

Police Bicycle Use in Crowd Control Situations

Officer Mike Goetz, Seattle Police Department

The Seattle Police Department started using bicycles in police work in 1987 and has employed them in a variety of ways. In recent years, it has begun to use the bike patrol to handle crowds. As described in the article by Don Hudson, bikes have proven to be very effective in crowd management and crowd control. With the type of training available through the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA), departments can become familiar with the techniques and use the information to develop their own bicycle mobile forces.

Given the real possibility that a bicycle rapid response team may have to shift from crowd management to crowd control, there are several points that must be considered before undertaking the training.

1. Will the administration permit the use of the bikes in a crowd? Consider such factors as how bikes fit into the department's overall policing strategy, P.R. implications, and possible equipment damage.
2. What level of force does the department equate with using the bike as a shield or impact weapon?
3. Does the administration understand that in order to be effective, bikes may have to be used in this manner?
4. Can the department muster enough bikes and personnel to be effective in the particular situation it faces?

Once these questions have been answered, a team can be developed and training can commence. The Seattle Police Department has deployed its bike team in a number of situations. The tactics and techniques described below are some of the crowd control methods they have employed.

Bicycle use in a crowd control situation can generally be broken down into two types, static and moving. The most effective use of bikes requires a careful blending of both techniques.

Static Maneuvers

Static refers to using the bike in one small geographic area. The two most common assignments are "post" and "barrier." In "post," the bike unit is assigned to maintain a high visibility presence in a particular location, such as one corner or an entire city block. In the "barrier (fence)" position, the bikes are used to block, or "fence", off a street, entryway, or other large area.

The Post technique is the simplest, but is often the most difficult to accomplish. The squad is assigned to a high visibility patrol of a small area. The squad is there simply to maintain order. The hard part is that the officers must maintain a professional demeanor and project an aura of control; they must not smoke, eat, drink, or joke around with each other or members of the crowd. The officers are frequently deployed in pairs and ride around the area enforcing a "no tolerance" patrol. They write tickets and make arrests for any violations they observe. Pairs are used instead of large groups in order to make the police presence appear greater than it is. The success of this is measured by the news stories that report seeing 100 bike cops when, in reality, only 30 were on the street.

The Barrier technique involves lining the bikes, front wheel to rear wheel, across the area to be blocked or protected. The squad leader and assistant squad leaders (ASL) are positioned behind the line. The ASLs assist with arrest, relay line orders, and watch the crowd for thrown objects. They may be armed with long-range, less-lethal weapons (bean bag guns, shotguns with LTL loads, pepper ball guns) as well as large OC canisters and/or personal-sized fire extinguishers. When forming a barrier in front of a building, it is important that a safety zone is retained behind the line so that a crowd surge does not force the line into a dangerous position.

The barrier can easily become a moving tactic called "mobile fencing" if the team leader determines that the crowd needs to be moved. Upon command, the bike team readies itself to move forward by holding the bikes by the stem and seat post. At the order, the squad members lift their bikes to chest level and, pressing them toward the crowd, take one step forward while ordering the crowd to "Move Back!" The squad then resumes its original stance. The "move" command is repeated as necessary. It is essential that the line is held intact, as the crowd will quickly exploit any gaps.

Moving Maneuvers

Moving maneuvers include most standard crowd control movements, such as columns, lines, diagonals, wedges, and crossbow. Each of these techniques can be used by bike units under the right circumstances.

Columns

Most of the time, the members of the bike unit ride in a single or double column. It is easy to move into the other positions from either type of column. There are several ways to move from a single column to a line formation; the option selected is

dependent upon where the unit is riding and where it is to be set up. All of them are simple in theory, but take practice to make them look and feel smooth and professional.

The simplest method is to set a line right or left. Starting from the right or left, the leader makes a sharp turn and rides to the point at which the end of the line is to be established. The rest of the unit fills in the line behind the leader. For instance, if the squad is moving down the center of the street and a line needs to be formed, the first rider stops at the point at which the line is desired. The remaining riders move left or right alternately until a line is formed.

Movements from a double column are similar to those from a single column. To move from a double column to a line, left or right, the column slows or stops and the inside column leader makes a sharp turn and rides to the set point with the other riders following. The outside column follows the first column to form the complete line.

To move from a center position to a line the lead riders stop at the set position and the right and left columns fan out to their respective sides and pull up evenly with the lead.

Diagonals and Wedges

The line can easily be changed to a diagonal or wedge formation, either before or after it is formed. If the diagonal is called for, the lead officer will ride out from the column at a 45-degree rather than a 90-degree angle. The wedge is formed by the two sides of the line dropping back from the center to 45-degree angles as the center moves slowly forward.

The Crossbow

The Crossbow movement is used to enter the crowd in order for such purposes as to make an arrest or render aid to an injured person or besieged officer. This movement requires enough personnel to supply a line and an entry team. It works well with foot officers serving as the line and bike officers performing the entry function.

The bike squad forms a double column behind the line, far enough behind so they can get a little speed up to perform the maneuver. On command, the line makes a gap in the center and the bikes ride through this gap. The two lead riders ride straight to the goal while the remainder of the squad splits left and right, encircling them to protect them from the crowd. Once they are in position, the cover officers dismount and use their bikes as barriers. If the crowd becomes a threat, an application of OC spray may be used. The lead riders make the arrest or tend to the injured person, and the squad retreats back through the line to safety. This maneuver must be conducted with enough speed and force to make a hole in the crowd, and completed quickly enough that the crowd does not have time to react.

Communication and practice are the keys to the success of all maneuvers. Every formation and maneuver must be ordered by the team leader. During an event that requires the use of more than one bike squad, it is important to ensure that each squad follows the correct leader. The simplest way to accomplish this is to assign a number (1, 2, 3...) to each bike squad. The team leader puts that number of the back of his or her helmet or in another easily visible location. The number must be placed so that it is easily seen by the officers, but not by the crowd, which may take action against the leader. Numbering the squads also makes it easier for the leader to signal the members to form up with simple hand motions rather than shouting over the crowd noise. The team leader also designates a rally point at which the squad will meet if it is separated.

Limited Contact Uses

Although the police bike squad works extremely well with other units on the front lines, it also works well on the periphery an incident. The speed and mobility of the squad allow it to quickly outflank a crowd if it moves in an undesirable direction. A squad or two of bicycles positioned several blocks away from the action can be moved in a fraction of the time required to move a foot squad or even a vehicle squad, as bikes are not hampered by stairs, traffic, or a lack of roads. This mobility makes the bike squad the ideal back-up unit for the interior officers. In addition, the strong flanking presence provided by the bikes can discourage people on the outskirts from joining the main group. The bike squads also function as crime suppression units left on the periphery to deal with those who would take advantage of the diverted attention of the other officers.

Equipment

This type of bike squad should always be equipped with everything they may need for effective crowd management, as its effectiveness is greatly reduced by reliance upon additional vehicles. The squad should be equipped with the following items: gas masks, large OC spray devices, flexcuffs, first aid kits, fire extinguishers, and a long, lockable cable. If it appears as if the squad will be on the street for an extended period of time, it may be appropriate to equip a support vehicle with complete wheel and tire sets, both front and rear; spare chains, tubes, a pump, water, and snacks. Long sleeves and long pants are recommended for added protection, even in hot weather, and use of arm and leg padding may be appropriate.

Other departments use lightweight motorcycle helmets to provide extra protection yet allow easy use of a gas mask, personal hydration devices worn on the back, and earbuds for the radios to ensure good communications. The list could be endless; but regardless of the equipment carried, it is essential that the bike squad practice with it prior to implementation.

Training

Many people outside of police bike circles still think, "oh, I know how to ride a bike, I can do this." Use of bike squads for crowd management and crowd control prove what the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA) has argued for years: bike operations require specialized training in order to ensure their effectiveness and success. Please refer to the article by Don Hudson elsewhere in this issue for more information. Officer Hudson has developed a 40-hour course, Bicycle Rapid Response Team training, which will debut as a pre-conference training session on May 4-8, 2002, in conjunction with the 12th Annual IPMBA Conference in Odgen, Utah.

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LAPD's Bicycle Rapid Response Team

Don Hudson, Los Angeles Police Department

Tactical Team. That is probably the last image that comes to mind when considering police on bikes. When most people think of bicycle mounted police officers, they think Kiddie Cop, Community Officer, D.A.R.E. Officer, and other outreach positions. When the bike was integrated into police work, it was for all of the above reasons. The bike allows the police officer to get closer to the community, something all police departments need. The bike has helped police officers get closer to their communities, which has helped make them more effective in crime prevention.

As described elsewhere in this issue in the article by Kathleen Vonk, bikes can be used for more than just community policing. They are great for drug enforcement, traffic enforcement, pedestrian violations, and surveillance. But what about crowd management and crowd control? Several agencies around the country have recently begun employing bikes for this purpose. Almost every police department has responded to a large crowd gathering – a football game, a demonstration, a national sports championship party, or a large group of gang members disrupting a peaceful picnic in a park. The goal in any pre-planned event involving a large gathering of people is to manage the crowd, maintaining order and preventing small problems from growing into large ones. At times, however, the crowd “forces its hand,” and the police department is forced to take a crowd control stance. Most departments across the nation have teams – mobile field force, horse-mounted, metro officers, etc. – trained to handle crowd management and crowd control.

Such events can be a challenge because it is often difficult to get a tactical squad to the source of the would-be problem before it becomes a big problem. Movement is difficult because of the number of people, and oftentimes the streets are blocked. By the time a team is moved to the problem on foot, sometimes from many blocks away, the members are exhausted from carrying the huge amounts of necessary equipment.

Past events, such as the demonstrations in Seattle and Philadelphia and the aftermath of several professional sporting events, have indicated that an agency could have the best-trained tactical squads in the world at its fingertips, but if they could not get to the source of the problem quickly enough, they were useless.

In 2000, Los Angeles was host to a major, politically charged event. No-one wanted to see things get out of control. With the concepts of Mobile Field Force Operations in mind, the idea of a bicycle mobile field force squad was born. After weeks of sitting at a drawing board working on bicycle movements and tactics, contacting vendors for equipment, and getting approval from the department, the new bike squad, known as the Bicycle Rapid Response Team (BRRT) was ready for training.

The first thing that the team needed was a mission. It was decided that the team would assist mobile field force units with crowd management and crowd movement through blocking maneuvers and escort. In addition, it would be trained in and carry the equipment to perform crowd control operations if needed.

All members of BRRT were seasoned bike officers who had been through countless hours of mobile field force type training; many of the team members were also less lethal munitions qualified.

Training included riding in tight echelons, both with and without gas masks and assorted tools; and using bike mounted officers as mobile crowd diversion teams. Team members learned to secure the bikes by rapidly weaving them together using a strong length of steel cable, carried by one of the officers on each team, and posting a protection team in case it should become necessary to leave the bikes behind and confront the crowd in a skirmish line on foot.

The team was first deployed during the 2000 Democratic National Convention. As testament to the recognition of the rapid deployment capability and maneuverability of bikes in crowded areas, the units were positioned where demonstrations were most likely to take place. The team consisted of two eighteen-officer squads working together as a platoon. Each squad was comprised of the following:

- 10 officers on skirmish line
- 2 officers less lethal (bean bag shotgun)
- 2 officers less lethal (37mm)
- 1 supervisor
- 1 communication
- 2 equipment officers (lock-down)

The officers were outfitted with long-sleeved shirts, long pants, motorcycle helmets with riot face shields, and back-mounted personal hydration systems. They also carried other special equipment on their persons, such as portable fire extinguishers and fire retardant solutions.

The police bicycles required few modifications. Heavy-duty downhill type rims replaced the existing daily patrol rims; the tires used were Kevlar belted with a liner and fitted with downhill tubes, to prevent flats caused by tacks or finishing nails.

The BRRT was deployed throughout the Democratic National Convention to head off protesters before they could disrupt traffic and business and engage in violent acts. The team was successful even beyond the expectations of the organizers. Once the supervisors became aware of the wide range of tasks the bike officers could handle quickly and efficiently, they found it unnecessary to call into action many of the tactical teams stationed inside and outside the convention.

Following the convention, the BRRT received the following commendation from the command staff:

The Bicycle Rapid Response Team (BRRT) training, developed by Bicycle Coordination Unit (BCU) personnel, has paid off. More than 70 bicycle officers from throughout the LAPD underwent rigorous mobile field force-type training specifically designed for the bicycle patrol officer. The bicycle officers called their skills into action numerous times during the week of the Democratic National Convention (DNC), proving themselves to be a valuable asset and a key force. With the ability to move quickly from assignment to assignment, the BRRT provided the person-power by pedal-power to protect businesses, community members, and protesters during the demonstrations. The command staff, field officers, and rest of the Department are extremely proud of the professional service these bicycle officers provided during this highly publicized world event.

Since its debut at the Democratic National Convention in 2000, the Bicycle Rapid Response Team has been called into action for many situations requiring crowd management in downtown Los Angeles and continues to be met with success.

Please note that successful crowd management and control is best achieved through a joint operation of many department entities, including metropolitan divisions, mobile field force teams, motorcycle strike teams and mounted units.

Although it may seem that this type of bike deployment is suitable only for large departments in cities that are likely to face potentially troublesome demonstrations, the concept is actually adaptable to a wide range of situations. The principles of bicycle rapid response are applicable to most crowd management situations, from demonstrations and parades to high school football games and college parties, to politically-charged speaking events. The escort, blocking, diversionary, and dispersal techniques utilized by the BRRT may be scaled to fit departments and crowds of all sizes.

The training will be introduced at the national level during the 12th Annual Conference of the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA), May 4-8, 2002. It will be instructed by original and current members of the Los Angeles Police Department Central Division Bicycle Rapid Response Team.

Officer Don Hudson is a 20-year veteran of the LAPD and has been on bike patrol since 1993. He is the founder and lead instructor for the LAPD Bicycle Rapid Response Team. He currently serves as the Vice President of the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA.) Comments and questions may be directed to him at ridemtbs@aol.com.

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