

Talk fast, ride slow

Final installment of *The Chronicle's* series on Chicago bicycling



A crowd of bicyclists take a break at an intersection during the Chicago Critical Mass Aug. 25. A Chicago police officer stops to help block the street.

Chicago Critical Mass gathering new riders with different ideas

By James H. Ewert Jr.
City Beat Editor

To some cyclists it's a sacred tradition. To others, a slow-moving cocktail party and to some motorists, a bane of their driving existence.

Regardless of the perspective, on the last Friday of every month riders from all over the world gather in their respective cities to participate in Critical Mass, a monthly unorganized ride without any form of leadership or hierarchy.

The meaning behind the ride is consistently debated, but one thing

remains constant—cyclists take over the streets once a month to present themselves as traffic—not an obstruction to it.

In Chicago, it begins at Daley Plaza, 50 W. Washington St., at around 5:30 p.m., rain, shine, summer or winter. Right as the evening rush hour is reaching its peak, hundreds of bikes begin descending upon the plaza; street bikes with fixed gears, freak bikes six feet tall, bikes with stereos, bikes with barbecue grills on the front, bikes with wagons, bikes carrying children.

At the plaza people pass out flyers of bike literature that debate the purpose of public space and maps detailing different routes for the ride to take. The maps will be voted on later by those at the plaza

who are participating.

The atmosphere seems like a low-grade bohemian carnival bordering on the hysteria of a circus-like parade. When the maps are voted on, Critical Mass is ready to ride.

"We're confounding the expectations of the ruling class by goofing around in the middle of the street and that's always been a big part of why Critical Mass is so appealing," said Andy Thornley, program director for the San Francisco Bike Coalition.

What was once a survival technique for cyclists in Beijing trying to cross impenetrable walls of automobile traffic, and a form of advocacy for cyclists, Critical

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Chicago Kickball reaching first base

Unsatisfied players start own league with cheaper playing fees

By Matt Woronko
Staff Writer

The Saucy Intruders, Our Lady of Perpetual Shenanigans and James Brown Celebrity Hot Tub may not seem like traditional team names, but they are all part of Chicago Kickball, an untraditional league.

Unsatisfied with paying the fees for the World Adult Kickball Association, a major U.S. kickball league that also spans the globe, James Crook and a few friends started their own league called Chicago Kickball this past summer after playing in the regional bracket of WAKA for three years.

Currently, the registration fee for WAKA is \$60-\$70, which varies due to factors like location and the requirements needed to play on certain fields. Chicago Kickball offers the same benefits as WAKA, like uniforms, equipment and discounts at a bar or restaurant in a division's area, for around \$40.

"Unlike WAKA, our fees go back into the league and help benefit everyone," Crook said. "We are one of the largest non-profit kickball leagues."

Crook estimates that about

150 people are involved in the league now, which has a wide array of participants, from college students to 40-year-olds. The league originally had eight teams and has recently expanded to 10 with the current fall season.

"We try to grow each year, and we might switch to one big season," Crook said. "Since we have a summer and fall season, it might be easier to have one long summer season, rather than starting later and freezing later on."

One factor that helped the league out was the local media. Publications like *Time Out Chicago* and *Chicago Magazine* have profiled the league and informed readers about the new organization.

"I think it's more fun when you take care of everything yourself."

—Anthony Piccoli,
Chicago Kickball member
and Columbia College grad
student

Crook also said that word of mouth helped too.

Columbia grad student Anthony Piccoli, another league member, was amazed at the progress Chicago Kickball made within the first few weeks.

"We had one guy take care of the sponsorship, another took care of the bills and I took care of scheduling," Piccoli said. "I think it's more fun when you take care of everything yourself."

Crook went on to say that a magazine article inspired him to create a new league for Chicago's kickball fans.

"My roommate had ESPN

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Ghostly presence

Art project evolves into memorial for fallen bicyclists

By Eric Kasang
City Beat Editor

When San Francisco artist Jo Slota started his ghost bike program in 2002, he wanted to create urban poetry that paid homage to discarded bicycle parts.

"I had seen bicycles that have been abandoned on the streets and have been stripped," Slota said. "They really stood out to me; they looked like skeletons."

By 2005, Slota's ghost bike project had evolved from his white-painted bikes to roadside memorials for riders killed by automobiles. And taking a cue from New York City and St. Louis memorials, Chicago has begun to honor those riders.

The ghost bike memorials are bicycles painted white and placed in the location where a rider died as a result of an accident with another vehicle. Often attached to a street lamp or bike rack, the memorial sometimes has a plaque or sign honoring the deceased. The memorials also represent a need to create stronger bicycle safety laws.

Although it may seem like a distraction, the neighborhood

response is positive. Howard Kaplan, who helps run Chicago's Ghost Bike program, said communities help out with the memorials.

"People in the neighborhood keep the bikes clean," Kaplan said. "They get adopted by the neighbors."

Kaplan explained that Chicago's Ghost Bike program is a loose association of bike enthusiasts. He said three to ten people actively handle the memorials and the collective consists of members from Critical Mass, local bike clubs like the Rat Patrol and Scallywags, as well as independent riders.

Despite the different views of the purposes of biking among the various groups, Kaplan said they banded together for this project.

"The idea strikes a chord with people, and they come together to honor bicyclists," Kaplan said.

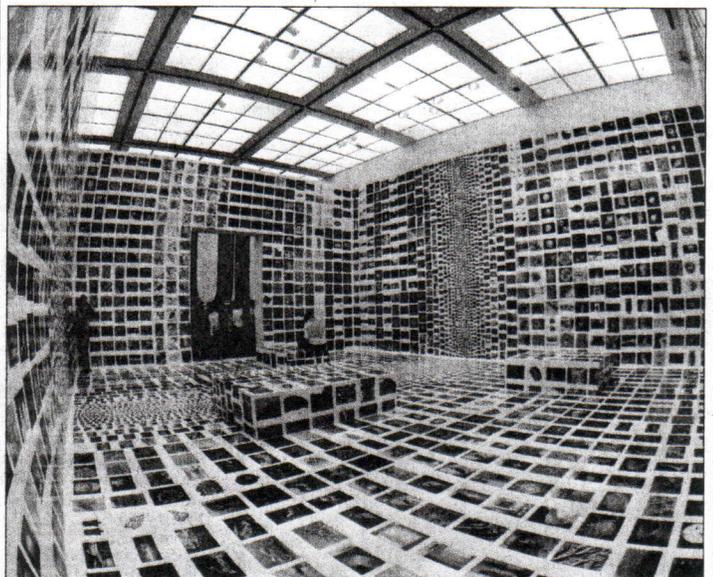
The first Chicago memorial took place in January 2006 to honor 50-year-old Isai Medina, who died from a hit-and-run.

Although initially installed at the accident site at Cortez and Western avenues, the bike has since been moved to a bike rack in front of the Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western Ave., near the original memorial site.

Kaplan said the turnout for the

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A picturesque room



Rachael Strecher/The Chronicle

A view inside the 'Massive Change: The Future of Global Design' exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Ave. The exhibit, which runs through Dec. 31, explores the power and responsibilities of design as it runs through everyday life.

Critical: Riders weary of "massholes"

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Mass has become a major social event. Except the ride is no longer simply known and attended by cycling enthusiasts within bike culture, but non-bikers and the like have begun participating, some of which may have an unclear understanding of the mass's purpose. Along with the increased awareness of the ride and its growing popularity, a new set of problems has cropped up.

"Police officers told me there was too much booze," wrote Travis Duffey on the group's e-mail listserv. Duffey has been participating in Chicago's Mass since about the time it began in the mid-'90s.

Duffey said that on last month's ride along the city's North Side, alcohol was a problem and at Foster Beach, where the ride ended, it appeared that people had stolen promotional signs for a running race that was taking place the following morning.

"I see it as a function of a large group. You get some drunken ones, you get some crazy ones and you get some that you probably want the cops to arrest," Duffey said.

The number of participants has definitely been rising according to Duffey, and as the number of riders participating each month has risen to more than a thousand, Critical Mass has become a different beast with new difficulties.

The ride has had its share of problems in the United States since its beginnings in San Francisco.

In New York, where Critical Mass has attained a notorious reputation with the police for riders' aggressive behavior, hundreds of cyclists have been arrested during the past two years. This past summer in Seattle a number of riders were arrested for interfering with undercover police officers, who allegedly failed to identify themselves while following the Mass.

"We're confounding the expectations of the ruling class by goofing around in the middle of the street..."

—Andy Thornley, program director for the San Francisco Bike Coalition

Thornley said that when he goes on the rides he likes to drift around, mingling from one rider to another. He said that because of the relationship they have with the

police, they pretty much mark it on their calendar.

The ride is now a staple characteristic of the city with movies and television shows filmed there often placing it in the background as sort of a texture.

"By now everyone in San Francisco pretty much knows that if it's the end of the month and it's Friday, there's going to be this appearance of bicycles," Thornley said. "It's become a legitimate excuse to ask your boss to get off



Michael Jarecki/The Chronicle

Riders participating in the Aug. 25 Chicago Critical Mass gather at Daley Plaza, 50 W. Washington St., just before leaving for the ride.

early."

The acceptance of the ride even caused one of the city's daily newspapers, The San Francisco Examiner, to print traffic advisories informing drivers of the ride, Thornley said.

In a city such as Chicago, that has made so many strides to accommodate bicycles, motorists may be the only ones unhappy with the ride.

While in last month's Critical Mass waiting for the throngs of cyclists to pass, Jessica Hammond said there has to be another way for bikers to "show off their presence." Hammond, who was idling in her car on Washington Street just west of Daley Plaza as the Mass was beginning, said she has no problem sharing the road with cyclists, but the cyclists have to share the road as well, something that doesn't always happen during the ride.

Aside from complaints and

honking horns from motorists, the rides have usually gone smoothly, with few arrests.

However, according to an email sent by Chicago police officer Mike Kuzniar to the Chicago Critical Mass webmaster, several complaints were filed by citizens through the office of Alderman Tom Tunney of the 44th Ward regarding last month's ride through the area.

"Numerous citizens were trapped in the intersection of Lincoln and Addison for quite some time while your ride proceeded in an unruly manner," Kuzniar wrote in the email that was forwarded to the group's listserv.

Sergeant Bill Looney of the 19th district community policing office, 2452 W. Belmont Ave. said the email was sent simply to let riders know that complaints were received.

The alderman's office was unable to comment on the email at press time.

Garth Katner, a frequent Mass rider since 2000, said that although new riders are coming out with possibly different intentions, they are a clear minority.

He said during the Chicago Critical Mass happy hour, where riders usually discuss the upcoming Mass, there has been rising concern about the purposes of many of the new participants.

Cathy Rigod, a Columbia broadcast journalism major who took part in the August ride for the first time, doesn't represent the type of "masshole" that Katner and many other regular riders are noticing, but rather the kind that are discovering Critical Mass from outside the bike culture to be a social launching pad for friends.

Rigod, who recently moved to Chicago from San Francisco, said although she never participated in San Francisco's ride, Chicago's was much different than her perception of the ride in her hometown. She had seen a documentary about Critical Mass in New York called "We Are Traffic" and was skeptical about getting involved in the ride. When she did however, Rigod suddenly understood why so many people were doing it.

"At one point I had to step out of the Mass to meet someone, and to see the amount of people going by me was just amazing," Rigod said. "I think that when I was doing it I was more focused on what was in front of me, but when I got a chance to take a step back, it was kind of awe-inspiring to me and it wasn't so much a social thing so much as it was the unity."

Before moving to Chicago a few months ago, Rigod had not ridden a bike very much, but upon getting here someone gave her one. Still, Rigod was hesitant about getting involved with the bike scene—that's where Critical Mass came

in.

"I guess I had the impression that bike culture can be a little closed off and a little hard to break into," Rigod said. "I showed up by myself and there was another girl standing there by herself and she's just like, 'My friends bailed out.' I made a couple of friends, and me being here only a couple of months, I was really happy about that."

Social stories like Rigod, along with the story and history of Critical Mass inspired Zack Furness to write his graduate thesis on biking and bike counterculture for the University of Pittsburgh in 2001. Now he is expanding his idea into a book to be published by Temple University Press.

Tentatively named *One Less Car: Bike Culture and the Politics of Cycling*, the book dedicates a chapter solely to Critical Mass and the effect it has on society as well as its social and political impacts.

"By Critical Mass being really political in certain places, I think it really turns off a lot of folks from coming out to rides," Furness said. "It's something that is enjoyable and something that is fun. It creates a lot less tension on the street and I think people get something out of that."

Furness said the politics and networking of the ride reside more in the fact that many of the riders have lives outside the two hours they are participating. Furness said many cyclists are becoming more active, whether it is through traditional forms of bike advocacy or by trying more do-it-yourself strategies.

Either way, Critical Mass has helped initiate a dialogue about transportation issues.

Despite the growing social popularity, many on the Critical Mass e-mail listserv continue to cite concerns over the direction the ride is headed. While many like Duffey believe the ride to be a low-impact protest, the increased social awareness of the ride has helped people like Rigod connect and break into Chicago's bike scene a little easier.

Furness said the atmosphere of the ride tends to vary from city to city with some being more social than others, but the issue of redistributing space as the underlying theme of Critical Mass will always remain present.

"It's this idea of mutual self-responsibility and people being able to negotiate and take care of things on their own terms rather than having the police do it," Furness said noting that journalist Dan Rather once said: "Americans will put up with anything provided it doesn't block traffic."

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Ghostly: Neighborhoods adopt, care for bike memorials

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Medina memorial was bigger than anticipated.

"It was done during a Critical Mass ride, but I don't think anybody expected 400 people to come to a Critical Mass ride in January," Kaplan said.

Kaplan noted that several riders had problems with the police and future ghost bike memorials will entail smaller groups.

Currently, three other memorials exist in the Chicagoland area. Division Street under Interstate 90/94, North Avenue and Rockwell Street and the border along suburban Wilmette and Evanston display ghost bikes.

Although the bike memorials are still present, their legality is questionable. Chicago Streets and Sanitation spokesman Matt Smith said an unauthorized memorial could pose danger to people.

"I don't think it's a good idea to use a public place to make a point," Smith said. "People should be able to express themselves but not at the public's safety."

Smith acknowledged that he has not heard of the ghost bike program and to date, Streets and Sanitation has not removed any of the memorials.

Chicago is not the only city honoring cyclists killed by motor vehicles. New York City, which served as an inspiration for the Chicago memorials, started a ghost bike program in June 2005. Visual Resistance, a Brooklyn-



Mauricio Rubio/The Chronicle

A ghost bike memorializing Isai Medina in front of the Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western Ave.

based art collective of eight or nine people, has created 22 or 23 ghost bikes in New York City. Ryan Nuckel, a Visual Resistance artist, said most areas accepted the ghost bike memorials.

"People in the neighborhoods take care of them," Nuckel said. "They bring flowers to them."

Although business owners removed two ghost bikes, Nuckel said others have contacted Visual Resistance about damaged memorials. And he said the New York police have not hassled the group. "We've been pleasantly surprised by it," Nuckel said. "Our memorials are pretty low-key and somber."

According to the most recent study conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 622 bicyclists were killed in motor vehicle accidents in 2003. The NHTSA, an agency under the U.S. Department of Transportation, listed 42,632 total traffic fatalities; one percent of these deaths

were bike riders.

The study listed 17 bicyclist deaths in Illinois in 2003 and 37 in New York. California led the pack with 106 deaths.

Slota said he had mixed emotions when he found out about the other ghost bike projects last December.

"It just made me question: 'How do I fit into this anymore?'" Slota said. "This is a project that I've really related to for four years and kinda considered my own."

However, since that time, Slota said he contacted other ghost bike memorial participants about his project and he's gotten positive feedback about his work. He also said that as a bicyclist, he shares the same sentiment with others about memorializing riders killed by autos.

"I think what it comes down to is we all want to see the world a safer place to ride a bike," Slota said.

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