



MEMO TO ALL ROAD USERS...

MEMO: N. - MEMORANDUM, I. A NOTE MADE OF SOMETHING TO BE REMEMBERED. ROAD USERS: CYCLISTS, MOTORISTS, PEDESTRIANS, ETC. CONTEXT: PLEASE BE SAFE!

Everyone who uses the road network has a responsibility to share and share alike. It may be congested but there is room for all and it can work if we have a little bit of respect for each other and realise that we will eventually all arrive at our destination... if we're safe.



UNFORTUNATELY THERE IS A GROWING LIST OF NAMES THAT EVOKE similar emotions when mentioned. Think of Darren Smith, Amy Gillett, Scott Peoples or Ben Mikic. All of them were racers who, in their final act, became ambassadors for a wider community. The tragedy is that their greatest legacy has been achieved post-mortem. They were killed doing what they loved and foundations have been established in their memory to ensure that they won't become the forgotten victims of accidents.

They are the riders who never got to see what was around the next bend or over the crest that lay ahead. By definition an accident is "anything that happens unexpectedly, without design, or by chance". And so none of the riders listed could have known what their fate would be. We can only hope that they are the catalyst for a change in attitude.

Road rules are drafted to ensure that this vast expanse of public space is used by as many people as possible in the safest manner possible. When I see incidents in traffic that have the potential to be hazardous, I feel compelled to write a memo to all road users. There are many regulations that should be reiterated on a regular basis and some have become the basis for campaigns to ease the angst so inherent in traffic. "The road is there to share."

It sums up the situation although the message doesn't seem to be getting through. Why else do we find ourselves mourning yet another accident victim? Dominic Mason, a 33-year-old father of two, was clipped by a truck during a bunch training ride near Newcastle last December. He never made it home.

UNFORTUNATELY THE STYLE FOR REPORTING ROAD ACCIDENTS is to make the actual vehicle appear responsible for what took place. "A truck travelling in the lane next to [Dominic Mason] clipped his bike and he fell under its trailer," is how it was reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. It has become common practice, perhaps to dehumanise the incident, but it is incorrect. The truck was part of the equation but it was driven by someone. Human error caused the crash.

There are many variables to consider: it may have been a misjudged passing manoeuvre, failure to understand the size of the vehicle in his command, a lack of visibility... the list is long but the onus is on the driver to take into account all the possible elements and act appropriately.

"The issue is that there are cyclists on the roads interacting with motorists who aren't used to so many bikes," said Melinda Jacobsen, the general manager of the Amy Gillett Foundation. "It's a new relationship for many and in some circumstances it's started to create a bit of tension. Cyclists are essentially doing the right thing: they want to do their bit to help save the environment, they want to get fitter and they want to save a bit of money. They should be congratulated."

Mason's death shouldn't be a prompter for just another cyclist versus motorist debate. It is a tragedy and it should never have happened on a relatively safe stretch of road. The memo to road users should state another obvious point: there is room for everyone.

This column is not about taking sides or suggesting that one vehicle has more rights than another. Paying road taxes does not make the road the sole property of motorists although this is a common taunt cyclists endure. Highways and byways are public property. Of course it's a complex system but cooperation by all parties should be manageable quite simply because there are rules that dictate how each entity utilises the vast network.

"There are also a lot of bike riders training on the roads and motorists aren't used to this type of vulnerable road user,"

continues Jacobsen, who spends her professional life trying to devise ways to make cycling safer. Like many people she has noticed the significant increase in rider numbers, from racing enthusiasts to commuters and all else in between.

"For many years, motorists have pretty much had the road to themselves. It's an interesting situation that's emerging and cyclists need to respect that they are legitimate road users and therefore they must behave that way and follow the rules."

Most of us have been guilty of taking risks to expedite our journey. On a bike or in a car, it can seem like a trivial act but it often involves bending the law a little and it's just not worth the risk!

The truck driver involved in the accident that killed Mason will never be the same again. The people responsible for the deaths of Smith, Gillett, Peoples and Mikic have all endured the torment that comes with knowing that they have forever impacted the lives of others.

"The most important thing to remember about being in traffic is that all around you are other people," said Jacobsen. "It's easy to feel comfortable in a car's cocoon but I ask drivers to give as much respect to random riders as they would if they were passing their mother, father, daughter or son."

It's possible for cyclists and motorists to easily coexist. It may be difficult to imagine if you've only ever ridden in Sydney, a city with a dire public transport infrastructure and a road system that's hardly conducive to riding. But consider the European attitude and observe the driving habits there and you will see that even amidst chaos there's room for respect.

It works both ways. We expect to be given a wide berth when cars pass; turbulence of a fast-moving truck is significant, distracting and dangerous. It's easy for drivers to wait a moment to check that the conditions are clear before going around. Conversely, cyclists shouldn't act as though it's their right to slink through traffic only to hold it up again after starting off from the front row once a red light turns green.

"Cyclesport Victoria in conjunction with police in that state have launched a cycling training code of conduct," explained Jacobsen about an initiative that came about after a pedestrian was killed by a cyclist who rode through a red light.

"What's important is that training bunches need to self-regulate and make sure everyone present is safe, responsible and competent. If anyone is not doing the right thing, there needs to be some encouragement and education amongst the cyclists to create a better, safer environment on the road."

UNFORTUNATELY NOT EVERYONE AGREES WITH HG WELLS AND his appraisal of cycling in society. "When I see an adult on a bicycle, I do not despair for the future of the human race." It's a sentiment that makes even more sense in modern life than when the writer penned the line early in the 20th century. We ride for many reasons including better health, effective transport and environmental concerns.

There are still people who believe cyclists are a menace and while there's no denying that some are, they shouldn't become victims of aggression or rage. No one should.

The road is there to share. There is room for everyone and rules provide a cooperative solution; we simply all need to adhere to them to make cycling the sustainable form of transport and exciting sport it should be.

Do not despair despite the losses. Remember your fallen comrades and look after yourself and those around you. The final part of this memo is a simple sentence but it has broad ramifications: be safe and make sure you get to your destination.

ROB ARNOLD

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AT, TO, OR TOWARDS THE REAR: QUIRKY COLUMN