

JP: Today we're talking with Dan Harrison, retired scientist, long time cyclist, club officer, and a Ride Captain with the Ann Arbor Bicycle Touring Society. Dan, tell me about your first bike.

DH: Well, my parents bought me a red & white Murray Bike. By today's standards it was very heavy, but it was flashy and looked good, and I rode it all over...

JP: With cards in the spokes?

DH: We would put baseball cards in there some times, and even a balloon. If you under inflate them, they make a motorcycle sound. And before that, I was thinking, I realized I can remember at 4 or 5 years old, my sister and I riding tricycles around the dining room table. Not many things you remember from being 4...

JP: Have you been a cyclist your entire life from that point on?

DH: No, like most people my age, I'm 70 now, when you went to high school you pretty much were done with bicycles, and bicycling never really came back for adults until 1973 or so. I remember I was working in Detroit then, and I bought my first nice real road bike.

JP: So you would have been in your mid-20s...after college.

DH: Yes, in my first real job. And if you remember about the same time, there was Bikecentennial. A good number of people at work had bought bicycles, some were commuting to downtown Detroit, and we loved talking about the bikes, and Bikecentennial started up in 1976. That was a cross-country ride for adults. I didn't do that (then), but adults were getting into cycling...

JP: It was a wave of motion that carried you along, supported you in some way...

DH: Yes. And that's where many of the adults who bike today first got into riding.

JP: Interesting, and at (the recent) Bike Tour Network conference, Adventure Cycling which is a descendent of Bikecentennial, is a big sponsor, and they're quick to champion the routes they created in the 70s.

DH: They started it all, in a way, and I remember at work there was this guy that wanted to take 3 months off for vacation, they wouldn't let him do it. Someone asked 'what's he want to do?', just bike across the country. I thought that's CRAZY! Little did I know that I'd be doing the same thing 40 years later!

JP: OK. So, you grew up, get married, work for the EPA, retired from that, when did you join the AABTS?

DH: I moved to Ann Arbor in 1974, got married in 1989, and it's my wife, she got me into joining AABTS. She already had several thousand miles...

JP: Was it a dating club?

DH: Well, people that I knew that were in the bike club, helped introduce us. They knew that I biked a little bit, I still had my bike from 1974, and I would ride out to Dexter on my own, and a couple people from work, we'd do short rides, 10-15 miles, which seemed long at the time...

JP: Perspective changes that...So you joined the club in 1988, when did you become an officer? (4:15)

DH: I think the next year (laughs) I get this call one night, they say 'Dan, we need someone to run the potluck'. Well, let me think about it. They called back and I said OK I'll do it. I did those for almost 30 years, three annual meetings and potlucks a year, we'd have 120 people. It just got me more involved in the club, and I enjoyed doing it, it was fun to do.

JP: When did you become a ride leader?

DH: Probably a couple years after that. I would lead some of the Sunday rides. They were not recurring rides, each ride was a different ride with different ride leaders. And then I lead Saturday rides. As you know now I lead a ride on Fridays, a recurring ride (same route).

JP: And what is the proper title? Ride leader, ride captain?

DH: We were ride leaders, but 10 years ago or so we changed it to Ride Captain. The reason is that we didn't want the leader to be in the lead of the pack, we want the leader to worry about the other riders and take care of them- not hold their hands, but to be there in case help was needed.

JP: So your qualifications early on, you had a bicycle, you had a pulse...what other qualifications did you have then?

DH: One, I was good at routes and knowing what were good bicycle routes, and knowing what rides I'd been on. The Sunday rides you would design or use someone else's previous Sunday ride and modify it. I was real good at maps, and this is before we had smartphones or personal computers. And so you had to go to the bookstore and find this really good map to buy, and make xerox copies, try to blow it up...

JP: And at this time there was probably minor or no support from MDOT. The nice maps we have now with color coded roads were not present then...

DH: The only thing we had, in Ann Arbor back then, the city had a part-time bicycle coordinator, and they actually had a bicycle map around the city. Of course we wanted to go out into the county, so we'd buy good county maps and work off those. And so one of the qualifications is being able to pick a good, safe route.

JP: I'm sure this has morphed over time. Does the AABTS provide safety guidelines for the ride captains?

DH: Yes, we do. We have a chair for the safety committee. On our website there is a 'rules of the road' page which is one full page of safety guidelines. Then there's a 4 or 5 page thing on the website, Tips for Ride Captains, and that's safety and general how to run a ride.

JP: Have you attended any training offered by other groups, maybe the League of Michigan Bicyclists, or Adventure Cycling?

DH: Our club, about 15 years ago, offered the League of American Bicyclists, which is one of the first-it was the League of American Wheelmen back in the 1890s, and they helped pave the first roads in the country. So anyway they offer effective cycling courses. Our club AABTS offered the League training for ride leaders. We probably had two or three courses over 3 years, about 20 or 30 people each time. It also included Red Cross (first aid) training. I need to go back and do the Red Cross training again, because you forget that after a while. The safety training was very good. We had Ann Arbor police, also part of the training, they have a police bicycle. She would take us out to practice manouvers.

JP: Are you keeping current in safety training?

DH: I'm not, but the website has several links to different safety training. I also have been a member of the Bicycle Adventure Club for several years, and I've arranged some of the ride leader seminars for that club, and we do that every year. For 4 years I discussed safety there for 20-40 people.

JP: How do you design safety into a ride? Understand that most of the events where I see you, are typically 20 to 40 miles, and they start a 9 a.m. and are over by 1 p.m. (11:00)

DH: The Friday ride you're talking about is one of our beginner rides, other rides we can hit 60 miles. The first thing, we talked about before, you pick really good routes that are safe routes. The second is that you talk to new people (on the ride) about how to be safe on the bike. I try to have some 90 second talk about safety. You don't try to cover everything, people's attention span is only about 2 minutes at best, especially when they're ready to ride, but you want to hit them with some key safety points. Also on the ride, I'll nicely give people safety tips. On the Friday ride, we're on some bike trails which are paved, and there's multiple uses on these trails. You have to be careful on the bicycle and be very courteous and polite to the walkers, they can't see you, they don't have mirrors. You don't want to ride two-abreast when there's bicycles coming at you. Some people will get talking, they're relaxed and having a good time (not paying attention). I have to go up and casually say 'try to go single file when there's a bike approaching. Remember these bikers (on trails) are not all high quality road bikes or seasoned riders, a lot of first-time users. So I work those things in as well.

JP: Yeah, it's remarkable, we don't train people how to walk or how to bike on paths. You have seen, if you're on a bike, a family ahead and you call out 'passing' or 'on your right', they scatter, half to each side of the road, and usually to the opposite side they're walking on!

DH: That can be very dangerous, especially if children are present. You need to slow down, you're on a road bike. It's like a sports car (in speed) compared to family bikers or walkers. I will even stop if there's a group. You've just got to be friendly and courteous.

JP: Remember that uses of the park are varied, and bikes are just a small part of it.

DH: One other point, is that a bicycle is very quiet on these trails, unless you're talking which can be good. But you come up along side a walker and they are shocked sometimes, they don't anticipate

something coming up that quietly. You don't think you're quiet, so a tip for bikers is to make sure that you're vocal, say 'good morning' or 'hello', so they know you're there in advance (of passing them).

JP: And the further in advance, I've found, the better received it is.

DH: I've thought of getting a bunch of inexpensive mirrors and giving them out to the walkers...

JP: So, what is your motivation for being a ride leader after 30 years?

DH: You know, not everyone is suited to be a leader. Many are very good riders, fast, strong, but they don't have the social skills or leadership skills. One thing as a leader, you want people to follow, or ride with you. You lead by example, I'm motivated to do it, though, because I like riding with groups, discovering new places, and you have something in common to talk about. You can have a rider who is brand new, I really enjoy new folks coming out to ride, and I'll spend time talking with them, telling about the club, nice places to ride, what to anticipate, how to worry about nutrition and safety, but as a conversation, not as a speech. Not to brag, some folks say I'm a very good ride leader, and I've seen other leaders who are very good but they maybe don't worry about the route. They think differently and say 'well, we just ride out to where we want to eat...and if some new person is along, they have no clue what your doing. Everyone knows you turn left at the next road, well no, they don't!

JP: Let's talk about that for a minute, because as a tour leader, that is my biggest problem. We tell people, spoken, from breakfast how to get to lunch, then from lunch how to get to the hotel. They get a road map with the route highlighted, they get turn-by-turn instructions on the back of the map, and the route is available on GPS for smartphone or computer navigation. People still don't pay attention! That's a big issue to overcome. Have you any advice for bringing people into the 21st century and getting navigation on their smartphone?

DH: Some people are just sort of not good at all with GPS. What you're going to find, in the future, is that people are not good with paper! It's like, we grew up needing maps to drive our cars anywhere. Now we have all the technology, what if it fails? When I do a trip I have maps and GPS. The GPS could lose power, it could lose the signal, then what do you do? On the other hand if you have a map you could lose it in the wind (or rain). It's good to have a backup. And then I think with a tour group like yours, you tend to get some beginners out for a good time, and they expect you the tour leader to take care of everything. I don't have that problem as a bike club leader because we have more experienced bicyclists...

JP: So, go back to beginners or new riders, what's the strategy for creating more new riders, and for finding new riders who are not old like us?

DH: That's a problem we're having now. For some reason, we're not getting the 40-year olds like we were when I was 40. Part of the strategy is having rides that are beginner friendly, shorter distances, and a ride leader does pay attention to the new riders. You work with them. As far as anticipating how to get new people to join our rides, now they're using technology, apps like Meetup where you say 'who wants to go on a ride tonight at 6 p.m.' and people just show up and they wing it. That's got a lot of freedom.

JP: Has the AABTS tried a Meetup event?

DH: We've been talking about it, but we haven't got to that point yet. I notice that some of my friends in the Tri-County Bicyclists Club (in Lansing), they're having similar problems. It's a problem that the younger generations are not into road biking as much (as us). Also a lot of people are doing more trail biking now, and we're starting to do some of that.

JP: Trail biking, do you mean gravel grinding, or trail riding, or mountain biking?

DH: I think more are starting to go into the gravel, vs. our Friday ride with some paved bike trails. Also some people feel safer on those kind of trails because you're not in traffic. It's something to think about.

JP: I've done the gravel ride, it's fine on a gravel road, I'm still looking for the charm in it, I'll find it some day.

DH: I've heard that some of the gravel road rides, especially in the spring, you'll get to areas you otherwise wouldn't. You'll see dogwood trees flowering, more wildlife, very few cars. In some places the gravel roads are in better condition than the paved roads.

JP: What else should I ask?

DH: We're talking about safety, and other clubs have some good stuff. The Cincinnati Cycle Club, I use their phrase a lot, 'remember the 3 C's', for safety- Courtesy, Caution, Communication. That sums it up. If you only have 90 seconds, talk about that for safety. Courtesy, show it to the other bike riders, show it to motorists. Sometimes we're wanting to fight with the cars, but be courteous. It's hard for cars to get around a group of bikes. So you don't want to ride 8 in a group. When I did this cross country trip, people asked if all 29 of us ride together. No! We wouldn't be a pack of 29 on a road, it would be impossible to pass if you're in a car. Courtesy is important.

JP: OK so for discussion here, it's easy to find on YouTube, passing a group of cyclists. They've done a study with 6 bikers, first two by tow, then six in a row, then spread out, to find what is easier or quicker for traffic to get around. It was the two by two arrangement that had the least disruption of traffic.

DH: That's interesting, I wouldn't do that.

JP: And safety is one thing where everyone has to come to their own understanding.

DH: You have to remember to be courteous. One of our club suggestions, if you're in a group and cars start lining up behind you, if they can't get around, you should pull off in a driveway. I think some states have this as a law. It's hard in a group. But remember, 99% of the motorists are nice, it's the 1% which are not nice, but we have to be nice too. Along that line of courtesy, I see people do weird things on bikes which we shouldn't do, and it reflects on all of us. I get blamed for what somebody else did. If motorists see you do something (illegal or non-standard) it upsets them. It's just not courteous. I've stopped at red lights and motorists have stopped to say 'thank you for stopping'. It's a good thing.

JP: So, the Idaho stop, which means for cyclists, treat a stop sign as a yield sign, and treat a red light like a stop sign, how do you feel about that?

DH: My initial reaction is that's not appropriate. I can see the logic, then we should change the signs or change the law. My initial reaction is that I don't like it.

JP: From an urban view, and Ann Arbor qualifies in this regard, very progressive town, lots of pedestrians, lots of bicycles...my wife who commutes daily into town will about once a month tell me about someone on a bike who took liberties with the code, would the Idaho stop help that situation at all?

DH: Well, it might. In my subdivision, motorists treat stop signs like yield signs, but that could be a \$160 ticket. I got one years ago, and I thought I'd stopped. Since then I've watched police cars-they don't stop at stop signs. Watch their wheels, they don't come to a full stop. You could give a ticket to almost everyone. That being said, I think bikes should obey all the laws. If the police would enforce some of the laws, most bicyclists don't want to hear this, the bikers would start obeying them more. You come up to a red light in your car, it's midnight, not another car to be seen, you still stop. If you're on a bicycle, you go through it. Why? Because you're not going to get a ticket. A car will get a ticket, the police can't ignore it.

One other thing, another club is the Cascade Bicycle Club, one of the biggest clubs in the country, in Seattle, two or three thousand members. They have this thing called Ride SMART. Basically it says the same little tips put in an acronym. Stay Alert is S, Maintain Space is M, Act Safely and Predictably is A, I like being very predictable. If you're very predictable and behave like a car, motorists know what to do and appreciate you. And then Respect the Rules of the Road is R, and T is Think Ahead and Talk. I like the SMART and I like the CCC. You can work those into your tours! (27:00)

JP: You know, I need to rewrite part of the website, starting with the safety expectation. What mantle or uniform do people put on when they get on their bike? I need to say that clearly at the start of each tour. You came on a tour, probably in a new place and you don't really know where you are; it's your responsibility as a guest to look at the itinerary and understand where we're going that day. I get it if you don't want to use electronic navigation, but if you have a smart phone please put the name of the hotel in! It's free and easy, just tough to get people to do this. I would love to encourage all my guests to use electronic navigation, because it's simple and unobtrusive. You get a beep when you're supposed to turn. And still people say 'I'm following my (spouse or friend)' or 'I'm with a group, I don't need to know the map', well, don't call me when you're lost! But I can't say that!

DH: Well, the club puts on a ride for 1,500 bicyclists each year, the One Hell of a Ride Tour in July, and we do maps, cue sheets, GPS, and we also paint the road with arrows. You do all that, and I've seen bikes just follow the bike in front of them! (laughs) I saw one guy miss a turn and the next 4 riders followed along, and I had to go chase them down! You can do everything, but getting lost is sometimes part of the adventure...

JP: And being out of your comfort zone, and having faith that it's supposed to be 20 miles after lunch, and there's only one road, even though I don't know where I am, it's pretty out and should take me an hour and a half, and then if I'm not there I'll worry about it...

DH: Yeah, I've read books about people riding across the country with that attitude, but I could never do that! I need more structure! (laughs)

JP: Yeah, but you're an engineer!

DH: Just a couple of little notes here, too. I like to encourage new riders to learn to use a mirror. You can ride without one, some folks are good at it, but I love a mirror...

JP: I have two, one helmet mirror and one handlebar mirror...

DH: And use hand signals, it goes back to being predictable. Make it clear that a car knows what you're up to, and make eye contact. Especially if they're focused on finding a parking spot. One time I rode by U of M stadium and the game got out early, that was a disaster! The cars couldn't focus, I had to get off the bike. Nutrition is another important thing. As a ride leader, I always carry extra electrolytes, gatoraid, a cliff bar or something. We'll get riders out with no breakfast and no supplies, trying to do a 60 mile ride at 80 degrees. I've bought water for folks who forgot their water bottle, you just have to do it.

JP: You didn't mention lighting...

DH: Yes, visibility. I have bright colored, screaming jerseys, and I have flashing tail and headlights, USB rechargeable. You can get a 100 lumen tail light on line for \$30. You want to get very bright ones. We were on this cross country trip and several people liked our lights so much that they all ordered them on Amazon and had them delivered to the next hotel. I've noticed that cars will pass you at a wider margin because they've seen your light and you got their attention! Lots of times they don't see you till the last minute. If you watch as you're driving, in the gray Michigan skies, it's hard to spot them. So it's very important to wear bright colors and have lights.

JP: I got a new bike in April, and I got the light set they recommend. It's outstanding, and the respect from traffic, all season I can recall only 3 occasions where someone passed too close when there was room to move over. Lights are very good.

DH: You mentioned passing too close, the new Michigan 3' passing law is here now. Many people are afraid to cross the center line when passing a bike but part of the law allows for this in no-passing zones if it's clear. You have to remember that some folks just will never cross the line, and if I see it I'll pull over and let them by...

JP: There was a second bill passed adding an hour of time to driver's education...

JP: Thanks Dan, for your time today.