

# Paws for Concern

by Jerry Soverinsky

Our physical encounter was brief. Probably no more than a minute, although I, of course, boast that it lasted much longer. Still I can't stop thinking of her. Especially those eyes.

Dark, steely brown, they were penetrating, intimidating. Some would see her as aggressive. I knew that deep down she was just scared, defensive

We were more than 50 yards apart when we first laid eyes upon each other. I sensed immediately there would be a connection — I'd seen that look before. It's a common storyline in the Western states — girls like her can go weeks, maybe months, without someone passing through, much less a male as vulnerable as I must have appeared to be. The "dance" had begun.

My heart began racing as she approached; I knew where this was headed. Last time — I think it was Minnesota — the meeting began much the same. Sure, she was bigger in Minnesota, but her legs were just as bony, her hair just as stringy and unkempt. She was a wild one and we ended up at the side of the road, sprawled out for all to see. I hoped this encounter would be different.

I was wrong.

And so, as I shifted gears on my Cannondale T1000 touring bicycle and began pedaling furiously away from the farmhouse, the German shepherd began her pursuit. I hate cycling on these desolate roads, I thought, pumping my legs while waving my bicycle pump, the dog racing toward me.

Her route was efficient, her stride effortless and purposeful. I searched frantically for an escape.

"Free milk bones!" I screamed, gesturing wildly behind me in a futile effort to divert the dog's attention.

As I reached the edge of the farm's front yard, the dog abruptly stopped her chase. She stood at the property line bark-

ing wildly, in near perfect sync with my heart arrhythmia. My escape — successful; my clinical-strength antiperspirant — ineffective.

That was a close one.

Such is the fairly common fate of those who cycle on lonely — and sometimes even well-traveled — roads. During my solo cross-country cycling trip, my number-one fear that kept me constantly on alert was not careless drivers, Deliverance-type drifters at state-park campgrounds, or spotty (really spotty) motel sheets. It was wondering just how big and how fast the next unchained, four-legged creature I would unexpectedly encounter might be.

Make no mistake, this is not an animal hater's rant (or even an animal-owner hater's rant); rather, it is a bicycle lover's admonition. A dog attack is a grave and legitimate safety concern that affects nearly any cyclist seeking an afternoon of carefree, outdoor, two-wheeled enjoyment. And preparing for and responding appropriately to a canine encounter can mean the difference between a mildly disturbing inconvenience versus a more serious one necessitating medical attention.

In no particular order, here are a few of the best ways to deal with an aggressive dog.

## Don't Get Pumped Up

Waving a bicycle pump at a pursuing dog — while pedaling, no less — is the "before" image

in a *Gruesome Bicycle Accidents* picture

book. There are so many dangerous elements here — unfas-

tening your bicycle pump from your frame while riding, pedaling with one hand (especially on a bike loaded with gear), waving a sticklike object at a dog — it all invites a sustained

chase as well as exponentially increasing your risk of falling.

Admittedly, I'm far better at offering this bit of advice than at respecting its inherent wisdom. During several dog encounters, this was my first instinctual response. And nearly half of them ended with a bad fall. (On the plus side, my crash typically stopped the dog, who ended up watching, amused). And between the two — crash versus bite — well, it's kind of like when I had kidney stones and

the urologist gave me a choice between living with the insanely intense pain or undergoing a surgical procedure that would involve inserting a metal instrument through my . . . well, suffice it to say you just kind of hope there's a

third option.

And, as far as the dog chase goes, there is. (As for the kidney stone, I wasn't so lucky.)

## The Eyes Have It

Ask any mail carrier: pepper spray works. And, during my cross-country trip, I too learned of its special powers. Available at cycling shops, hardware

stores, and mail-order warehouses, the spray has proven invaluable to me on several occasions, and I carry it with me on any trip through unfamiliar territory. Mail-order varieties are especially appealing for those with a vindictive nature — they promise a variety of Jack Bauer-like neutralization effects. "Temporarily numbs the dog's central nervous system" is a particular favorite selling point of one I

remember seeing. It's kind

of in a similar vein to the energy supplements available at convenience store checkout counters with their not-so-

alluring promises ("the safest way to shock your heart into a 48-hour state of alertness!").

Despite the effectiveness of pepper spray, take note of a few precautions.

— Where's the Wind? No steep learning curve here, try to position yourself upwind before releasing at your target. I hesitate to add that the nozzle should be pointing away from you, but having made that painful mistake once, it bears repeating. (In my defense, when your heart is racing at 290 beats per minute, you don't possess the best coordination and timing.)

— Not in My Backyard. While cycling into Canada from the United States can be an appealing option, keep in mind that you're not allowed to transport pepper

spray across the border. (At least, that's what the border police told me after confiscating mine during a routine check.) Less than 30 minutes into my Canada ride, I was yelling "Oh, Canada!" as a speedy bulldog welcomed me to Ontario.

Incidentally, bravo Canada! — your dogs are *fast*. That bulldog had me by 50 yards. Lucky for me, though, his attentive owner called him back before he reached me.

— You Got a Pretty Mouth, Boy (second *Deliverance* reference!). While administering pepper spray is strictly a defensive measure, dog owners might not agree with your assessment when they discover their crying, yelping sidekick (yes, pepper spray hurts, but there are no permanent harmful

until the air is depleted, which can be a problem if you've run out of air and the horn is your only line of defense. I fill mine before every ride and after every blow. It reassures me that I've always got on-hand wind when the moment necessitates a 115-decibel warning.

## The Amazing Race

The thing to realize with most in-pursuit dogs is that once you reach the far end of their property (heading away from them), they stop. However, *most* is not *all*, as I've discovered on several occasions. During rides when I've been sprayless and hornless and approaching a large yard, I instinctively searched

for a leash-less dog, performing a lightning quick assessment: how much ground did I need to cover until I passed the house? How quickly was I cycling (and how much quicker *could* I cycle)? Was I headed uphill or downhill? And how large was the dog?

If I found myself clearly out-matched and an owner was in sight, I would yell until the owner recalled his dog. On another occasion and following the advice of a fellow cyclist, I dismounted well before

the dog had reached me, keeping my bike between him and me, sharply yelling until the dog retreated (admittedly, I tried this one time only and it worked —





I was too scared to try it ever again).  
**Steer Clear of Trouble**  
If a dog encounter is inevitable, it's important to survey your surroundings. Are you among passing cars? If so, get off your bike and get out of the road, keeping your bike between you and the charging dog. Although you won't eliminate the dog risk, you avoid the potentially more serious car accident.

A friend of mine encountered this precise scenario, and fortunately for him in an extraordinary display of nonpartisan transportation goodwill, the passing driver stopped and honked her car horn until the dog retreated. My friend was overwhelmingly relieved and treated the woman to lunch in return for her kindness. Everything was going well until he put ketchup on his Chicago hot dog (Windy City faux pas!). He guesses that's the reason she never returned his post-lunch phone calls. In any event, two years

later, he's still single and hasn't eaten a hot dog since.

**The Road More Traveled**  
During my cross-country trip and while passing through the Midwest, dog chasings became so prevalent that in several cases I opted for more heavily trafficked roads. It was an unfortunate but necessary trade-off, one that you should consider based on shoulder width (the road, not yours) and traffic volume and speeds.

**Could be Worse**  
Despite the fear of being chased by a 35-mile-per-hour sprinting dog, it's a relative anxiety, as I've learned firsthand. While cycling through Montana, I came across a 2,000-pound buffalo, standing alone in the road and staring at me from 200 yards in the distance. Thoughts raced through my mind — *I should have traveled more, I should have gotten the deluxe cable television package, I should have eaten more sugar cereals* — and I immediately stopped pedaling (although, in

all honesty, I'm not sure I would have been able to cycle much farther anyway, what with an onset of temporary incontinence).

In such a circumstance, none of my previous advice applied — I undertook a 24-mile detour to avoid the buffalo. I had no intention of trusting the effectiveness of yelling, pepper spray, or an air horn. A *Jurassic Park*-like creature with teeth should get the benefit of the doubt in every case.

**Post-Mastication**  
If you are bitten by a dog, seek medical attention, especially if you cannot find the owner. Dog bites carry the risk of rabies, a potentially fatal consequence if left untreated. In the meantime, control any bleeding, then clean and cover the wound. **AC**

*Jerry Soverinsky is a Chicago-based writer and author of Cycle Europe: 20 Tours, 12 Countries. A former bike tour operator, he has led more than 100 commercial group bicycle tours.*

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