

Riding in the Winter Wonderland by Kevin Hyde 6 December 2009 for BWAM

What does it take to ride year-round? Dedication? Persistence? Running a half bubble off plumb? I'm confident it's some combination of the three - plus preparation and staying especially alert. And slowing down ...

I've been riding (nearly) year-round for the past ten years, early on from necessity, now from passion. Winter riding mostly brings fun and reinforces the stuff that stirs regular riders to keep pedaling – the deep satisfaction of self-sufficiency and the full body glow when we reach our destination with clearer mind and heightened senses.

Over the years hard-knocks interrupted several times with critical lessons. The few days of deep cold sent me straight to the outdoor shop to find bulky gloves. Fortunately, the occasional falls, though humbling, brought only minor injury. Through patience and Yoga a torqued knee finally heals. Working with the City to keep bike lanes clear and safe continues to teach patience and command understanding for our shared need to adjust to the snowy season.

Are you thinking about taking up the winter ride? Are you just curious about the crazy minds of someone who takes to winter's street? Here are some thoughts about clothing, equipment, riding style, and learning how to play well with others.

The clothing for winter riding follows pretty much as with any other winter sport. With the right stuff staying warm is pretty easy – at any air temp! Dress in layers. Expect to start your ride with a little chill. You know that within the first mile body heat builds and with it, sweat! You'll be wondering why you just had to add that extra layer. Have a range of clothing to adjust for the weather of the day. That extra layer? If in doubt, I throw the heavier gloves or extra fleece in my back pack.

Keep fingers warm, skin covered, and eyes protected. These are safety issues. Fingers go numb and braking becomes impaired. Eyes water as the temps falls. Cold shock to facial skin may distract you as the car pulls out in front of you. My gloves vary from thin shells to sausage fingers. The neoprene face mask goes on starting around 25 degrees. Much below 20 and I switch from sunglasses to goggles. All done up on colder days the look comes off as "The Invisible Man!"

I have three helmets; well actually two riding helmets and my ski helmet. As autumn temps move in I wear a thin skull cap more as a wind break than for pure insulation. About the time when the neoprene mask comes out I switch from the tighter fitting riding helmet to a larger helmet over knit cap. The ski helmet comes out whatever the temp when road conditions get dicey. Usually with the ski helmet comes the ski goggles.

My personal best is -11 degrees. That's right, minus. (Recall that "half bubble" thing?) Is it a cold ride? Not really. Repeat after me, "Cover skin." By this point my sausage finger gloves are out. Below zero the cold tends to penetrate my boots. Best remedy there is to take them off at the office and sit in my sock feet until they warm - feet and boots. Tip: Wear clean socks and keep your boots fresh. This tends to maintain

good relations with colleagues - though they, too, know about the half-bubble thing and tend to be quite tolerant, or at least enjoy laughing with - or is it at - me.

As for the bikes, the road bike and cross bike stay hanging from the rafters. Out comes the old faithful Raleigh. The front shock fork of this hard tail seized several seasons back. Funny the corrosive power of winter crud accumulating under the rubber boot! The tires are wide, with beefy knobs, and a little underinflated for a wider footprint and better lateral control. How many pounds under? Couldn't tell you. Experiment.

What of studded snows? They are available, if a bit pricy. I experimented last winter with one on the rear. The snow never lasted long enough to justify keeping it on. I think handling was somewhat better but have concluded studs probably just inspire false confidence. The jury is still out on this one.

And you always use bright lights on your bike at dusk and night? Right? RIGHT! Turn them on when it's overcast or snowing. 'Nuf said.

Did I mention, expect to slow down? Change travel habits. Expect to take much longer to "get there". Pedal more deliberately. Use lower gears. Anticipate stops WAY ahead of time - much like winter driving in one of the oil burners. You know to watch for BLACK ICE. And if that thin veil of fresh snow appears especially flat, assume there is ice underneath. (Remember that knee injury ...?)

Playing well with others includes fossil fuel drivers and the good folks of the City who work to keep roadways clear for everyone. Expect drivers to be especially nervous to see you riding. I've been told directly that I should not be on the roads at all in the winter. Of course, this is my choice, not theirs. As a matter of good sense I respect their fears.

Keep the number to Missoula Streets Division in your phone: 552-6360. I'm convinced the street crews do the best they can with what they have to work to keep snow at bay. Snow plow drivers are instructed to keep bike lanes clear along all priority traffic routes - and the officially designated bike lanes are all on priority routes.

Give Streets Division a call when you encounter sketchy bike lanes. What constitutes "sketchy"? My personal call is when there are obstacles I must go around which force me into the motorized lanes and when less than half the lane is available for my use. Some folks take issue with my "half lane" rule. Sure, I'd like to see the full width kept open. The fact is there is only so much roadside space to put snow.

Watch for folks and private plow drivers who push snow into bike lanes from sidewalks and parking lots. This is a big no-no - against the law actually - but very difficult to enforce. If you see anyone putting snow into a bike lane call Streets Division immediately. Left unattended these piles turn to hard pack and remain hazardous long after all the other snow melts away.

Sometimes the solution is yours. If you can access it safely, wander back to a bike lane blocked by snow and get some exercise with a shovel. If you can do it with a smile on your face, I encourage you to knock on the door of the homeowner who just cleared their sidewalk into the bike lane. Ask them to change their habits.

Do I really ride year-round? No. When don't I ride? During a snow storm – drivers can't see me and I can't see the road. After heavy snows – plow crews struggle just to keep main arteries open. I do not ride after an ice storm. Duh!

Be adaptable. Some mornings it makes perfect sense to ride the bike into work. Come evening, not so much. I load the bike on the bow of the bus and make a warm ride home. Yes, there are days when good sense dictates! I leave the bike in the garage and hop the bus - or (shhh, time for true confessions), I drive . . . Hey, I said "half-bubble off," not whole!

Keep warm. Be extra vigilant. Keep smiling. Stay safe!