

Rough riders

By Ian Tizzard

THESE are strange riders downtown, delivering packages year-round on machines that never suffer from the elements.

Some members of this small band congregate outside a bike shop on Albert Street. On a mid-winter's day, one of them is covered head-to-toe with windproof synthetics, a hiked-up neck warmer, sunglasses and a helmet. Patches of skin at the corner of each eye are all that's visible of him.

"I can imagine we look pretty intimidating," says Matt Magura, pulling down his mask to offer a reason why he hasn't had a serious run-in with a car after a year as a full-time cycle messenger.

"I've been cut off a lot, but I don't whip out the u-lock and start yelling," he says, smiling.

"And I might just be waiting for what's coming to me."

After three years as a full-time messenger, Sara Martin laughs with Magura over his "u-lock justice" fantasy, but not over stories of close calls.

Martin keeps her lock in her bag, but she says the ride can be rough. Last week, a driver gave Martin too little room for comfort at a stop.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," she told him through the window. When traffic started, he lurched and there was another close call.

"That's a serious threat," she says. Riders and drivers exchange epithets often enough, but she knows the odds in a conflict between a car and a bicycle.

"Obviously, I have to be the one more on the lookout," says Martin, who promises to keep up with traffic or get out of the way.

Most likely she'll keep up, as she's one of the best cycle messengers in the world.

It's true. Last summer at the Cycle

Messenger World Championships in Seattle, Martin placed second overall, above 100 messengers from around the world.

The impressive showing hasn't brought her fame, but news like that is easy to miss from a cubicle in a building with sealed windows.

Magura has no animosity for the workers in the offices he delivers to, no judgment.

Just an observation: "I think a lot of them hate their jobs. You can see the ones that are just eking through every day," he says with the understated tone of one who loves his job dearly.

But anyone who will ride a bike in Winnipeg to make money — typically from \$300 to \$1,000 every two weeks — has to be compelled.

The community among the city's 15 to 30 regular messengers is one thing that draws Ellen Smirl to the job. She says they travel in packs outside work, and like any clique, they share ideals.

"It is a lifestyle," adds Martin. One that includes Critical Mass rides in summer and a healthy aversion to containment. They can't think of a messenger in their group who owns a car and they balk at the "lineups of cars all with one driver and five seats," as Smirl describes rush hour.

They'll also tell you that their caution on the road is militant, and that even on winter pavements, they are capable riders.

"Just take it easy through the corners and hope that cars do the same" is Magura's advice on getting through winter. He's worked on days where the temperature is -30, chilled to -60 by a relentless wind, but the cold is incentive to keep moving.

On a rare delivery outside the downtown area, a messenger can get to the University of Manitoba from Portage and Main in about 20 minutes, or to Grassie and Plessis in about 25. Most often they keep that pace in an area bordered by the rivers to the south and east, by Memorial and Balmoral to the west, and around Notre Dame to the north. A good day, winter or summer, will see some couriers making up to a hundred stops.

Between the stops, on machines that never stall or fail from the cold, these couriers continue to ease through red lights and weave paths through ranks of cars, all in a day's work. They admit to taking liberties with the rules of the road, but they promise not to be a threat to anyone's safety.

Go easy on them.

Downtown
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BIKE COURIER MATT MAGURA