

RIDING WITH THE A TEAM

By Sarah Locke

As appeared in the Yukon News, Wednesday, October 26, 2005

At just past six on an October morning, the trails between Copper Ridge and downtown Whitehorse are nothing but dark. Once you cross Hamilton Boulevard and head off into the woods, the only slash of light is along the Alaska Highway. Riding down the trails, the headlamps on three of our four bicycles barely pick out the jumps, ramps and other obstacles that energetic teenagers have built along the route.

For a visiting rider, this is an exciting descent; for the “A-team,” it’s just another morning commute.

The A team is made up of Rob Gaetz, Ray Warner and Dale Ristau. All RCMP officers, they have been working the same watch for more than a year; four days off and four days on. And summer and winter—whether working days or nights—they commute together from their homes 100 metres above Whitehorse to the RCMP headquarters on Fourth Avenue.

Gaetz says that even after a 12-hour night shift, he still looks forward to the ride home. “Actually the ride home at 5 am is very nice,” he says. “It clears my head and by the time I get home, work is far from my mind.”

“Once it becomes part of your daily routine, you just have to,” says Warner. “When you don’t get your ride in, that is when you have problems.”

A dedicated bicyclist who was once part-owner of a Whitehorse bike shop, Warner has been commuting by bike for 25 years. Ristau, a former biathlete, is also a competitive biker.

Gaetz did not start biking until he moved to Whitehorse a few years ago, and he says this daily commute has transformed his life. “When I first moved here I weighed 265 pounds and had no aerobic capacity,” he says. “I needed to make a change.”

After he and his family moved here from Trail, BC, Gaetz soon did what he considered to be the Yukon thing to do—he bought two snowmobiles. “And for the first winter, that was our source of recreation,” he says.

His conversion to non-motorized transportation occurred the following spring when he was out snowmobiling on the trails behind Copper Ridge. While pulled over to drink some water, he was shocked to see one of his fellow officers flash by him on the trail—riding his bike to work.

“I thought that was just completely wild; biking into work in the middle of winter in the Yukon Territory,” says Gaetz. “Down south nobody rode their bikes in winter, at least where I was anyway.

“I had an epiphany at that point and said ‘I have to try that,’” he explains. “A couple of months later Ray built this bike for me, and since March of 2004 I can count on two hands how many times I have driven my car into work.”

Gaetz can measure the rewards from biking in pounds. “I’m down to 220, and my ultimate goal is 205 to 200 pounds. Now I can run and chase the bad guys around the clay cliffs.”

But there are other measurable benefits as well. He figures he now fills up his Chrysler minivan “maybe once per month. My fuel savings alone bought my bike.”

The savings in greenhouse gas emissions are equally impressive. Eliminating a 14-kilometre round trip drive four days per week, 50 weeks per year, means Constable Gaetz alone has cut out more than 2,800 kilometres of driving per year, reducing his greenhouse gas emission by about 700 kilograms per year.

Ristau says that his wife also bikes regularly, and they manage fine with one car between them. All three officers agree that the difference in commuting time between biking and driving is negligible, particularly on the way to work. “You can ride it in 15 minutes if you’re in a hurry,” says Warner.

In winter Ristau points out that commuting by bike is faster than driving, once you figure in the time it takes to warm up your car at the beginning and end of the day.

Their routine does not vary much when winter arrives, and they cite ice fog as a bigger problem than cold weather for biking. While Gaetz says his cut-off temperature for riding is -30 Celsius, his friends quickly lower the ante to -40 and lower.

“I rode last Christmas at -45,” says Ristau, recounting how the bike grease stops working at those temperatures. “You have to pedal downhill,” he laughs.

They say that winter riding is something they look forward to, and they still ride the trails if possible. “Once the snowmobile trails and walking trails are packed down, they are rock hard so it is just like riding in the summer really,” says Warner. “Except the landings are softer,” adds Ristau.

The three constables say that work can occasionally start early on their morning commute, as it is not uncommon to find people along the trails who are obviously intoxicated or in need of attention. “Just last week we came across a parked vehicle and stopped to check on the driver, and when we got to work, we went back up in uniform, says Warner.

All three would like to see the RCMP patrol more on bikes, adding that trial efforts have been very effective. “Two summers ago, when we had a bike patrol, I had a 100 per cent success rate,” says Warner. “On all of the calls that I responded to, we were able to find who we were looking for, and either keep them safe or arrest them.”

While the A team is the only RCMP group that commutes year-round by bike, at least a dozen other officers regularly ride to work in the summer, and Warner credits Gaetz with much of this increase in interest.

“Big Bear [Gaetz’ nickname], he is the guy who is motivating everybody, and showing that you can make biking a part of your lifestyle. He has inspired a lot of people in the RCMP,” says Warner.

Commuting by bike is an obvious choice for Canadians committed to the principles of the One-Tonne Challenge, a federal program that encourages all Canadians to reduce their yearly GHG emissions by one tonne. For more information, check the One-Tonne Challenge website at www.climatechange.gc.ca/onetonne.