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## **Are You a Courteous Trail Biker?**

**Take this Five-Question Quiz to Find Out**

**By Kenny Bellew**

This summer, I was biking the Minnehaha trail and came upon a mother and her young children parading along the path. The daughter was peddling her training-wheel equipped bike with rapturous enthusiasm. I slowed my advance and dinged my bike bell several times to announce my approach. As I grew closer, I again sounded my bell and pleasantly informed the group I was "passing on your left." The little girl looked over her left shoulder at me, and when she did, she turned her bike left, directly in front of my path. Luckily, I had slowed enough to stop without hitting her. Many adults, let alone children, don't understand the phrase "Passing on your left," and I'm sure my bike bell reminded her of an ice cream truck.

As gas prices rise, so have the number of bicyclists and pedestrians taking to Minnesota trails and paths. New cyclists need to learn the rules of the trail, and we all need to understand why these common courtesies can be mortally important. Their value is greater than politeness. They save lives and protect from injury.

Here are the five quiz questions:

1. Do you announce your intent to pass other bikers and pedestrians?

According to Statutes 169.222 (subdivision 4:d), it is law in Minnesota that bicyclists must "give an audible signal when necessary before overtaking and passing any pedestrian." Why is it in everyone's best interest to announce intent to pass? –Because people move left without warning. Pedestrians and bikers alike drift left, step left, and even abruptly turn left with no signal. Crashing into a pedestrian or biker can cause injury to both people (potentially deadly) and cause damage to bikes. In addition, bikers could be liable for medical and legal costs. Always make sure people know you are approaching before you are right beside them.

One difficulty is that bikers and pedestrians often cannot hear your announcement until you are within a few feet of them. This can startle people and produce unexpected results. Recently, I passed a man walking his dog on a shared path. In an attempt to make my approach known, I dinged my bike bell a few times from a distance. He was far to the right, and there was plenty of room to pass; so, what happened next was unexpected. When I was about 10 feet away, I said "Passing on your left." It startled him so severely that he jumped off of the path and very forcefully pulled on his dog's choke collar to drag his dog off of the path.

I believe that one reason some people do not hear a bike bell is that we lose our high-frequency hearing as we age. The high pitch of a bike bell does not get the attention of many people on bike trails. In fact, I have found that clicking and releasing my brakes is heard by more people at a greater distance than my bike bell. Also, when people hear this clicking sound, it sounds like I'm changing gears. It is much less intrusive than a bell, which may be perceived as an admonishment to "Get out of my way" versus what we really mean, "Don't be alarmed. I'm about to pass you."

More and more, I have noticed that fellow bikers and pedestrians are incensed if bikers do not announce intent to pass—even when they are fully aware someone is about to pass. I have witnessed a biker grow increasingly upset about other bikers not announcing their pass. Due to this frustration, he looked in his mirror at approaching bicyclists and started drifting left, forcing passing cyclists to acknowledge intent to pass. As tempting as it is to teach rude or ignorant bikers a lesson, this risky behavior increases chance of injury and should be avoided.

## 2. Do you speed past small children or pets?

Can you imagine the horror of crashing into a small child while trying to exercise? It is easy to get so engulfed in trying to keep our heart rate up, that we forget to slow down when passing children and pets. Children love to zigzag on a trail. Pass children slowly and with extreme caution, especially if the trail is narrow.

Dogs are particularly unpredictable on trails with wildlife. Often, dogs will charge after squirrels directly in front of your tire just as you pass. Unfortunately, many pet owners allow their dogs to roam many feet ahead of them on long leashes. If you spot a pet with such freedom, use additional caution when passing. Expect the unexpected.

The courtesy of slowing down around children and pets will not only ingratiate Minnesota bikers to parents and pet owners, but it will help avoid tragic injuries.

## 3. Do you wave or nod when drivers stop to allow you to cross the path?

The Minnesota Department of Transportation reports that more than 50% of crashes between cars and bicyclist occur when car and bike meet on a path, and the cause is usually due to one or the other failing to yield. There is often confusion about right of way at path/car-lane intersections. Many cyclists feel that bikes always have the right of way (they do not). Some motorists feel that bikes traveling on

paths marked for pedestrians are moving vehicles, and are not entitled to the same right-of-way privileges (they do have the same rights). This causes confusion.

In my experience, most motorists are very eager to stop at paths and allow bicyclist to pass. When possible, I always try to make eye contact and nod. If stopped, I wave before continuing. This simple reward to the driver reinforces the behavior and ensures that it will continue. It increases respect between motorists and Minnesota bikers as well.

Of course, most of us have had experiences with overly cautious motorists who stop even when the bicyclist obviously does not have the right of way. In some cases, the bicyclist should motion the driver to continue. For example, drivers who stop for bicyclists on trails that cross a four-lane road. This creates a couple of dangerous problems. First, automobiles stopping on a four-lane road could cause speeding cars to crash into the back of the stopped vehicle. Second, the stopped car blocks the view of the cyclist from seeing all approaching motorists. Wave the car through and pass when it is safe.

4. Do you stop in the middle of the path to get a drink or to talk on your cell phone?

It's easy for people to forget that a popular trail is alive with movement coursing through the arteries that create the thoroughfare. Just as you wouldn't expect a car to suddenly stop on the freeway; neither should bikers abruptly stop in the middle of a bike trail. If a cell phone is ringing, pull over as far to the right as possible before answering. If possible, get off the trail entirely.

If the path is especially busy, signal your intent to exit the path. Look behind you, making sure a sudden deceleration is not going to affect other bikers. If it will, slow more gradually, giving other bikers time to adjust and pass.

5. Do you announce your presence when approaching a blind corner?

Blind trail corners can be terrifying. I once rounded a blind corner to find three deer in my path. Only the deer's quick reflexes avoided a collision. On another occasion, several years ago, I curved around a corner to encounter a mother and child crossing the path. She seemed to have zero awareness that her sauntering toddler was dillydallying in a live traffic lane.

There is no way to know what you will find around a blind corner: children, pets, cell phone users stopped in the middle of the road or misplaced pedestrians. Your only offense is defensive biking. Slow down as you approach the blind corner. If you have a bike bell or some other way to alert others of your presence, use it. Make some noise.

As gas prices cause more and more bikers take to local paths, the rules of the trail become more important. They keep people safe, remove confusion, and calm tensions on a crowded trail. "Share the Road" is more than a reminder between bikers and motorist. It includes pedestrians, pets and other bikers who want enjoy a day on the trail and make it home safely.

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