therefore, when they need repairs — as all bikes do — you will largely be on your own. Some of these bikes — like Schwinn — have longstanding positive reputations, but after going bankrupt in the early '90s, are now imported by a cheap manufacturer in China while maintaining the same name. Other bikes — like Mongoose — dominate the market by producing low and high-end bikes. So one might see a high-quality Mongoose on the trail, and then go buy a cheap one at Target that breaks in a month.

In general these bikes have very low quality parts made of cheap metals or even plastic. I can still hear naysayers: "I don't care! I'm not an elitist!" In some cases, the cost to fix something is almost as much as you originally paid for the bike, and because the parts are cheaply produced, the bike will require repairs more frequently. In the long run you're not saving any money. And worse, you'll slowly start to hate riding your bike. If you don't believe me, go to NAU's **Property Surplus**. Every summer, they collect the bikes previous students have abandoned on campus and re-sell them to students in the fall. It is not a coincidence that Property Surplus features the same bikes you'll see at Target and Wal-Mart. They break, and people abandon them. The stores selling these bikes are ultimately taking advantage of you.

A Schwinn Varsity from the late 1970s is going to be ten times the bike that the new Schwinn from Wal-Mart is. There are many places where you can buy affordable, used, high quality bicycles in Flagstaff. Check out BiciMundo or Flagstaff Bikes. Even the shops that specialize in new bikes periodically have used ones for sale. And there is always craigslist.

LOCK IT UP. EVERY TIME

Once you've chosen your steed, you're going to need a good lock. If you value your bike at all, do not buy a cheap cable lock. Get a U-Lock, and use it every time your bike is out of your site. Make sure you lock the frame to something. Ever see a lonely bicycle wheel locked to a rack? That person simply locked their wheel to the rack and someone easily stole their bike. Don't be that person.

DON'T BE THAT CYCLIST!

Northern Arizona University Police Officer Eric Greenwald reminds us that "when bicyclists are riding on the road they are required to follow all traffic laws applicable to motor vehicles." The caricature of an NAU cyclist is someone riding the wrong way down a street with ear buds in, talking on their phone, blowing stop signs at night with no lights. On the one hand, this sort of behavior undermines the very real efforts of longtime cyclists who have advocated cycling as a positive and safe alternative mode of transportation. On the other hand, it will get you pulled over, which frankly is really embarrassing on your bike, or worse — killed. "The most common citations given to bicyclists are failing to stop at a stop sign and riding the wrong way on the roadway," Mr. Greenwald said.

Unfortunately, we live in a community where the behaviors of some cyclists impact the reputation of all cyclists. If you don't believe me, reference the public comment section of any article the **Arizona Daily Sun** publishes on cycling. In other words, when you blow through a stop light while talking on the phone, you reinforce the stereotype that we're all jerks with a death urge (of course that stigma doesn't follow motorists when they blow stop signs, but that's a different topic for a different article).

The best advice I can give new cyclists in Flagstaff is to pretend you're invisible all the time. By orienting every decision you make under the premise that nobody can see you, you'll make safer choices. Mr. Greenwald notes that the majority of bicycle-related accidents that occur on campus are "single bicyclist accidents." In other words, "they are going way too fast and cannot control their bikes when someone walks in front of them, managing a turn, or avoiding vehicles." This underscores the importance of riding a bike that suits you, but also one that is properly maintained.

This is also a good opportunity to come back to my apology. It was early July, campus was dead, and it was the middle of the afternoon, in the middle of the week. I've got the best bicycle routes on campus down. I was in a hurry to meet my partner and took a short cut around the library by the bike racks. I whipped around the corner, and there she was on a hybrid bike, just as surprised as I was. I was going too fast to react in time, and I slammed into her head on. That's right; in writing this article, I'm a hypocrite. As we both lay on the ground accessing our injuries and damage to our bikes, we both apologized to each other, but it was my fault, and I'm sorry.

In the hopes of continuing to make our city safer for cyclists, the next part of this article will delve into more detail regarding some of the most common ways cyclists are injured on and off campus, including how to avoid getting hit by a car. That article will hold valuable lessons for motorists as well. Stay tuned. 🚲

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