

Safety is as Safety Does

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Though you may have read in these very pages last month about the dangers of canines while on the run, the truth of the matter is that people, not dogs, are our main threat when out training. As attested to elsewhere within this month's PaceLetter, bikes and cars do not mix. But even if you don't own a bike, Mobile's streets are far from safe. Several Mobile runners have been badly injured by automobiles in recent months, showing that we runners and walkers are in equal peril every time we take to the streets.

It's been my experience that in other countries, athletes on the roads garner appreciation and respect from motorists, while in other regions of the US, athletes elicit apathy--few motorists slow down or give a wide berth, but they do seem to go about their business without aiming for you. Only in the South, it seems, do drivers actively veer towards athletes on the roads. Although, to be fair, Northerners seem to be more prone to throwing projectiles at runners and walkers: I've had numerous beer bottles thrown at me while racewalking in Wisconsin and I once had several "D" batteries whiz by my head during a distance workout in New York's Central Park. But given the choice, I'd rather dodge a Duracel than a Dodge any day.

I've escaped being run over on numerous occasions while living in the South, including one time in LaGrange, GA when the driver actually turned around, drove back up the road, then turned around to try again. After I flipped her off (again) she got out of her van to yell at me for walking on the quiet country road where "only cars are supposed to be." When I stopped to argue with her she smacked me in the face. Better her hand than her bumper I guess, but I actually was hit once (by a car) while training in Ft. Lauderdale. Luckily, the tiny old woman who plowed into me had slowed down considerably to take an illegal right-on-red (without stopping) so I was only slightly bruised when I wound up on the hood of her diesel behemoth. Valiantly navigating her dandelion-yellow Mercedes through town by looking out from under her steering wheel, she never did stop--even after I tore the windshield wiper off the car.

Finally, like so many others, I too have been hit by a car while biking here in Mobile--luckily only the side-view mirror hit me, but the scary part was that the driver clearly saw me, veered towards me, then didn't stop when it was obvious that he had hit me. Maybe it's a Southern NASCAR Bubba thing, but it sure seems like people around here believe their cars are supposed to run into things--be it other cars, bicycles or pedestrians. Whatever the reason, when out on the roads you can't trust anyone. Heed the bicycle safety tips found on page 10, and when running and walking keep the following in mind:

- 1.) Face traffic.** Runners and walkers have an advantage over bikers in that we can see cars coming. But facing traffic won't do you a bit of good if you're not paying attention. Try to make eye contact if possible so you can better judge what the driver is up to.
- 2.) Never assume.** Drivers are not necessarily going to act logically (or legally) in a given situation. If you're going to assume anything, assume the worst. Don't cross in front of stopped cars whether the driver sees you or not, be very careful crossing side-streets, and of course, look both ways before crossing--if a car slows down as it approaches you, don't assume it's going to stop.
- 3.) Wear light-colored or reflective clothing.** Assuming that most drivers aren't gunning for you, visible clothing will allow drivers to see you sooner. Of course bright clothing will also make you a more visible target if a driver actually is out to get you.

4.) Don't play chicken. Pedestrians have the right-of-way. This phrase tops the list of famous last words. Cars should yield to runners and walkers. Most will not. Don't let your sense of justice get you killed.

5.) Avoid confrontation. To paraphrase Forest Gump, drivers are like a box of chocolates--you never know what you're gonna get. The old woman who smacked me in Georgia could have just as likely been a big genetic mutant with a tire iron and a bad attitude. It's not necessarily a good idea to flip the bird to someone in control of 4,000 lbs. of fast moving iron and steel.

Remember: You can't win your age-group from a hospital bed. Be safe.

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