



# Commuter tutor

You never forget how to ride a bike but cycling in traffic is a skill that many never learn. CTC's **Greg Woodford** spent a day training a diverse group of cyclists

**C**ycling in traffic doesn't require nerves of steel, just a set of skills that anyone can learn. Many never do so and instead fall back on old habits and half-remembered schoolyard drills. While that approach will generally get you from A to B, the right skills will make your journey easier, safer and less stressful. That's where National Standards cycle training comes in. It's just as relevant for existing cyclists as it is to those starting out.

That fact was brought home to me during our training session as I watched regular cyclist Victoria negotiating a two-lane roundabout. She was undertaken by a car driver, who squeezed past and roared off up the road, leaving Vic shaken.

She had done very little wrong. She was in a good, commanding position where she was clearly visible to all

traffic; she was well aware – thanks to her excellent over-the-shoulder observations – what was happening around her. But she had not taken into account one driver's desire to overtake at all costs and her road position wasn't ideal.

Road positioning is a key part of effective cycling. There are lots of situations in which a cyclist needs to make him or herself seem as big as possible in order to block over-enthusiastic drivers from pushing past when there isn't room to do so safely.

## Training for all

We were running through the National Standards in cycle training with a variety of different riders. This was to see how a range of cyclists responded to a road training session, and indeed how much a good instructor could teach them.



Clockwise from main picture: Instructor Greg explains the principle of positioning on the road; Checking the bikes over before the start of the session; Towpath cyclist Trina gets used to executing a right turn, making sure that she's visible and that she's aware of any traffic

Photography by Chris Juden

There were six trainees: Sam, Victoria and Nick are all regular cyclists; Trina is fairly new to cycling and has limited experience on road; Trina's 13-year-old son Ross and his friend Jordan are keen but had even less experience on road. My aim was to get everyone riding at National Standards Level 3. That's the level at which the cyclist can confidently and capably make journeys that include busy roads and more complex road junctions.

As their instructor, I have been involved in the National Standards in cycle training since its inception. I am a keen and regular cyclist and ride in all different levels of traffic. My work takes me all around the country assessing and observing cycle training and National Standards instructor training.

We met in the morning at a leisure centre in Reading. I chose Reading for its large variety of training environments and because I could

guarantee high levels of traffic at any time of the day. Although I knew the trainees, and had chatted to them all previously, I still needed to check their level of knowledge before we headed out onto the road. The leisure centre would let us have some fun on our bikes with no pressure.

**Bike checks and basic skills**

First up was the bike check. It is important that the instructor assesses the trainees' bikes; a defective bike can be dangerous.

After that we rode in the car park – a few circuits, including stops and turns, so that I could assess the ability of the cyclists to stop, signal and look behind. All was well: all the cyclists were confident and able.

After a cup of coffee, we shifted our base and focus to a nearby road. Cyclists need to interact with traffic to learn the necessary skills. I believe that the biggest issue in training cyclists is

**RIDER FEEDBACK:**  
**Trina Hatschek**



**Typical riding:** London leisure cyclist.  
**Trina says:** Both my son and me have only

really cycled for leisure along the towpaths of the River Thames, so cycling in traffic, particularly in London, was a scary proposition! We were delighted to be offered the chance to receive some proper cycle training.

Greg showed us how to check our bikes to make sure they were roadworthy and we started off doing some basic things in a very quiet cul de sac. Greg was clear and concise about what we should gain from the training and checked everyone's understanding. He asked lots of questions so that we really had to think about what we were doing.

By the end of the training session we felt confident enough to tackle a busy roundabout. Ross is now far more aware of the dangers of the road and how to avoid them. He is now confident enough to cycle to school, so is also getting lots more exercise! Many thanks, Greg.

**Greg's assessment:**

Trina and her son got loads out of the session. I think Trina was a little worried before we started, especially as she was also looking after two teenagers.

She was not an experienced road commuter and it showed. Trina was a little timorous and hesitated to 'take the lane'.

I think the session gave her confidence and showed her that the road, treated correctly, is actually a safe place for cyclists. My only comment is that she needs to get out there and do it. Another training session might be useful for her.



“The key points to riding any roundabout are road position, eye contact, road position and eye contact!”



teaching road positioning. Although we would need to look at the road position of the cyclists whilst interacting with quite heavy traffic, the basic concepts can be taught on quiet roads.

Our road was very quiet. We rode some simple starting and stopping manoeuvres, passing parked cars and side roads. The cyclists soon found the correct position, although some needed persuasion to get out of the gutter.

Even experienced cyclists often tend to drift towards the gutter. A more central riding position, further out from the edge, is much better. The cyclist commands better views up and down the road and is in a position on the road where he or she would be seen very early by anyone who might be driving up or down the road. It also forces traffic – which was largely absent on this road – to overtake properly, rather than squeezing past.

### Moving up a gear

One of the keys to National Standards cycle training is to match the training setting to the level of ability of the trainees. The trainees

need to be continually assessed and to have just enough risk introduced into the training to allow them to learn and adapt to the new riding environment.

So after some more advanced Level 2 training – that is, allowing the trainees to interact with more and more traffic – I decided that they were ready to take on a Level 3 training environment. The key differences between levels 2 and 3 are the increased traffic level and the more advanced road features.

When adults are being trained, there does not need to be a division between Levels 2 and 3: the traffic levels can be increased seamlessly as the session requires. However, adult cyclists often require a little negotiation at this point. Some aren't keen to ride multi-lane roundabouts. It was important that my little group did.

The two teenagers coped confidently with the step up in traffic levels. The only incident concerned a young lad who wasn't in our session cycling no-handed on the wrong side of the road! We all watched aghast as he zigzagged through oncoming cars. At least he was very

## RIDER FEEDBACK: Nick Fish



### Typical riding:

commuting, mountain biking, performance road riding.

### Nick says: My

only training to date was in the school playground 35 years ago, but I signed up for the training day looking forward to a sunny day 'off' work. I didn't expect to learn much I didn't already know. As with all training, it's a process that at the beginning seemed a bit obvious but as the day progressed the logic of the approach became clear – to assess where you are on the road ahead of time and realise your bad habits.

The two big things I got from the training were: 'maintaining my position on the road' as I seem to have migrated over time to the far left (so I'm not an obstruction to motorists!), just moving out around drain covers; and 'taking a proper look' rather than just turning my head for a glancing look, which is a bad habit. However much you ride I think a session to review the way you cycle is worth it.

**Greg's assessment:** My comments echo that of Nick's, and I think he was the person who got least out of the session. Nick is a competent rider with years of experience and that made it quite difficult to interact with him. He cycled competently, but within the bounds of the teaching session, quite often wrongly.

I would like to see him on his own in a training session to try to improve his defensive riding. The big lesson he can learn is: be visible. You need to ride where you can be seen best and only move in towards the gutter when you want drivers to overtake you.



visible: the car drivers must have thought he was completely mad and steered well away from him or else stopped dead.

Finally we got to the big roundabout where I knew the cyclists' mettle would be tested. Reading is a challenging road environment for cyclists – more so, in my opinion, than London, where heavy traffic tends to be slow and/or confined to arterial roads. This busy roundabout was typical of that challenging environment.

There were six trainees to one instructor, so the session needed to be thought through carefully. I could have followed each cyclist around the roundabout and then returned for the next. But on discussion with the trainees we decided that my vantage point was sufficient for them to attempt the roundabout on their own, and we could still follow the basic National Standards precepts: Teach, Demonstrate, Do. By this stage, even those with less cycling experience had had several hours of intensive training in road positioning, eye contact and interaction with traffic.

### Rounding it off

The key points to riding any roundabout are: road position, eye contact, road position and eye contact. I could repeat that ad infinitum. On a roundabout, the cyclist needs to adopt a position where: he or she can be easily seen by drivers; no one is able to over- or undertake the cyclist unless he or she allows it.

To get around a roundabout, you need identify where you want to go, ride in the centre of the lane that takes you to your exit, and stare hard at any driver attempting to drive out in front of you. This is where Vic

had her contretemps. As she was attempting to turn left, she inadvertently left space for a car to undercut her, and a car duly obliged. It was an excellent learning point. It caused no danger to Vic because she was very carefully looking all around and was well aware of what was happening. Next time she attempted that roundabout, no driver got a look in.

The rest of the trainees coped admirably with this multi-lane roundabout too. The two boys seemed to get the most out of the session, perhaps because they were more used to listening and absorbing than the adults.

Overall I felt the session was extremely useful. It clearly demonstrated to me that even experienced cyclists could use some training. The session showed the more experienced cyclists just how much they need to be aware of their surroundings and their road position, and clearly showed the usefulness of eye contact with drivers.

When cycling in traffic it's important to remember that we are all human, even drivers. We all want to be treated like human beings and eye contact and smiling goes a long way towards that end.

My final word on cycling through heavy traffic is that the key skills required to interact with traffic safely and good-naturedly are: observation, anticipation, and negotiation.

*To find out more about National Standards cycling training, visit [www.ctc.org.uk/cycletraining](http://www.ctc.org.uk/cycletraining). This will tell you how to find an instructor and even how to become one. Alternatively, tel: 0844 736 8460. The official Bikeability website, [www.bikeability.org.uk](http://www.bikeability.org.uk), has a wealth of useful information too.*

## RIDER FEEDBACK: Sam Walton



**Typical riding:** utility and leisure cycling.

**Sam says:**

Whilst I could already deal with the trickier aspects of cycling I found it useful to formalise my experience. It was good to find out that the way I cycle is what is considered to be best practice. Now when a driver next yells at me I will be more confident that I am cycling in the correct manner.

The key thing for me was going over the simple bits, like looking behind you before you start, which are easy to forget. Greg also talked about not always having to signal. It seems so obvious that maintaining control of the bike should be the main priority, but I used to signal regardless.

The emphasis on confidence was very interesting. I know from the work I do for CTC that roundabouts are designed for flowing traffic, and Greg was firm that it is important not to go too slowly on roundabouts.

**Greg's assessment:**

I think that Sam got more out of the training than he would care to admit. He arrived confident and cocky, but I could immediately see that there were areas we could work on. His positioning and eye contact with drivers were lacking. The mantra 'see and be seen' should be repeated ten times every day for the next four weeks!

If I were to give him one tip it would be: 'Make eye contact!' Looking behind you is not just about looking but about seeing exactly what is going on. Making eye contact is the best way of avoiding conflict: it shows the driver that we are human beings and gives them an idea of which direction we are going.