

Firearms Training for the Police Cyclist

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In recent years, there have been a number of documented police cyclist involved shootings and other associated deadly force encounters. By tracking these encounters, trainers have been able to identify firearms, tactics, and survival-oriented training specific to the needs of a police cyclist. In a 1998 survey conducted by the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA), *67% of officers who responded indicated that their agencies provided no firearms training or qualification specific to mountain bike officers; however, 94% felt there was a need to at least qualify with the equipment associated with mountain bike patrol.*

What is the justification for special firearms training for mountain bike officers? Most well-informed trainers will agree that the more specialized a unit is, the more specific and tailored the training must be. Training has been designed to reflect the duties and challenges of many types of special unit officers, including K-9 units, marine patrols, undercover officers, and mounted patrols. Mountain bike officers are no different. Firearms training for bike officers must address a variety of issues, including equipment, the lack of secondary weapon carrying options, weapon retention, and physical fitness.

Equipment

In the 1998 IPMBA survey, 46% of the respondents reported using nylon gun belts with holster retention systems that differed from those of their leather gear. The different retention systems can cause problems with drawing the firearm, particularly under stressful conditions. This is especially evident in part-time or seasonal bike officers. Another consideration is the placement of equipment. Ideally, a nylon duty rig should be set up identically to leather gear. However, because of the placement of keepers on bike shorts and pants, officers may find themselves positioning equipment slightly differently than is their custom. Again, this can become a problem when they need to access their equipment – baton, O.C., or pistol – quickly and easily. This difficulty can be addressed by moving the keepers to match the locations on class A uniform pants or by discarding the manufacturer’s sewn-in keepers altogether. Finally, bike officers should be encouraged to practice with their secondary gun belt systems. Range exercises should mandate practice on drawing all weapon systems and quickly transitioning from one weapon system to another.

Another equipment-related issue to address involves the effects of cycling gloves on the officer’s ability to shoot a pistol and handle intermediate weapons, including handcuffs. Cycling gloves are generally equipped with padding in the palm area. Depending on the thickness of the padding, the pad can actually enlarge the overall surface area of the handgun. This can change how the officer grips the gun, which ultimately may effect the point of aim and the accuracy of the shot. Loose-fitting gloves will allow the pistol to shift in the shooter’s hands, especially when experiencing recoil. Sloppy gloves have been known to inhibit the proper insertion of a magazine into the magazine well. Working outdoors in inclement weather brings up another consideration: full-fingered gloves. Indexing the trigger can be more challenging with gloves on and therefore should be the subject of additional training. Benefits to wearing padded gloves include the reduction of perceived felt recoil, and an improved grip in humid and warm environments.

Indexing all tools is more challenging while wearing gloves, whether or not they are full-fingered. The glove acts as a barrier between the skin and the handcuffs, chemical aerosol, magazines, etc., causing the items to “feel” different. For this reason, it is highly recommended that officers perform a series of weapon manipulation drills in order to become familiar with these differences.

Secondary Weapons

A third equipment concern inherent to bike patrol is the lack of secondary weapon carrying options. Those officers who are accustomed to wearing an ankle holster containing a back-up gun are in for a rude awakening. Ankle holsters and bike patrol just aren’t made for each other. Most bike patrol officers wear shorts, and when they wear long pants, they choose bike pants that have stirrups or are cinched at the bottom to prevent entanglement with the bike chain. These pants make carrying and drawing from an ankle holster virtually impossible. Body armor holsters are very popular among bike officers; however, many officers wear polo-style bike uniform shirts, which can make accessing a torso-style holster a challenge. Another viable option is the “inside the pocket holster,” as long as the pocket is large enough to accommodate a smaller frame handgun. Due to the activities bike officers engage in, the officer must be able to close the pocket and secure the pistol in some fashion. Because of their limited ability to carry secondary weapons, if they do carry them, proof of proficiency in accessing and using the weapons is paramount.

Weapon Retention

An area that cannot be ignored is weapon retention for mountain bike officers. In a recent IPMBA survey, a number of officers reported having been pushed or pulled from their mountain bikes. Envision for a moment the standard riding position. The

position leaves most weapons on the gun belt exposed while the officer's hands are occupied on the handlebars. Officer Gary McLaughlin of the Sacramento Police Department designed an exercise that illustrates the officer's vulnerability. In this exercise, which simulates a crowd situation, one cyclist at a time rides slowly through a "gauntlet" of people. The officer rides through the channel, offering no resistance as items are removed from his or her gun belt and mountain bike. Open-ended baton holders and level one holsters are defeated easily. After a number of officers have "Run the Gauntlet", a discussion takes place regarding equipment, positioning, weapon retention techniques and defensive tactics. Most officers will agree that while riding or straddling the bike, they would respond to a weapon disarming attempt as if the bike were non-existent. The next level of the drill involves only one member of the crowd attempting a pistol or baton grab at about 50% speed. The cyclist exits the bike quickly while maintaining his or her weapons, then handles the threat in the appropriate manner. As a result of this drill, officers are better able to recognize problem areas and situations where the best tactical option is to walk the bike rather than ride.

Physical Fitness

In addition to equipment, fitness and heart rates can have a significant impact on an officer's motor skill performance in handling weapons. Officers in poor physical condition will be limited in the types of tasks they can perform on the mountain bike. Fitness level is also a determining factor in gauging the level of difficulty of any given range exercise. Sprints leading to crossover dismounts and power slide dismounts involve complex motor movements, or "a series of muscle groups in a sequence of movements involving timing and visual tracking." (Siddle). Range exercises involving sprints prior to dismounting should be included in training; however, sprinting and dismounting should not be the sole focus of the range training. Rather, the exercises should be designed to allow the officer to experience the physiological effects of riding hard to a call, including the effects of physical exertion on performance at the scene. Although it is not a bad idea to bring an officer to his or her personal physical threshold, a building block approach is highly recommended. In other words, first condition an officer to master the skill at slower speeds, then increase speeds, vary the terrain, and enhance the complexity of the exercise. Riding an officer to exhaustion will cause muscle failure and loss of cognitive processing ability, leading to a negative training experience. Bike officers should be trained to and condition themselves to be an asset at a scene. They must understand the need to decrease their speed prior to dismounting, as failure to do so can result in a fall. Additionally, there are tactical issues in teaching officers to slow down as they approach a scene, i.e., scanning, breathing, accessing, and identifying threats and cover options.

Training Considerations

What types of range exercises should the firearms instructor include? Exercises that emphasize the need to be cognizant of their changing 360-degree environment and constant lack of cover. Officers should be trained to recognize when the bike no longer serves them tactically or mechanically and how to exit the bike quickly when needed. Range exercises should incorporate shooting on the move as well as stationary and moving dismounts, weapon manipulation, use of cover, shooting from relative positions, and drawing back-up pistols. Greater distance shooting may fit into the training philosophies of some agencies. Due to the lack of a readily available shoulder-mounted weapon, and the cover and speed of a patrol car, officers may find themselves confronting suspects at greater distances. In 1994, there was a police cyclist involved shooting in which an officer engaged, and effectively neutralized, a suspect from 71 yards. Because a speeding bullet will beat a pedaling officer to the scene every time, being proficient with one's pistol at greater distances may be a necessity. In this drill, non-reactive steel target systems reward an officer for using proper sight alignment and trigger control by providing instant feedback. Officers can fire from a variety of positions at whatever distances the range will accommodate. Naturally, range drills will depend on the range facility, but most limitations can be overcome. For instance, an indoor range can easily accommodate stationary dismounts, slow roll dismounts, and weapon manipulation. Stationary bikes or track-stand style trainers can be used to simulate sprints to increase the heart rate.

Range exercises should also include realistic scenarios. As mentioned above, there have been a number of documented police cyclist involved shootings and a number of reported assaults against bike officers. One outcome of the analysis of these deadly force encounters is the recognition that a high number of spontaneous encounters resulted from the officer's silent and nearly invisible approach. Although the mountain bike affords a stealth advantage to officers, it can also put the police cyclist "in the mix" much sooner than he/she expects. Because of this, police cyclists can sometimes experience vulnerability in the same environment which they dominate. They must practice overcoming this vulnerability, particularly in situations identified in police cyclist deadly force encounters, such as gang activity, foot pursuits, narcotic activity, alcohol use and vehicular assaults against bike officers.

The annual conference of the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA) offers extensive scenario-based training both in the *IPMBA Police Cyclist Advanced Course* and in the *Officer Survival* workshop. In these training sessions, real world encounters are utilized in scenario fashion to raise the attendee's levels of awareness and better prepare them for their duties. Scenarios include single or multiple officers responding to a variety of calls which result in lethal or less-lethal encounters. Officers are "dispatched" to assist other officers in need of emergency assistance, to investigate suspicious person(s) or patrol a particular area where particular challenges await. These types of scenarios are effective in increasing

heart rates both chemically and physiologically and enhance decision making capabilities. Scenarios are performed utilizing inert O.C., FX marking cartridges and proper safety gear, with one exception. Standard groin protection is reported as being very uncomfortable while in the saddle. Industry representatives have taken note.

On Shooting from the Saddle

Bicycle officers have unique tactical issues that must be incorporated into firearms and associated training exercises. Because of this, IPMBA has taken an official stand on the concept of discharging a firearm while riding a mountain bike. First, it has been established that there are no tactical benefits in engaging in a firefight while on a moving mountain bike. The 1998 IPMBA survey posed this question to respondents: Do you think you could fire effectively from a moving mountain bike? Of the 145 responses, 37% responded as follows:

- “Yes,” if they “didn’t have to stop or turn”
- “Yes,” if the “target remained stationary”
- “Yes,” but with “less accuracy”
- “Yes,” with “proper training”

63% of the respondents stated they *could not* perform this task effectively and gave the following reasons:

- “Too much movement”
- “Not enough stability”
- “Not enough time to train to become proficient”
- “Against department policy”

In examining this issue, consider this question: Just because it is possible to do something on a mountain bike, does that mean it should be done? Too often, officers and trainers overemphasize the use of the bike. Forget for a moment the issue of whether it is a trainable task. Ask this question instead: What is the tactical soundness of training someone to control a bicycle while firing at an adversary, who is probably firing back? Years of conducting scenarios with police cyclists provide evidence that supports teaching officers to dismount the bike prior to engaging the suspect(s). In documented deadly encounters involving bike officers, officers report having dismounted the bike prior to engaging their adversary. Compared to running, the bike offers greater speeds; however, an officer’s movements are *quicker* off the bike. In high threat situations, being quick is more important than being fast. On the bike, the officer’s movements are very predictable, similar to those of a gliding duck in an arcade game. Off the bike, the officer can be a quick, moving, and unpredictable target. Trainers must teach their officers to take the safest action under the conditions. For these reasons, IPMBA does not advocate training officers to shoot from a moving bicycle.

Although re-inventing the wheel is not a necessity, the firearms training needs of bike officers should be researched and explored by each agency. Bike-specific firearms training should emphasize officer survival rather than just line drills, similar to the methods employed by Heckler & Koch (H & K) in *Survival Skills for the Mountain Bike Officer Course* and the IPMBA courses described earlier. Police cyclists as well as firearms instructors have the obligation to one another, and to their agencies, to design and implement firearms training to accommodate the bike officer’s needs.

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This article originally appeared in the April 2001 issue of Law and Order magazine, www.lawandordermag.com.

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