

Canyon prime spot for accident

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AMERICAN FORK CANYON

If there were a perfect storm for a car-bicycle catastrophe, this was it.

On an otherwise tranquil Saturday morning near the canyon's entrance, just past the "Share the Road" sign, a lone cyclist is pedaling up the winding, narrow road, negotiating a left curve ...

... a Suburban pulling a trailer full of motorcycles, also traveling uphill, sees the cyclist and, to give it room, veers over the double yellow line ...

... an Explorer coming down suddenly sees the Suburban on its half of the road as it rounds the curve and hits the brakes to avoid a head-on collision ...

... not far behind the Explorer, five cyclists participating in a bike race round the curve at a high downhill rate of speed just as the SUV slams to a stop.

It's no wonder all five cyclists crashed, the first two into the Explorer.

The other wonder is that none of them died.

I went to the scene of the accident and measured the road. Each lane is 11 feet wide. Beyond the asphalt on the uphill side is a sheer drop-off to the creek. On the downhill side is a steep mountainside.

Now consider that a Suburban and trailer measures 8 feet wide and a bike with rider measures 2 feet wide. Add in the 3 feet of clearance recommended (but not necessarily required) by state law, and you've already got a serious deficit on your hands.

Add in traffic on the other side of the road, and you've got an equation for disaster.

For sure, something had to give. There was nowhere to escape.

For finger-pointers, the accident scenario provides a field day. Bicycles are crazy to ride in such a narrow canyon. The Explorer shouldn't have stopped so abruptly. The downhill cyclists shouldn't have been following so close. The powers that granted the permits shouldn't have allowed a bike race in American Fork Canyon in the first place.

In hindsight, all these arguments have their merits. Already, the race organizer, Rick Bennett, has indicated he won't hold any future similar events in American Fork Canyon, because it's "too dangerous."

And it won't be a surprise if the crashed cyclists have insult added to their injuries with citations for following too close. (No citations have yet been issued pending review of the highway patrol investigation by the Utah County Attorney's Office.)

But one argument trumps them all: The lone uphill bicyclist shouldn't have been passed on a blind corner.

A vehicle certainly wouldn't have been passed there, no matter how small or how slow it was traveling.

Even though, as anyone with a driver's license knows, the urge is incredibly strong, a motorized vehicle does not HAVE to pass a bicycle.

"Share the Road" doesn't mean sharing it only once you've cleared the bike.

Without passing over that double yellow line, the calamitous chain reaction may never have begun.

Now, it's all over but the anguish.

"Both drivers were pretty traumatized by what happened," said trooper Nathan Powell, the investigating officer for UHP.

Powell pointed out that it could have been worse if the Explorer hadn't managed to avoid the Suburban.

"At least they (the cyclists) had a flat surface to hit instead of sharp edges going everywhere," he said, and then added, "but there's always going to be a lot of what-ifs."

As for the cyclists, they had good reason for going fast — they were in a sanctioned race.

To prepare for the competition, the lead biker, Dave Collins, formerly of Provo, had already ridden some 6,000-plus miles this summer, according to his brother, Rob — without hitting a single SUV.

"He was a good, fit, safe rider who was racing as fast as he could," said Rob. "Something went wrong, yes, but it wasn't because you had out-of-control cyclists."

Nope. What you had was a perfectly awful blend of circumstances on a bend of road that the devil himself couldn't have hand-picked better.

"Things lined up just not good," said trooper Powell. "That's a real narrow canyon to have that many bicycles in it with the cars."

Lee Benson's column runs Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. Please send e-mail to benson@desnews.com