

In the US, as well as victims of crime, mountain bikes are tools in the fight against it

A drug dealer, peddling his illegal wares on a street corner hears a squeal of brakes behind him. But before he has a chance to turn around, two police officers are on the top of him. One uniformed man jumps off his bike and makes for the dealer's neck to keep him from swallowing his stash. Cynthia King reports on the mounted police of Seattle.

# RIDE ON CRIME

What Britain has held dear for many years - bobbies with their high helmets riding round the village on a single speed bicycle - has turned into a lean, entirely professional and deadly serious business in the United States.

Five years ago on the hilly, cobblestoned slopes of Seattle, Washington, a couple of policemen thought it would be a good idea to have a Mountain Bike Unit. Their fellow officers

PICS BY PAULO ROSSI

thought they were nuts. But the department took to the idea like a rider to a saddle and the pair soon showed up in their custom-designed gear.

Those two who stuck their necks out with this crazy idea got the last laugh. Because now the mountain bike unit has 45 officers, both men and women, with ten in one squad during the day, increasing to up to 15 at night.

It is a showpiece of productivity and cost-effectiveness for the Seattle police - despite the officers getting tailor-made clothing with no expense spared. The local Raleigh factory provides their Chill model bikes with 21 gears for a start. Then the officers go

to be fitted with a bright yellow Goretex top shell with Seattle Police emblazoned across the back and a waistcoat with a Goretex and nylon lining.

The outfit is feather-light and full of pockets. The only item standard up top is their bullet-proof vests and cotton undershirts. And if an officer comes to up with a good idea or wants a different waistband, the tailor will fit that in.

They wear Goretex boots to keep out the rain or black bike shoes for dry days. Giro helmets protect their heads and Scott goggles their eyes. With black spandex leggings, collar-clip radio, nightstick, handcuffs, gun and speed loader they're ready for the streets. The gear is so good that sometimes people mistake bicycle couriers for police officers.

We spent one day with officers Gregg Calder, 28, and Bob Besaw, 33, following them as they rode the streets of downtown Seattle, and came away with the impression that these men were definitely doing something right. People constantly walked up to them to ask questions about their bikes or ask directions. One man walked over, all in a steam, and

said a man had tried to run him over on a zebra crossing. The officers took each query seriously.

'We volunteer for this,' said Gregg as he kitted up at the station before our tour round the town. 'Basically they were looking for guys that are out there actively searching for things, officers that have high rates and are self-motivated. They don't want people that are lazy because we're not required to answer regular calls.

'If you're a lazy officer, this would be a unit you could hide in.' The bikers don't have to do the kind of paperwork that ties down other officers - a sort of bureaucracy amnesty - which leaves them free to be out nicking villains.

Freed from the humdrum of paperwork and out in the fresh air they can concentrate on their specialties. 'It's our job to respond to in-progress stuff and find drugs. If you're interested in drugs you have the freedom to work on that,' said Gregg. 'If it's high car prowls [breaking into vehicles] you can work on that. The physical aspect of the work is fun. And because it's a small unit you do a lot of things together.'



'We will go into a building to survey and if you see a narcotics deal going down you radio in and then we're right there with the bikes. If we have to run away from the bikes citizens will pick them up for us and stand by until we get back. I've seen that a lot. But if we're going into a building we will handcuff the bikes together.'

However, members of the public aren't complete angels. The unit's had two bikes stolen so far which have never been recovered. And 'We do hear snickers sometimes but they're usually out-of-town people,' said Bob. 'But the local people are real receptive and you get stopped downtown all the time by people saying 'thanks for being here'. We probably get our pictures taken 50 times a day in the summer.'

Like San Francisco, Seattle is a hilly place, ringed with mountains and bordered by Puget Sound, a major port on the west coast. Many of the people come from Scandinavian logger stock and have an almost religious sense of law-and-order, obeying the Do Not Walk signs and sticking to the speed limit. But the city's liberal dole laws have attracted down-and-outs from

across the country and in the last few years problems like homelessness, gangs and drugs have become much more serious.

As we followed the bikers in the thriving Pike Place market area with its pungent smell of fresh fish, crab and oysters on ice and displays of green, red and yellow vegetables and fresh farm-pressed apple juice (this is the home of the Washington Red Delicious apple) buskers sang for a few coins and winos tottered along, window-shopping. On the corner at a park a tin opener was on the ground. We left it there and a few minutes later saw a tramp pick it up and open a can of peas.

Down the hill from the market, between it and the bay where ferries carried commuters to and from the islands, is an overpass. Under the overpass is a wide clay bank which runs for about a quarter of a mile. It is fenced in, of course. But someone had torn the wire away so that people can duck under and crawl in to sleep, eat, and shoot up in the dry dirt, out of Seattle's perpetual winter rain.

The bikes are in their element here, able to whizz

along the dirt track. Against a background noise of the overhead freeway, they were completely silent. A couple sleeping rough under a pile of blankets noticed us only after we had gone by.

At the other end of the dirt bank, scattered with white garbage bags after a recent clean-up, we stopped at a staircase which runs up a steep hill from the waterfront to the marketplace. As we chatted, a man approached the officers and said he had seen a syringe. Not exactly emergency stuff, but Bob went and picked it up and packed it away in his bike bag

before giving someone else directions.

At night, this hideaway under the roar of traffic is a haven for drug users. But the real deals go down several streets away and that is where the team concentrates a lot of their legpower when darkness falls.

Police on bikes have deterred the drug dealers, says Bob. But the other side of the coin is that, at the same time, they have forced the criminals to be more cunning. 'They don't like to come downtown to make their buys because they're afraid of the bike police. That's

