

Is this what we want?

Mountain biking is meant to be an escape; an unrestricted form of exercise that's fun and free. Not in South Africa! Mountain bikers have become soft targets for criminals - some of them are opportunists, some of the bastards actually plan their attacks. It's not that new, but over the past year, it's reached a worrying peak. Well, we hope that's the peak. We don't have a solution, yet. We also realise that it's a negative theme for a feature article. But it's a very real threat we face every time we go for a ride and it's too important to ignore. So here's a summary of the situation with some tips on how to avoid having your next ride, or worse, your life, cut short...

Compiled by Barry McCallum and Sean Badenhorst

Almost killed for her Camelbak

By Barry McCallum

January 2009... Mathilda Barnard can't speak for herself. She is left unconscious and bleeding next to her mountain bike after being stabbed in the neck in the veld near the N1. She spends more than two weeks in a drug-induced coma after being viciously attacked on the way to a ride in Doringkloof.

February 2009...

After a group ride at Groenkloof...then-fiancé (now husband) Grant Williams taps me on the shoulder: "Here's someone I think you'd like to meet." Mathilda looks up at me from her wheelchair and manages a meek smile. She says nothing. She doesn't need to. Her eyes say it all. She's hurt, but alive. She's fighting.

August 2009...

Testing bikes at the MTN Toyota Bike Park on Woman's Day...another tap on the shoulder. It's Grant again. "Someone wants to say hello to you..." There's that smile again, then a hearty "Hello". Mathilda tells me about her recovery. Her words are slow, measured and deliberate. She has such a long way to go, I think.

December 2009...

I punch in Mathilda's number...

"Hello, Barry!"

"Hi...can I speak to Mathilda?"

"This is Mathilda, how are you?"

The speed and clarity of delivery take me by surprise. She sounds like a completely different person to the woman I'd spoken to just four months earlier. Mathilda credits her speech therapist at Muelmed, Jonelia Theron, for the turnaround. "Yesterday I had my last

therapy session with her," says Mathilda, "She feels there's not anything more that she can contribute."

There's still a long road ahead. "In January I will continue with the occupational therapy. For how long, I can't say. Grant still recalls that the doctors didn't have much hope for me walking again..."

Mathilda has scant recall of what happened on the 7th of January 2009.

"I saw these two men sitting under the bridge," she says. "I crossed the railway tracks without any hassles. Next thing, though, one of them had grabbed a hold of my bike from behind - I shouted at him to 'F*ck off'.

"I don't recall seeing the shears in his hand, or feeling the actual stab to my neck. My next memory is looking up into the distance and seeing him scurry off with my Camelbak in his hands. That's the last thing I remember until about a month later..."

She was later discovered by the Epic Cycles group ride she was on her way to meet. She was being watched over by one of two pedestrian passersby who had witnessed the attack. The other had gone off to seek help.

Mathilda says it's "a pity" that she's never seen them since - "I would love to thank them personally."

Mathilda has managed to spend some time on an indoor trainer and an adult trike - but not as much as she'd like. At the time of speaking to her, she had just returned

from a trip to Sabie, where Grant rode the Experience. You get the feeling that it must be frustrating to be spectator rather than taking part.

"I try not to dwell on it too much, I'm happy being off my bike at the moment," she says, before excitedly adding, "Hey! I've started driving my car recently! Started in Sabie and I'm loving it! I actually don't need to get an automatic car now.

"In time, when I regain my balance, I'd like to get on my bike again."

The race she has her sights on is the Sani2C Adventure - the same event she was in training for at the time of the attack - "even if it's 2011 or 2012".

Mathilda refuses to let the viciousness of the attack get to her. She feels no need to seek counselling. "No, I don't think it's necessary. Maybe I'm wrong, but I feel that it is overrated.

"A year or so earlier I was involved in a smash-and-grab, which was far more traumatic. I still remember the nightmares about that incident."

Mathilda refuses to see herself as a victim, but she does urge people to exercise caution.

"I don't really have any advice, except that people should NOT go anywhere alone - whether it's on rural trails or not. Even larger groups of cyclists aren't safe. But don't be too discouraged, just keep your eyes open.

"And don't do anything stupid - like tell them to 'F*ck off!'"

Mathilda Barnard before the attack - doing Sabie Experience 2008



Mathilda Barnard after the attack - riding on an adult trike, keen to get fit again.

We know that your bike is valuable to you, but what is it worth compared to your life?

DO

- Co-operate fully. Let them feel that they are in control of the situation. Listen attentively to any orders barked at you. Answer any questions by speaking slowly, and always answer truthfully if asked whether you are armed. The outcome could be bleak if they later discover that you have been dishonest.
- Avoid direct eye contact with your attacker as they may either perceive your glare as a threat or think you are trying to memorise their features for when you report the incident to the police. If you have the presence of mind, without making it obvious try to focus on one assailant at a time, taking in info about their height, build, clothing, facial features, accent and the make of firearm if they are brandishing one.
- Report the matter to the nearest police station as soon as possible. Once the attackers are gone, ascertain the extent of any injuries suffered. Get to the nearest major road and attract the attention of passing motorists or pedestrians. Ask to borrow a phone and call the police on 10111 and, if necessary, medical services immediately. The police can only build a profile on mountain biker assaults/attacks if they're reported. Once the SAPS have enough reports/info, more targeted action can be taken to make mountain biking safer.
- Speak about what happened. Don't hit the bottle and don't bottle up your feelings. Let them out. Yes, mountain bikers are meant to be tough, but you are allowed to cry. Seek counselling if you experience any of the symptoms - constant reliving of the incident, anxiety or avoidance - of post-traumatic stress disorder. Don't allow yourself to be a victim. Get back on a bike as soon as possible.

DON'T

- Make any sudden movements. This could provoke a negative reaction. Most safety advisers suggest keeping your hands at chest level. In the majority of cases, victims are asked to hand over money, wallets and phones. If any of these are in your jersey pocket or hydration pack, tell the robbers this. Never reach for them yourself, as they may think you are reaching for a weapon.
- Try to be a hero. Victims are often ordered to kneel on the ground or lie facedown. Stay there until they have fled the scene. Without making it obvious, take note of the direction in which they leave. Never give chase to try and retrieve your possessions, especially if they have firearms.
- Fight back. The key to increasing your chances of surviving any robbery, is to try and stay calm and not fight back. Although it may not be your bike-jackers' first attack, they will still be keen to finish their 'business' in the shortest time possible, and as such are likely to be nervous or jittery. They could be worse if they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol. It's not easy to do when the adrenaline is pumping, but taking long deep breaths will reduce your heart rate and lower your anxiety.

The Gauteng Gauntlet

The Irene/Olifanstfontein area was not a good place for mountain bikers last year. This was a major headache for Pierre Nel. As chairperson of CycloSport, which often uses trails in the area, he has a responsibility to the “vulnerable guys and gals of my club”.

He himself knows what it's like to be attacked on a bike.

“I was involved in a bike-jacking about eight years ago,” says Pierre, “and got away from three more incidents since then.”

As he would often “train alone and ride in isolated places”, Pierre used a background in survival skills and martial arts to “develop preventative measures for myself in order to be prepared for the ‘next time’”.

Thankfully, to date, that ‘next time’ hasn't come...but it has for some of his clubmates.

After a spike in incidents in the area the club utilises, Pierre was prompted to involve role-players to tackle the crime wave. It has not been an easy task.

He acknowledges that the South African Police Service lack the resources and manpower to effectively control the area. This, says Pierre, is exacerbated by the fact that “the majority of trails we use for rides traverse private land, making it very difficult for them to get involved in preventative measures”.

“They must and will respond when incidents have taken place and are reported,” he says, “but the area is just too big to expect them to patrol it - they don't even have enough policemen to deal with higher-priority crime.”

Another policing option was to involve David Boshoff, the head of Groenkloof Nature Reserve, who recently developed a network of trails on Klapperkop.

“David is willing and very eager to involve his anti-poaching squad, who are extremely capable in dealing with this sort of scenario,”

says Pierre. “However, he also cannot get his guys involved on private land.”

But patrols themselves will not be enough.

“People believe it is the inhabitants of the surrounding bushes that are the assailants, which is highly unlikely.

“The perpetrators have a logistical system to get rid of the bikes, meaning that it is more likely that residents of nearby formal settlements like Thembisa are involved. It will therefore be futile to ‘clean-up’ the bushes and ‘burn them out’.”

So what can be done?

“The only manner in which we can effectively deal with the matter is to compile stats on the incidents and use that to identify hot spots. This information can then be used to approach council politicians, who will take it up with the appropriate safety and security forces.”

To this end, Pierre says he approached Gauteng North Cycling to compile a database and “consolidate all information on bike-jacking incidents”, but this hasn't as yet bore fruit.

“This was discussed during a GNC meeting, but clubs seem reluctant to send information of incidents in which their members were involved to us,” says Pierre. “However, since October 2009, we have addressed MTB safety extensively in our monthly club newsletter and members have now started reporting incidents to me as soon as they hear of them.”

He is encouraged that the number of attacks has dropped since last September, but says riders still have to be careful out there.

“Focus on prevention and do so by riding in fenced-in areas, ride in groups, ride faster and be aware of what is cooking around you.

“That is why it makes sense to join club rides. These assailants are cowards and they only take-on soft targets and lone riders.”

Prevention is better

- Fenced, dedicated bike parks and trails are, generally, the safest places to ride.
- Everyone canvassed for this feature agrees on one thing: safety in numbers. Ride in large groups, preferably 10 or more.
- New to an area or planning on riding at a holiday destination? Speak to the staff at the local bike shops about organised rides, and enquire about safe trails and no-go areas.
- Try stay away from informal settlements. These provide easy escape routes for robbers.
- Make sure someone knows the route you are riding, and give a family member or friend an estimated time for your return.
- Never be complacent. Keep your wits about you and constantly be on the lookout. Just because you ride a trail regularly and know it intimately doesn't mean that it's safe.
- Make eye contact with anyone you pass on the trail. You are less likely to be attacked if a potential robber sees that you are prepared or aware of them. Give any pedestrians as wide a berth as possible. It is easy for them to bring down a passing rider.
- You may not want to pack heat, but a self-defence device like pepper spray or a Tazer attached with Velcro to a handlebar or top tube could thwart an attack. Martial arts skills may also come in handy.
- Spread the word. Tell your club, your mates, your bike shop or post on Internet forums about any suspicious activity you encounter or hear of. You may think they're ineffective, but report anything to the police and your local community policing forums.

So which are the danger areas?

It's hard to compile a list of dangerous areas as the incidence of attacks often seems sporadic. Statistics are impossible to come by as the South African Police Service doesn't have a specific category for bicycle robberies, and some attacks may be opportunistic as opposed to organised.

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Gauteng has a bad, but totally deserved, rep when it comes to crime. And 2009 was a bad year for it. Parts of the Braamfontein Spruit, Melville Koppies, the trails near the Linksfield off-ramp on the N3 have all been the scenes of robberies. The southern reaches of Gauteng - particularly the veldt behind Brackenhurst and the dust road alongside the R59 down to Kliprivier - also suffered a recent spate of attacks. But the area with the highest prevalence of attacks seems to be the Midrand and Irene areas.

Pierre Nel, the chairperson of the Cyclesport Club, believes the attacks in the Irene/Olifantsfontein area reached a peak in September - including a brazen incident during a race involving 1500-plus riders and within a kilometre of where Metro police officers were stationed - "and then subsided, with only isolated incidents". This, Nel believes, "could have been as a result of MTB riders using high-risk trails less" because of the awareness created about the incidents.

At the time of going to press, the popular

Northern Farm, and its surrounds, was feared to be becoming a danger area. Reports of an unsuccessful attempted hijacking within the farm was followed by a successful hijacking, where a lone rider was robbed of everything but his shorts and heart rate monitor chest strap. Near the farm, Malcolm

Schutte and Andrew Bennett were relieved - at gunpoint - of their Bianchi Oetzis and other items of clothing and gear. Northern Farm MTB representative, Simon Nash, said that measures were being taken to beef up security, but recommended that people don't ride there on their own in the meantime.

Ironically, the 'Environmental Management Plan for Recreational Mountain Biking in the Table Mountain National Park', compiled in 2002, identified the "presence of cyclists" as a "benefit ... (which) may act as a deterrent, discouraging criminals from operating in the park". Yet, they and other trail users seemed to attract the criminals. To such an extent, that, five years later, the level of crime prompted the Mountain Club of South Africa to say the park was in danger of losing its World Heritage Site status, while the city's head of tourism, Simon Grindrod, was quoted as saying "Table Mountain is under attack", and calling for military intervention to stem the tide of attacks. A concentrated effort by the park's management has improved the situation, and

although there were some incidents reported last year, it is considered to be relatively safe for riding.

Majik Forest has long been considered a safe venue, but an increasing number of vagrants in the park led to the local Vallei Komitee taking the proactive measure of working with the Tygerberg Mountain Bike Club and ADT last August to clean up the area. The security company's Adrian Good said: "This was an ideal opportunity...to contribute to the safety of those who use the Majik Forest. The forest is for recreation purposes." Many of the other popular routes - Tokai, Eden, Lebanon, etc - are believed to be very safe.

Durban and other destinations in KwaZulu-Natal seem to be relatively quiet in terms of attacks on mountain bikers, although local riders will say that riding alone anywhere in the sugar cane plantations is asking for trouble. Some riders reported isolated incidents in Cedara Forest, Botha's Hill, Inanda Dam and even Giba Gorge but wouldn't go so far as to call them danger areas.

Been involved in a criminal incident while riding? Or heard of one? After reporting it to the local SAPS, log onto www.thehubsa.co.za and add a warning under the Cycling Safety forum. This isn't only the most popular cycling online forum in the South Africa, it's one of the biggest online forums period. By posting a warning on this site, you'll be helping fellow riders avoid a similar encounter.

Riding armed

More and more mountain bikers are beginning to ride with guns. Midrand's Rory Munton is a "keen mountain biker... and a chiropractor in my spare time" who rides with a firearm, and he's not afraid to use it. Here he shares a tale of a narrow escape, and some lessons gleaned...

“So there I am riding along my favourite piece of singletrack between Midrand and Irene with three friends on an early April Sunday morning, when, suddenly, out the grass jump five attackers armed with pangas in one hand and half-brick sized rocks in the other hand.

“They come towards me in a crescent-shaped attack formation and I brake just in time to see two rocks come flying past my head. Problem is, I have braked too hard and as I am going over my handlebars I realise that if I land on my feet I will live and if I fall I will die.

“I somehow land on my feet and half-stumbling and half-slipping I manage to keep my momentum to run through the attackers, narrowly missing the slash of a panga. As I run I reach for my moon bag, but I struggle with the zip as I notice one of the attackers is now running after me. Still struggling with the zip I feel a rock smash into my elbow and although I feel no pain I am temporarily lose the use of my arm and my hand.

“Finally, my moon bag is open, and I turn to face my attacker who is now winding up to slice me with a panga. I see the cold malevolence in his eyes become confused as it is replaced by horror, and then pleading, as I take careful aim with my Walther 9mm. The hunter became the hunted. Luckily my friends used their bicycles as shields and bravely fought the other attackers back to back. Only two of us were slightly injured.”

Here are some important guidelines Rory compiled in the wake of his experience:

- Do NOT carry a gun if you do not know what you are doing or you are unsure how to handle it. It is a massive responsibility.
- Make sure you can get your firearm out quickly. You have less than two seconds to get this right. So invest in a quick-draw holster, such as the Fobus holster. Make sure there is 'one-up' as there is no chance to cock. A moon bag is no place for a gun.
- Do not ride in dangerous areas without a firearm even in groups, as there is no strength in numbers when you are out-gunned or out-knifed.
- Do not fight if you do not stand a reasonable chance of winning.
- Club rides should have at least two firearms per group. They should be at the front of the group as they will make contact with the attackers first.
- Keep the group close together in dense and dangerous terrain where the likelihood of attack is higher. Ride slowly as you do not want to fall when surprised. Be hyperaware and remember surprise is a key factor for both attacker and defender.
- Practice drawing and shooting while you are riding if possible as this will build confidence and highlight any inadequacies such as gloves making it difficult to feel the safety or the

weapon snagging on your jersey.

- Remember it is only because we have been soft targets that we are now being victimised in greater numbers. Mountain biking is a tough, dangerous sport and mountain bikers are tough, dangerous people. Knitting and bowls are good options for the rest!

Proactive measures



Rory Munton

Rory has been in close contact with the police and other role-players to tackle what he calls a “scourge”. He is in the process of setting up a self-defence unit by enlisting the services of cycling reservists. What is crucial to the success of these efforts, Rory stresses, is “intelligence”.

“Everything we plan on doing will fail unless we have communication,” he says. “How can we fight crime if we don’t know what is going on? It may seem like a negative topic, but unless we bring this problem to the attention of everyone, the bicycle industry will die.”

If you know of any bike-jackings or robberies of cyclists in the Midrand area, please email details of date, time, number of perpetrators, weapons used, items taken and modus operandi to lara@zamil.co.za. Mark your mails for the attention of Rory Munton.

All is not lost



Inspectors James Swann and Hein van Heerden

In mid-2008, a spate of bike-jackings and a general lack of safety felt by all users of the popular Braamfontein Spruit trail that runs between Mellville and Paulshoff through Sandton and Randburg, inspired two SAPS members to form a mountain bike patrol unit and ‘clean the area up’.

Inspectors James Swann and Hein van Heerden, both sector heads of large precincts in Randburg and Sandton, managed to get bikes and gear sponsored or donated to create a six-rider-strong patrol unit, which began to regularly ride the Spruit Trail.

Unlike other mountain bikers on what is probably the country’s busiest mountain bike trail, theirs was a stop-start ride, which took up to five hours to complete the 20-odd kilometres from one end to the other. This was because they questioned every single person they encountered, whether they were under a tree, or under a bridge, or under the influence... They had a couple of patrol bakkies on call nearby to help transport those they arrested to the Randburg Police Station.

“We made quite a few arrests, mostly illegal immigrants, but also a suspect in one of the bike-jackings,” recalls Inspector Van Heerden. “We ran a few more patrols over the next few months and the levels of crime

reported dropped significantly, improving the safety for the trail users. We still run patrols along The Spruit from time to time to ensure the maintenance of the safety of the trail.”


What was most important is that suddenly, The Spruit was being patrolled by policemen on bikes, shifting it from a haven for criminals to a risky refuge. The element of the surprise was the biggest factor on the cops’ side.

“We’d ride right up to suspicious looking people and because we just looked like regular mountain bikers, they’d just stand there and not run, like they might if we sent a patrol vehicle and uniformed officers,” explained Swann.

The bike-jacking suspect they’d arrested was eventually released, but only because they lacked any evidence to convict him of the crime. And this, according to both Swann and Van Heerden, is where mountain bikers can really make a difference.

“Report attacks, no matter how minor you think they are, to your local police station,” urges Van Heerden. “The SAPS can only take appropriate action and make a significant difference if we have information that can help us identify criminals.”

Unfortunately, the SAPS MTB Patrol Unit created by Swann and Van Heerden remains a pilot project limited to the precincts they have jurisdiction over.

“We’d love for SAPS MTB Patrol Units to become a national initiative. And hopefully they still might,” says Swann. “But at this stage, like ours, it’s got to be a combined initiative between the local SAPS and the community. There simply isn’t budget allocated within the SAPS to establish these kind of units on a nationally structured basis.” 

Help them help you

Inspector Van Heerden has been a cyclist for years, while Inspector Swann played provincial rugby and has a keen interest in all sport. They’ve both become keen mountain bikers since they started their MTB patrol unit and say that it’s not that difficult to help your local SAPS form a similar unit.

“The bikes and gear are the major cost. If that can be sponsored by the local community then it’s most of the battle won,” explains Van Heerden. “There are many SAPS members that are interested in sport or like to be active. It may require a suggestion from the community to get something started though.”