

7 deadly bins

In 2011, more than 3,000 cyclists were seriously hurt on UK roads. That doesn't mean cycling is unacceptably risky, but we all need to keep honing our survival skills to avoid catastrophe. Here's how...

Words David Bradford Illustrations Daniel Baines

Binning it, stacking it, wiping-out — whatever you call it, falling off a bike is usually painful, always embarrassing and at worst culminates in blue flashing lights and roadside bouquets. It's that latter, catastrophic order of accidents we're addressing here. CA has spoken to road safety experts to identify the commonest forms of life-endangering bike crash: our seven deadly bins. And we're hell-bent on helping you avoid them.

We can't offer a cover-mounted cloak of invincibility. Mass plus velocity plus hazards equals crashes. Accidents happen. Parting company with your steed is an inevitable part of cycling — bound to happen at one time or another. But that's no reason to be fatalistic: disregarding risk is tantamount to letting the Reaper ride in your slipstream. Cycling's inherent dangers can't be eliminated but you can become very adept at dodging them.

Most serious cycling accidents — the blood-spilling, bone-breaking type — involve other vehicles. We invariably come off worse; 80-odd kilos of flesh and bone mounted on skinny aluminium tubes never stands much chance against several-thousand kilos of motor-propelled steel cage. Sometimes it's the driver's fault, but there's little point shouting, bawling and wagging the finger of blame. We can't control the actions of others; the only effective way to stay safe is by riding skilfully and smartly, taking responsibility for our own safety. Fist-waving rage won't prevent you from crashing, but road-craft and foresight might.

The purpose of this feature is not to strike fear into your heart and scare you back into your car. Serious cycling accidents create huge headlines and draw out all kinds of terrifying claims from opinionators keen to sensationalise. Comparing the rate of fatal accidents — deaths per x-miles — can suggest that cycling is far more dangerous than driving (35 versus three fatalities

per billion miles)*. But that's misleading, as a typical car journey covers a far greater distance than a typical bike ride. A like-for-like comparison calculates the risks on the basis of time spent driving/cycling and reveals that cycling is only marginally — if at all — more dangerous than driving, and less risky than being a pedestrian.**

Cycling is considerably less dangerous now than it was 20 or even 10 years ago. The figures for Greater London show that there has been a huge reduction in fatal and serious cyclist casualties since the late-Eighties: 61 per cent fewer fatalities in 2010 compared to 1989; compared to the 1994-98 average, the reduction was 32 per cent. Nationwide, the number of cyclists paying the ultimate price in 2011 was 18 per cent lower than the 2005-09 average. This is despite a massively increased cyclist population on our roads: the number of workers commuting by bike in inner London has risen by 155 per cent since 2001; in Brighton, the figure is up 118 per cent.

The actual risk in numbers: one cyclist kicks the bin, so to speak, in every 18,600,000 miles ridden; for the typical individual cyclist who covers about 900 miles per year, that means meeting the Grim Reaper once every 20,000 years.*** You might have noticed, that's somewhat longer than the average human lifespan! Indeed, cycling has many well-documented health benefits and is far more likely to keep you alive than kill you — fact. Provided you take the risks seriously — not least those illustrated in the following seven deadly bins — and ride accordingly, the odds are in your favour and pedalling will remain pleasure, not imperilment.

*DfT road casualties in Britain 2011.

***Exposure-Based, 'Like-for-Like' Assessment of Road Safety by Travel Mode Using Routine Health Data* by Mindell et al.

****Comparing Chalk and Cheese: Injury Risks for Cyclists* by Dr Jennifer Mindell.

1 HGV catastrophe



The number one killer of cyclists in London: lorries turning at junctions. More than half the fatal crashes in the capital happen like this. So keep yourself safe and seen at junctions. If the lorry driver — perched high in his cab — hasn't spotted you before the lights go green, you could end up in a very tight spot.

What went wrong?

- 1 HGV pulls up at the red traffic light, deliberately leaving a large gap along its nearside — giving it room to turn.
- 2 Cyclist spots the gap and thinks, 'A-ha, plenty of space for me!' and promptly rides directly into this space, stopping alongside the nearside door of the HGV's cab — in the driver's blind spot.
- 3 Lights change. Cyclist and HGV move off, but HGV driver is unaware of cyclist and proceeds to turn left — disaster is inevitable.

How to elude disaster...

- 1 The first and safest option is to hang back and wait behind for the HGV to manoeuvre — keeping yourself clear of danger.
- 2 The second option is to pass down the right-hand side of the HGV — provided you are sure that a) the HGV is not turning right and b) there are no other hazards on the right-hand side.
- 3 If you decide to pass the truck, once you get in front of it, make sure the driver has seen you. Stop at the front of the stop-box, at least 2m ahead of the cab, and if possible make eye contact with the driver.

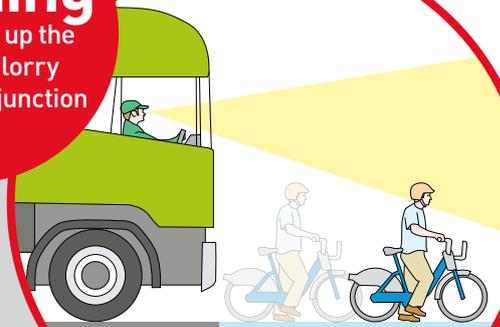


CYCLING SURVIVAL SPECIALIST Sergeant Simon Castle

Sergeant Simon Castle spearheads the Met Police Service's Cycle Task Force. He has nearly 20 years' policing experience and has served as a traffic officer on four wheels and two — motorcycle and now bicycle. Much of his work these days is dedicated to helping cyclists stay safe. He helped select our seven deadliest accidents and provided invaluable advice on how to avoid them.

Warning

Never cycle up the inside of a lorry stopped at a junction



Top tip

If you pull in front of a lorry, get far enough forward to make eye contact. The driver can't see you if you're right in front of the bumper.

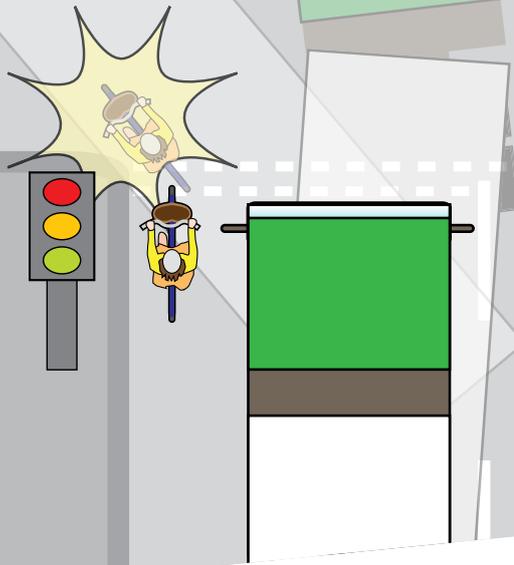
Keep 'em peeled

Just because a section of road seems safe and featureless, if there are vehicles around you, danger lurks close — remain alert and ready to react

Sarge Simon says Met Police cycling specialist sergeant Simon Castle

"The HGV may bear stickers stating 'If you can't see my mirrors, I can't see you'. Which is true, but your being able to see the mirrors doesn't guarantee that the driver has seen you. The only way to be sure is to get well ahead of his cab and make eye contact.

"Consider all the circumstances. Is the lorry indicating? Has the driver seen you? Is there room to safely pass on the right-hand side? If in doubt, hang back."



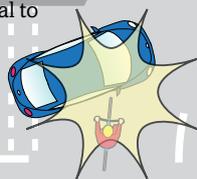
2 Roundabout ruination



Roundabouts are designed to keep the traffic flowing, which is all very well for those protected in steel boxes — but you're out in the open. The second exit is your target, but what's the safest way to get there? It's vital to pick the line of least resistance.

What went wrong?

- 1 You're approaching a roundabout and you want to go straight on — in this case, the second exit. Complying with the Highway Code, you elect to stay in the left-hand lane.
- 2 The driver of the car waiting to emerge on to the roundabout expects you to take the first exit, second-guesses your manoeuvre and pulls out.
- 3 Whack! You wanted exit number two but you got a face-full of car instead. Ouch.



How to elude disaster...

- 1 Yes, the Highway Code prescribes the left-hand lane of roundabouts for cyclists, regardless of the intended exit. However, if your exit is past the 12 o'clock position, it may be safer to take the same approach as other vehicles — the second lane. This will give motorists a better idea of your intended exit.
- 2 If you decide to keep to the left-hand lane, take a defensive position, a good metre out from the curb — this will make it more obvious that you are not yet exiting the roundabout.
- 3 Do a lifesaver check over your left shoulder before exiting the roundabout to make sure no vehicles have snuck up your inside, and if necessary give a hand signal to make it clear you are about to manoeuvre.

Sarge Simon says Met Police cycling specialist sergeant Simon Castle

"Be as predictable as possible to other road-users. Correct, defensive positioning on the road goes a long way towards indicating to drivers which exit you intend to take.

"Think like a car driver. The cars around you may not make special allowances for you just because you're on a bike and exposed to greater risk than they are."



3 Door floored



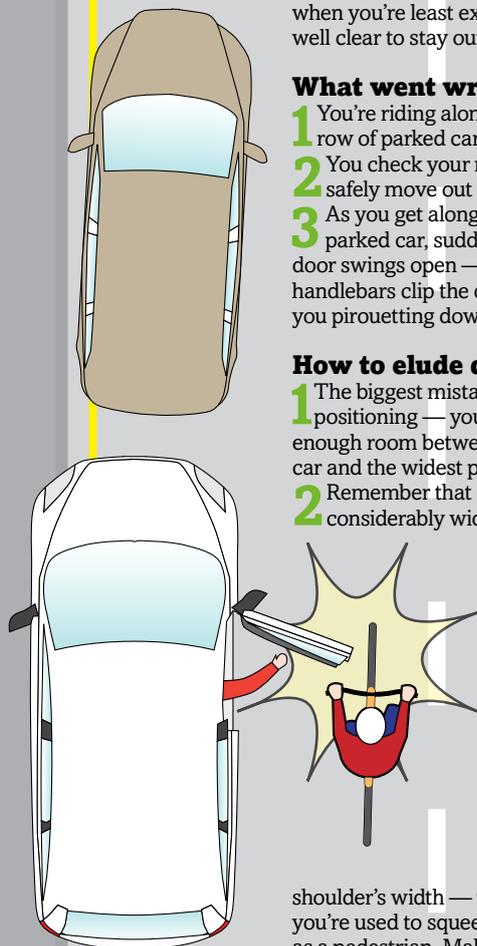
Q: When does a stationary car become a lethal booby-trap? A: When its door swings open into your path when you're least expecting it. Steer well clear to stay out of harm's way.

What went wrong?

- 1 You're riding along, approaching a row of parked cars.
- 2 You check your right shoulder and safely move out to pass the cars.
- 3 As you get alongside the first parked car, suddenly the driver's door swings open — and bang! Your handlebars clip the door, which sends you pirouetting down the road.

How to elude disaster...

- 1 The biggest mistake here was positioning — you didn't leave enough room between the stationary car and the widest part of your bike.
- 2 Remember that on a bike you are considerably wider than your



shoulder's width — the width you're used to squeezing through as a pedestrian. Make sure there is plenty of space on the road ahead to allow you to give yourself plenty of room to pass.

- 3 Move out early to make yourself visible in the parked car's mirrors, and pass leaving plenty of space — the width of a car's door plus a little more. This allows room for your handlebars and pedals, etc.

Sarge Simon says Met Police cycling specialist sergeant Simon Castle

"Moving out to give yourself plenty of space to safely pass parked cars means any motorists behind you may have to slow down and wait to overtake you — especially if you're climbing a hill. Be courteous and acknowledge their patience — a little human interaction can have a powerful effect, and cultivating mutual respect helps keep us all safe.

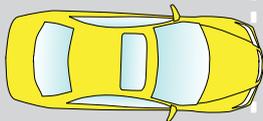
"It's possible to correctly presage a car door swinging open. Look through the rear window — is the car occupied? If so, be on high alert. Read the signs and ride defensively."

Top tip
Use the car's door mirrors to see if there is an occupant inside.

Know your width
Be mindful of your bike's width at the widest points — handlebars and pedals — and factor this in when passing stationary cars



4 Filtering fiasco



Filtering is a fantastic way to beat the traffic and save time — but it demands technical skill, as it's potentially hazardous. Get it right and you'll arrive early at work, winning brownie points from your boss; get it wrong and you could pay the ultimate price.

What went wrong?

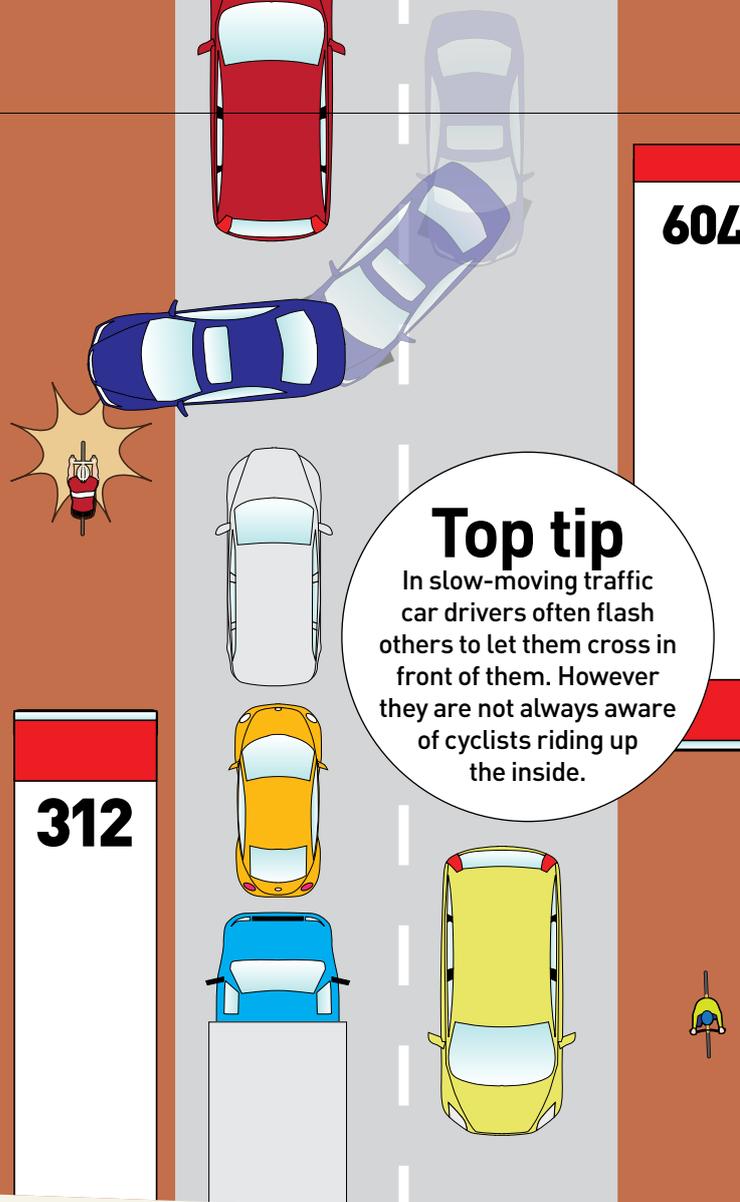
- 1 The traffic is queued, moving at a creeping pace, and you're filtering through it by zooming down the outside (or inside — one of the great joys of cycling!)
- 2 A car in the queue has stopped to allow another car to emerge and turn right. It drives directly into your path before you have a chance to react.
- 3 Wallop! Your bike has smashed into the car's wing and you're flying over the roof. This is going to hurt.

How to elude disaster...

- 1 Speed: are you filtering at a speed that makes allowances for unexpected events? If not, slow down. Queued traffic can conceal a multitude of potential hazards.
- 2 Read the road: Ask yourself, why is there a gap in the queue of traffic up ahead? Is there a side-road or entrance from which a car is waiting to emerge? If so, be prepared — and don't presume that the driver will see you.
- 3 Cover the brakes: be alert, ready to slow down and, if necessary, ready to take evasive action. An emerging car need not spell unavoidable disaster.

❖❖❖ Sarge Simon says

Met Police cycling specialist sergeant Simon Castle:
 "The road environment is full of clues. Read them, and they will alert you to impending hazards. Just as a stationary bus means pedestrians might be about to emerge, a break in the traffic means there could be a hidden vehicle about to pull out. Junctions and side-roads are usually obvious, but entrances and driveways far less so. Consider the entire landscape, not just the roads."



Top tip

In slow-moving traffic car drivers often flash others to let them cross in front of them. However they are not always aware of cyclists riding up the inside.

5 Red light recklessness



Traffic lights are there for a reason: to prevent vehicles smashing into each other. Riding through red lights is deadly folly and it infuriates motorists, sullyng the reputation of us all.

What went wrong?

- 1 You're cycling towards a set of traffic lights and they change to red.
- 2 You're in a hurry, late for work, and in a split-second instant of impatient, foolhardy judgement you decide to ignore the red light and plough on.
- 3 A vehicle proceeding legally, albeit swiftly, through a green light is unable to stop in time and — crunch! — takes you out.

How to elude disaster...

- 1 Red means stop, so stop. Simple. Refusing to do so puts you and others in danger.

❖❖❖ Sarge Simon says

Met Police cycling specialist sergeant Simon Castle
 "There's no excuse for this one. I've driven response cars and motorcycles for many years, and even with lights flashing and sirens blaring, it requires extreme caution to get safely through a red light. Doing so on a bike — regardless of the illegality — is far, far too risky.
 "Witnessing cyclists riding through red lights is a major cause of resentment towards us among drivers. If only one in 10 riders goes through red lights, that's enough to ensure that all drivers will at some point witness this behaviour — terrible publicity for all of us. Even if you think you're invincible, at some point or other you'll need a car driver to act kindly towards you — for instance, by giving you space in traffic — so create the right impression for the sake of us all."

NUMBER CRUNCHING

The stats



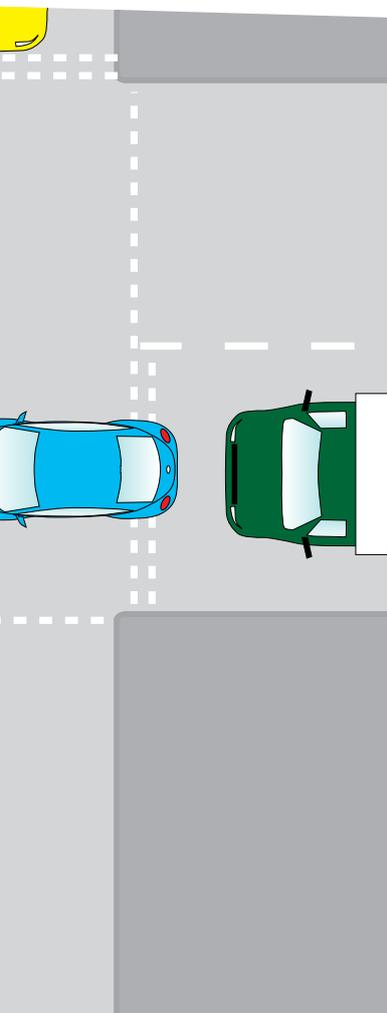
Percentage of cyclist fatalities in London between August 2010 and July 2011 that involved a lorry.

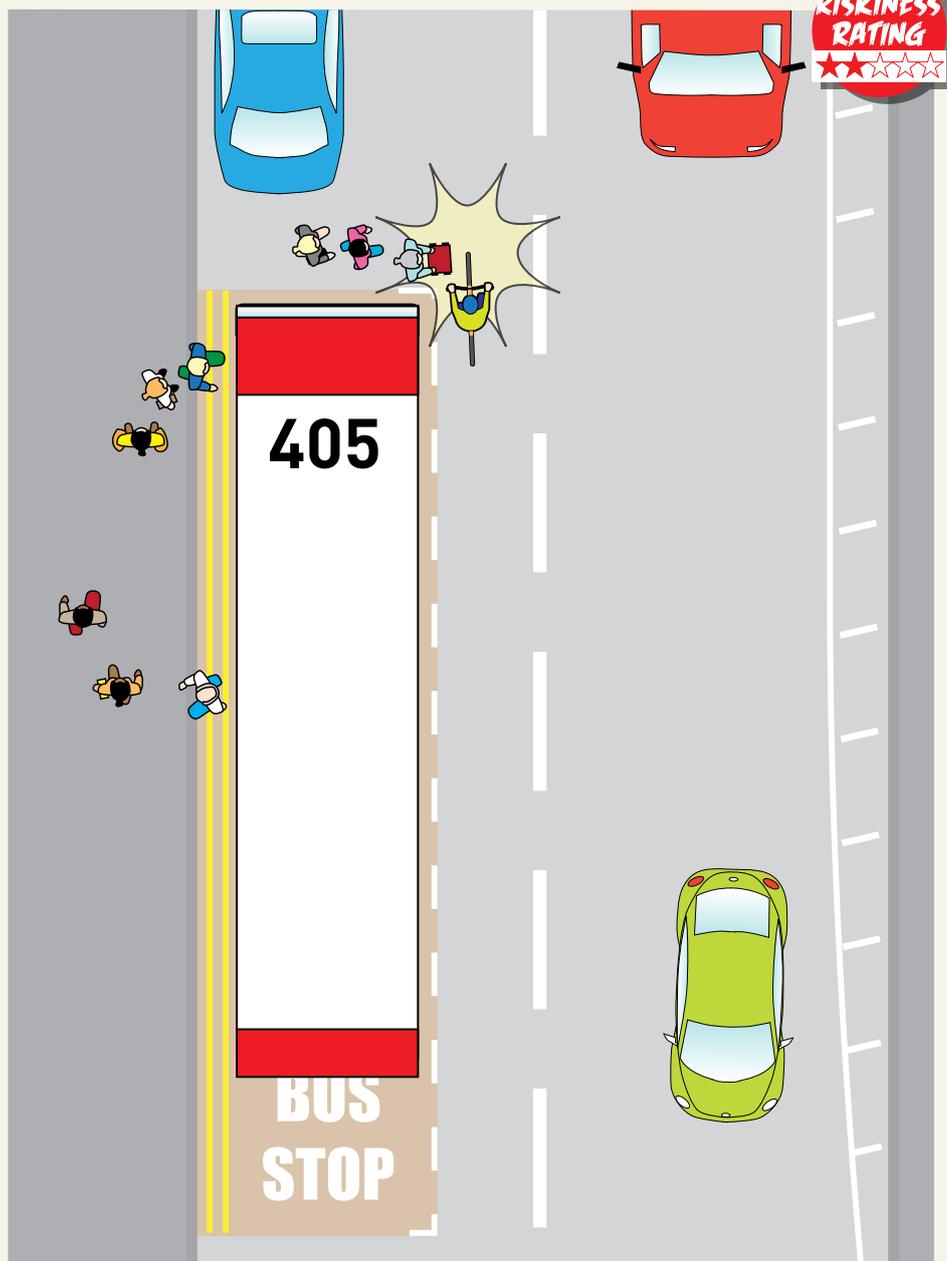


Proportion of UK traffic accounted for by goods vehicles.



Percentage rise in cyclist fatalities in London in 2011, compared to 2010.





6 Pedestrian peril

Where did she come from?! A split-second ago, the route ahead was completely clear — now it's very much occupied, in the shape of a defenceless granny dragging her shopping trolley. Yikes! Could you have foreseen her banzai dash?

What went wrong?

- 1 You're pedalling along and suddenly an elderly woman steps directly into your path, leaving you only milliseconds to react.
- 2 You brake and swerve as best you can, but there's no way to avoid contact: you clip her shopping trolley and skid into a parked car. Argh!

How to elude disaster...

- 1 The clue in this scene is the stationary bus at the bus stop — you should have suspected that pedestrians were likely to be lurking and preparing to cross the road.
- 2 Be wary of pedestrians and places where they could be concealed, such as between parked cars and behind road furniture. If in doubt, play it safe and slow down.

♦♦♦ Sarge Simon says Met Police cycling specialist sergeant Simon Castle

"Many people aren't aware of the fact there is no law against jaywalking in the UK. If a pedestrian steps out and causes you to crash, you've little recourse to law (apart from civil proceedings). It's your responsibility to watch out for pedestrians.

"We're looking for clues that might warn us that someone is about to step out into our path. Survey the whole scene — between and even beneath stationary vehicles — you may catch sight of a pair of feet before they step out in front of you. Is that delivery man distracted by his phone? Has the elderly woman seen or heard you? Read people's behaviour and body language, and ready yourself accordingly."

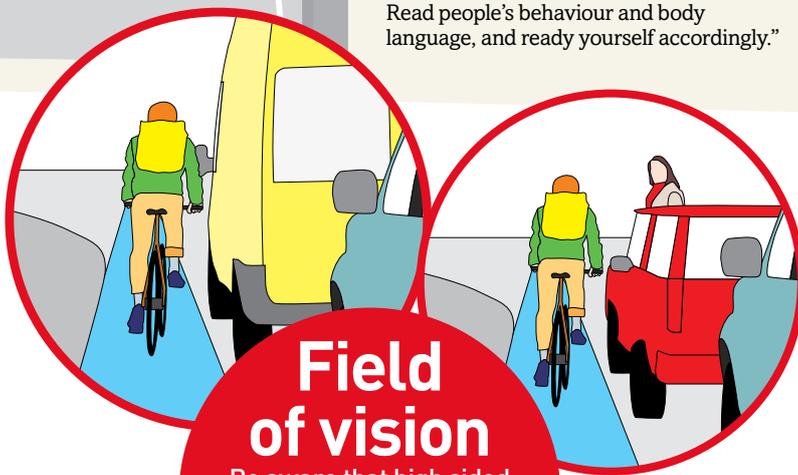
STRAVA PALAVER

KoM at what cost?

Our road safety consultant sergeant, Simon Castle, told us about a trend he has noticed among competitive-minded cyclists registered with the website Strava (the site allows cyclists to log on and compare GPS data from their rides).

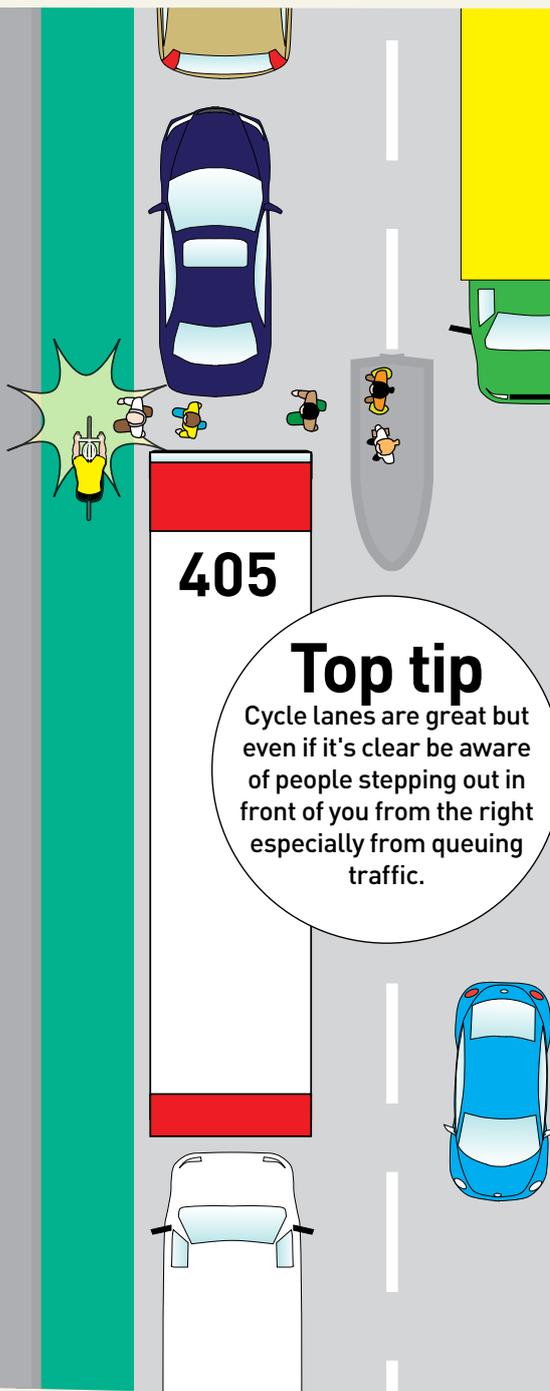
"They're so determined to beat their best time on a segment that they disregard safety, and in the worst cases throw caution to the wind, riding through red lights and putting themselves and others at a hugely increased risk.

Many of us at CA are fans of Strava and we appreciate the temptation of trying to set segment personal bests on the commute to work, but safety must come first. Beating your mate's segment time won't count for much when you're lying in a hospital bed — or worse. In the litigation-loving USA, the family of a man who crashed and died while trying to break a KoM record attempted to sue Strava for encouraging him to ride too fast. All of which sounds barmy, but the dangers are real; if you want to ride competitively, save it for the controlled environment of a real race.



Field of vision

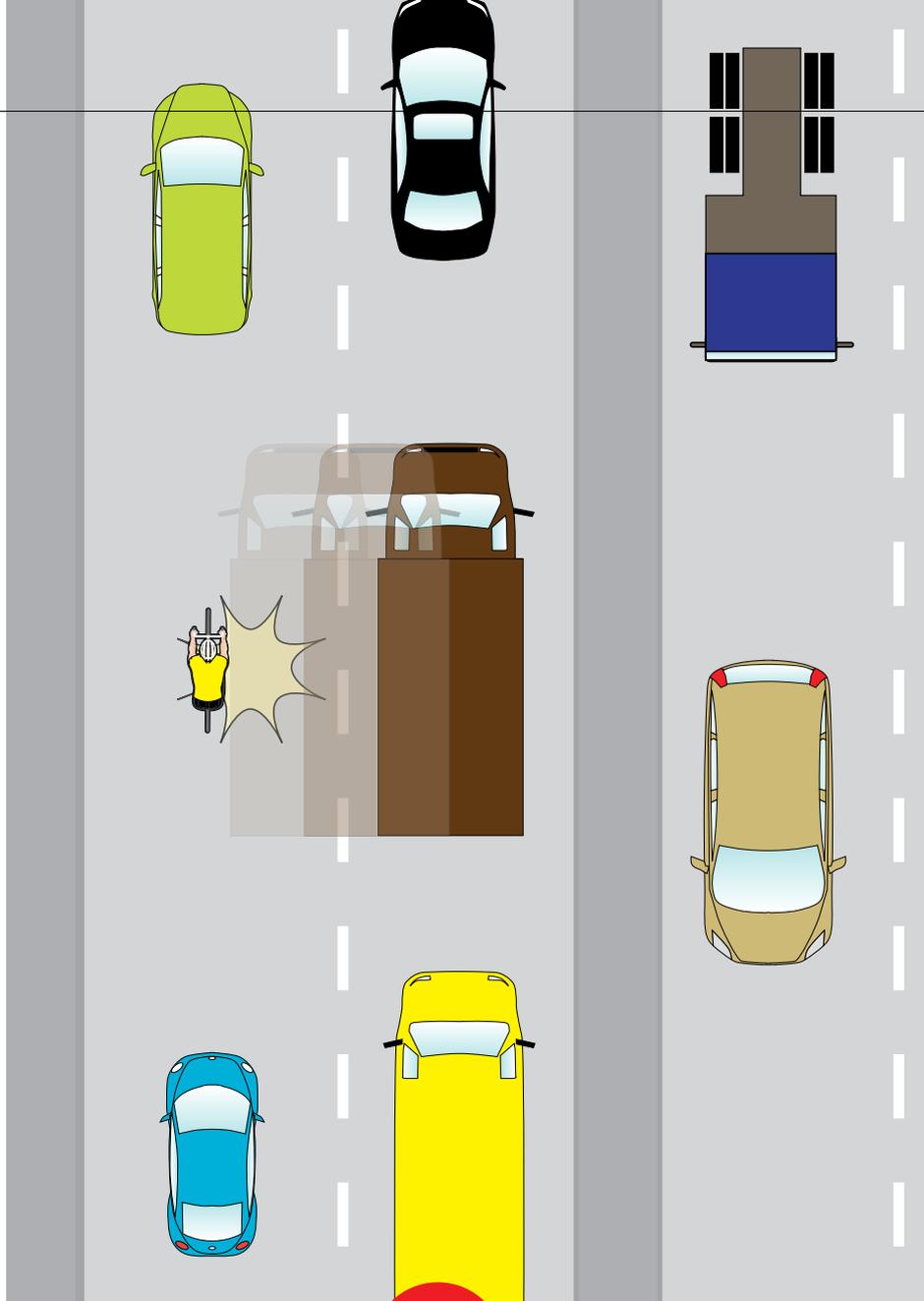
Be aware that high sided vehicles narrow your point of view. When pedestrians cross the road they often only check for motor vehicles



405

Top tip

Cycle lanes are great but even if it's clear be aware of people stepping out in front of you from the right especially from queuing traffic.



7 Straight-line squeeze



You're riding along a straight road with no obvious hazards in sight when suddenly a truck appears alongside you and it's getting perilously close! The straight-line crush is a cruel type of crash but not uncommon. Fear not, there are effective steps you can take to stay safe.

2 Pay attention to the traffic around you. Who's doing what? Have the drivers seen you? Are they distracted? Are they about to manoeuvre? Expect the unexpected; be ever-ready to react.

position (roughly 1m out from the curb) is not the safest — you would have stood more chance had you been tucked in.

BACK TO SCHOOL

Skills to avoid spills

Learning need not start and end with the cycling proficiency test

If you're keen to learn more about safe riding and how to stay safe on your bike, why not consider taking a training course. Useful contacts:

■ London Cycling Campaign

www.lcc.org.uk

■ Bikeability

www.dft.gov.uk/bikeability/

■ TfL list of private training companies

<http://tinyurl.com/caph7r5>

What went wrong?

1 You're happily cycling along in a defensive position on a straight road enjoying your daily commute. Adjacent, in the next lane, travelling at roughly the same speed, a truck driver is likewise minding his own business. Neither party is aware of any imminent danger.

2 A van (shown in green) between you and the truck accelerates ahead. The truck driver spots the gap alongside, but does not spot you. He manoeuvres left.

3 Wham! It's a direct sideswipe, knocking you from your bike. Oof!

How to elude disaster...

1 OK, you did nothing wrong, but what could you have done differently? Think about your position: here, the defensive

Sarge Simon says Met Police cycling specialist sergeant Simon Castle

"This is a tricky one because the cyclist isn't to blame — and the truck driver didn't see her, perhaps because of a blind spot. The best defence against this type of incident is to be aware of the vehicles around you and be forever asking yourself: 'What's he/she about to do?'"

"The defensive position isn't always the safest one. Consider the possibility that it might be safer in certain circumstances to be tucked in next to the curb. Keeping pace with a large vehicle may give you a buzz — but are you in the driver's blind spot? If so, drop back. Read the road ahead. What's coming up that may cause the traffic around you to change their course? Again, it's about pre-empting danger as much as you can."