

30,000 MANIACS? OR, THE FIVE BORO BIKE TOUR

"It's too dangerous!" my bike-club friends yelled. "Thirty thousand people who never ride bikes, riding bikes! Seriously dilapidated bikes! All trying to get in front of you at once!"

I knew. The first year I'd ridden the annual Five Boro Bike Tour in New York City, I'd avoided any snarls until the Verrazano Bridge, where a teenage hot-dogger on an El Clunko Special mowed me down at 25 mph. "Y'okay?" he hollered, speeding away before I could answer. I wasn't, really, and the fall had bent my left crank so out of shape the pedals couldn't turn. Fortunately we'd crashed at the top of the bridge, and I coasted to the finish line.

What was I doing two years later, volunteering as a front-line marshal? Overwriting an old disaster with triumphant new memories, or just tempting fate?

I wasn't sure, but I'd biked a lot in heavy traffic over the last two years, and the idea of leading an army of bikes taking over Manhattan for a day overrode fear.

On the big day, I was on the road by 4:58am. The air was spring-fragrant, and the city was mine: nobody else about. I rumbled over a deserted Brooklyn Bridge, Manhattan silhouetted against the dawn. All marshals arrived at Battery Park at 5:30 am, and stood around losing body heat until the start. At 8, we lined up right behind the pace car, and off we went.

The front-line marshals, nicknamed "Masi" after a brand of race bikes, are charged with making sure nobody gets in front of the ride. This means a lot of close riding, elbow-to-elbow, and the willingness to growl politely at riders trying to break through our line. From everyone's horror stories, I expected total chaos. It wasn't. OK, calm—not. There was jockeying for position. There were potholes. There were street kooks and obstacles and flashing police lights. But all the marshals were expert cyclists, so despite the tight quarters

nothing bad happened. To me, anyway. Somewhere behind, someone crashed, but you look, you're gone. The road demands undivided attention.

Riders and spectators yelled warnings and encouragements. We never had to stop for traffic, the police on our side for once, so we were pumped—even more so once we merged onto Manhattan's FDR Drive, then the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, high-volume roadways forbidden to bikes. This was glorious, the dream: a pulsating river of bikes sweeping the cement heights clean of motorized traffic. We flew up hills at breathtaking speeds, as the pace car had lost all inhibition and forsaken its 13 mph limit. Sun baked our faces, air sharp in our nostrils as we blasted up the BQE.

Then we soared up the Verrazano Bridge, no teenagers to crash into. I pumped up the ascent, bombed the downhill, and sped into the finish at Fort Wadsworth on Staten Island. At the festival, we checked out everyone's bikes—many not dilapidated at all, but a crazy rainbow of differently configured human-powered vehicles.

Rides like this aren't everyday by any means, but a vision of a different everyday—one with thousands of bikes streaming down the urban thruways. Something to think back on in my daily dances with SUVs and trucks, and something to push towards in the future.

This was the dream: a pulsating river of bikes sweeping the cement heights clean of motorized traffic.

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Editor's note: The 30th anniversary of the Five Boro Bike Tour takes place Sunday, May 6, 2007. (<http://www.bikewyork.org/rides/fbbt/index.html>)