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She's got a ticket to ride - to work

By **Joe Rodriguez**
Mercury News

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Shiloh Ballard and Sue Young don't even break a sweat. Nothing - not fear of marauding traffic, demanding jobs, helmet hair or even today's stifling heat wave - can stop them from bicycling to work in a valley built for cars.

And does it show.

More than their strong, Spandex-loving physiques, what also stands out about both dedicated bikers is how they brim with energy. Like thoroughbred athletes each workday morning, they are busting to go.

Today is National Bike to Work Day, but you'll see a lot more men pedaling than women. Bicycle commuting is pretty hard on women, say those who should know.

"Fear of motorists is No. 1" with all cyclists says Corinne Winter, director of the Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition. But for women she notes, there's also "fear of being stranded" and "fear of attack."

She estimates that 20,000 people will bike to work today in Silicon Valley. The U.S. Census Bureau counts 36,000 regular bike commuters in the Bay Area with no breakdown by sex.

But for those who conquer the fears, studies show a definitive payoff in physical well-being. In the first year of bicycling, research shows, the average person loses 13 pounds. And just three hours a week reduces risk of heart disease and stroke by 50 percent.

Beauty and fear

The fresh smell of baled alfalfa wafts over Ballard's condo next door to an old farm in San Jose's Santa Teresa neighborhood.

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It's a green start to a bicycle commute that alternates between beautiful and intimidating.

It's 7:30 a.m. as Ballard, director of housing and community programs for the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, takes off on her red Lemond cyclocross bike. She hasn't put on makeup and credits bicycling for freeing her from that chore at the office.

"I stopped wearing it," the 33-year-old says. "Most women don't really need makeup to look good at work."

Ballard heads north on Snell Avenue, one of the more unsettling feeders for the Hwy. 87 freeway. A commuter since age 19, Ballard aggressively "takes the lane" and peddles for several miles.

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Shiloh enters the HWY 87 bike path again after leaving the traffic congestion... (Josie Lepe)

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No matter where cyclists are on the road, the prime danger is motorists not noticing them. Two accidents with cars recently left her with broken bones - but she still rides.

After several miles Ballard leaves heavy street traffic and flows onto a narrow bike path - the loud freeway on one side, a cyclone fence on the other. Ominously, the path looks like a tunnel made for an ambush.

"This is the spot where I saw a guy lying down on the ground next to his wheelchair," she says. "I didn't know what to do. Here I am, alone. There's nobody else. I'm thinking, this could be a trick. I had to decide really fast."

She rode past the man.

"I'm still haunted," says Ballard. "I didn't stop to help him." She knows, however, that it's smart for women riders to have an expanded sense of care and caution.

The path ends and soon she's in the working-class Washington neighborhood, which Ballard declares is where, "the commute becomes pretty."

Soon she pulls onto the Guadalupe River bikeway, which is both gorgeous and - for women - notably isolated. Ballard points toward a family of ducklings in the river.

"This is good for the soul," she says. "You can't see this from a car on the road."

She speeds past the noisy airport and reaches her office nearby. There are seven pairs of shoes under her desk and a few outfits on hangers.

Women who commute by bike say the experience is intense and exhilarating. To do it successfully requires them to plan and focus in a way that is simultaneously physical, mental and emotional.

"Your exercise is built into your commute," Ballard says. "When I get home, I don't have to think about rushing to the gym."

Rising to challenge

Sue Young started bike commuting after a friend challenged her on Bike to Work Day three years ago. Despite an ill-fitting bike, she got hooked anyway.

At 45, the mother of two teenagers is as fit as Ballard and also glows with strength and confidence. And it doesn't hurt that she works at Sun Microsystems, which encourages bicycle commuting and has a fitness center with showers at its Sunnyvale campus.

Young's route to work is nearly all official bike lanes, routes or paths.

She meanders through Los Altos' calm streets and then cruises toward downtown Mountain View. Young survives by being extremely watchful and helpful to other riders - pointing out potholes and parked motorists who push open their doors without looking.

"Inattentive drivers, that's what scares me the most," she says. Getting a flat tire used to give her the willies. "I think it was about dependence. As a woman, I rode in groups, or with men, who took over and fixed the flats." Now she fixes her own tire troubles.

The longest stretch of Young's commute is on Central Expressway, which offers a wide bike lane and fewer stoplights - but bikers must deal with the terrifying sensation of cars zooming past their hips at 60 mph.

"It's not for novices," says Young, who graduated to the expressway after months on side streets.

Miles later, she makes it to the San Tomas Aquino Creek bike trail, which is safer than Ballard's route on the Guadalupe.

Once at Sun, Young, a senior product manager, easily emerges in casual clothes and flip-flops.

Young and Ballard agree bike commuting is a challenge for women with young children or for those who need their cars for work. But with determined planning, they suggest, why not try it once, and then maybe once a week?

"After a while," Young says, "you'll wonder why you didn't try it before."

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