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Bike safety: It's pedal to the mettle

by **Kimberly Gadette**, guest opinion

Thursday March 05, 2009, 12:00 PM

Bicycling outfits are so funny you could die laughing.

My husband wears Greek pastry on his face. Seriously. Once the rainy, lion-like March roars its Oregon head off, my bicycle-commuting mate dons this black-hooded thing called a "balaclava," pulling it over his head for warmth. You say balaclava, I say baklava. Hence: Husband wears Greek pastry on his face.



Kimberly Gadette

South of the neck, he's swathed in neon yellow and black, his outer waterproof layer covering a leotard-esque, I'm-a-biker-not-a-ballet-dancer ensemble. In one fell swoop, he mutates from Baryshnikov into a swollen bumblebee.

Like a child fully bundled before going out to play in the snow, the idea that Husband's swaddled body can still move is nothing short of miraculous. And the fact that he bikes 12 miles to work each way, each day, violent monsoons excepted? He's Lance in Yellow Pants.

Except that Lance Armstrong sports a bike helmet and that's that. Not my own Worker Bee. He tops his ensemble with a yellow, waterproof shower cap. Note: If a lemon soufflé glides past your passenger window, don't be alarmed.

Jokes aside, by swapping four tires for two, he's not just remedying the obvious (i.e., our budget, energy consumption, vehicle wear). He's deflating his own personal tire as well. It's another happy case of turning lemons into lemonade -- though depending on the particular light of day, the color might be closer to a deep mustard.

Hot dog.

Then there's the illumination factor or, to quote Noel Coward, "Ninety-five percent of romance is good lighting." What with Husband's three halogens in front, two red lights in back, plus another blinking furiously on the shower cap, by Mr. Coward's definition, I'd have to be in love.

Far from being an exhibitionist, he does all this for protection -- against the rain, the cold, but primarily against the careless motorist. You'd think it would work.

Yet here in Portland, considered one of the best biking towns in America, my Neon Bumbler slowly buzzes home from work at least twice a month with tales of close calls with motorists. Drivers who cut him off while making right turns, those who open car doors into traffic, or pull out without warning, or come up right behind him, loudly honking (which could cause a less-experienced cyclist to get thrown).

On the one wheel, we hold summits (National Bike Summit, March 10-12), conventions (Bicycle Transportation Alliance's Alice Awards this Saturday), pass legislation (Rep. Earl Blumenauer's Bicycle Commuter Act, effective Jan. 1, 2009), and continuously fight to wrest more dollars for improving the cycling environment. On the other wheel, a serious injury occurred Monday in Northwest Portland, a car hitting and dragging a cyclist who'd been riding in the bike lane. Maybe the accident could have been averted if the cyclist had been more noticeable, maybe if she'd worn a wackier outfit. Then again, maybe not.

With the economy pointing to "E" on the national gas tank, it's inspiring to see so many citizens relying on the most natural energy they've got. Taking their personal bike pedal to the mettle, as it were.

My husband wears Greek pastry on his face. And a shower cap, a bumblebee clown pantsuit, and enough flashing lights to rival the fireworks blazing over PGE Park on the Fourth of July. Yet he's still far from protected.

I look forward to an idyllic future in Bike City, U.S.A., when the only armor my husband requires will be from his wife's barbs.

Now where's the fun in that?

Kimberly Gadette is a freelance writer based in Hillsboro.