

Cyclists are clashing head-on with motorists as both parties insist on their right to use Singapore roads



Motorists have long been kings of the asphalt in car-crazy Singapore. But their right to road space for their air-conditioned dream machines is being challenged by open-air riders atop tiny leather seats – yes, cyclists. And sometimes, neither set of wheels wants to share.

It is a situation that has sparked debate in Parliament, coffee shops and chat forums about whether cyclists deserve equal rights on the roads.

The tussle comes as more Singaporeans, ranging from fitness fanatics to eco- or budget-conscious commuters, are taking to two wheels, even as more of them add to road accident statistics.

Last week in Parliament, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs Masagos Zulkifli said cyclists were found to be at fault in more than half of accidents involving bicycles. In the first nine months of last year, 15 cyclists died on the road. In 2008, the figure was 22, just one fewer than the number of people who died in motorcars that year.

Marketing executive Susan Lee, 24, knows how dangerous it is. She was cycling home when a bus driver failed to notice her on the left-most side of the road. The bus sped past, brushing her handlebars and almost knocking her off her bike.

"The only thing that saved me was the fact that there was so little space between me, the bus and the kerb that I had nowhere to fall over," she says.

Conversely, motorist Win Lee had a close shave one evening when a cyclist clad in a black shirt cut abruptly in front of his Mitsubishi Lancer. "I had to jam hard on my brakes to avoid hitting him," recalls the 27-year-old, who is between jobs.

His car spun across the next two lanes before skidding to a halt. "Roads are meant for vehicles. Cyclists should keep to designated areas," he declares.

Cyclists LifeStyle interviewed told of drivers who beep their horns impatiently, squeeze past on narrow roads and blindly open car doors into their path.

Motorists, on the other hand, bristle about cyclists who flout traffic rules, road hog and change lanes without indicating.

"Cyclists are another element of uncertainty on the road," says teaching assistant Aaron Ng, 27, who drives a Kia Cerato. "If they were banned from the roads, drivers will have one less thing to look out for."

Motorists hoping to banish cyclists from roads may not have much of a case.

Interest in cycling has surged. Joyriders, one of the largest sports cycling groups here, began with fewer than 10 members in 2004. It now has over 700.

It is not just spandex-wrapped athletes who are spilling onto the roads. More Singaporeans are picking up their bicycles for home-to-work or neighbourhood commutes, citing environmental, health and economic benefits.

Mr Mohan Mirwani, director of the Trekology chain of bicycle shops, says sales of hybrid bicycles, typically used for commuting, have risen about 5 to 10 per cent year-on-year over the past two to three years.

Ms Vivian Yuan, marketing manager of foldable bicycle business Dignexx, adds: "There is a growing awareness of cycling being a real solution to go to work."

Product designer Francis Chu, 49, rides a foldable bike from his home in Paya Lebar to work in Toa Payoh daily, saving \$2,200 a month that would have gone on a car.

So simply banning cyclists from the



Instead of both parties going on the offensive-defensive, motorists have to accept the presence of cyclists on the roads while cyclists should observe traffic rules and signal accordingly.

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# Cycle of strife



From weekend riders to the eco- and budget-conscious, more people here are commuting on two wheels.

road fails to address this rising trend. Besides, where would they go? By law, cyclists are not allowed on pavements as they may endanger pedestrians.

Motorists argue that since cyclists do not pay road tax, they should be kept off the road. But imposing tax on bicycles would not be justifiable, given their low value compared to motor vehicles, says Professor of Economics Winston Koh from the Singapore Management University.

Moreover, road tax is seen as a way to compensate for "social costs" such as pollution and congestion. The social cost of a bicycle, he adds, is "minimal".

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) told LifeStyle that licensing bikes as it would "unnecessarily subject bicycle owners to onerous requirements" and would also be difficult to enforce.

Building dedicated lanes for cyclists, which are common in major cities, has

been a longstanding recommendation of the Safe Cycling Task Force, a volunteer group of cyclists working with the authorities to make Singapore more cycle-friendly.

Spokesman Tham Chen Munn, 34, says without investment in such infrastructure, road users here are "not given a chance to be gracious". If cyclists and motorists each had their own space, there would be less friction and fewer accidents between them, says the civil engineer.

LTA says it needs to "ensure our roads are optimally utilised to meet the diverse needs of all road users and pedestrians" so dedicated bicycle lanes are not feasible.

Some are sick of the authorities spinning their wheels. Dr Low Wye Mun, honorary secretary of the Singapore Amateur Cycling Association (SACA), says the issue of cycling on roads has been discussed in Parliament over the years, but to no avail.

MP Teo Ser Luck, a keen cyclist who helped push through a pilot project where

cyclists and pedestrians in five towns – Tampines, Yishun, Sembawang, Pasir Ris and Taman Jurong – share footpaths, does not rule out dedicated bike lanes but says there are "factors to be considered".

"Whenever you carve out something there will be a trade-off in space, and right now, it's a balancing act," he says, adding it is a "personal dream" to make Singapore connected for bicycles.

The introduction of cycling towns is a "big leap forward". More radical changes will take time and further lobbying from civic groups. For now, the answer to the problem of warring road users seems to lie in better education on both sides. The Safe Cycling Task Force works with town councils to run regular cycling clinics.

The Traffic Police says people taking the test for a driving licence are taught, for example, to give cyclists "a side clearance of not less than 1.5m" when passing. Bus companies SMRT and SBS told

LifeStyle that their bus captains are trained to gently tap their horns as a warning to cyclists before overtaking them.

Still, much more can be done. The task force's Dr Low says: "What is needed is a fundamental re-think of what is accepted on roads in view of cycling, and then organise educational and promotional campaigns to bring about the desired outcome."

Motorists have to accept the presence of cyclists for a peaceful co-existence, he says. "Cyclists feel they get no respect and when vehicles drive aggressively against them – as I have personally experienced regularly – they react in a defensive-offensive way. This is totally unhealthy from a social and safety perspective."

sandra@sph.com.sg

Do you think cyclists have as much right to be on the roads as motorists? Write to [suntimes@sph.com.sg](mailto:suntimes@sph.com.sg)