



The Rush Hour Race: Cars Vs. Bikes Vs. The T

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If a driver, a biker, a runner and a T commuter had a race in Boston's rush hour traffic, who do you think would win? Well, that race is exactly what happened Monday night.

Paola Ferrer of Allston was among the competitors who accepted the "Rush Hour Challenge."

"I'm riding my beloved bicycle, my commuter bicycle," she said. "Her name is Blanca."

Blanca is a cruiser bike with a basket in the front, and a custom-built case in the rear that serves as a trunk. And Ferrer isn't the kind of biker who wears spandex. She wore a red dress.

"So I wear my regular clothes and incorporate this as an everyday way to get from point A to point B," Ferrer said.

On Monday evening, point B was Davis Square in Somerville, and she and "Blanca the bike" wanted to beat out several competitors.

"I'm a little intimidated by the runner, more so than anybody else," she said, "because I am going to be obeying all of the rules of traffic I will not be able to take some of the shortcuts that he can take."

That runner was Ari Ofsevit, who said he'd actually consider commuting by running, but he lives only two miles from work, so it's not worth getting sweaty for so little exercise. Ofsevit said he thought he stood a pretty good chance in the race.

"The one problem is the heat," he said. "It's 85 degrees out. That does not help, but we'll see how I do."

Stacy Thompson is with the Livable Streets Alliance, one of the groups sponsoring the race.

"The problem is that our streets are designed for cars instead of being designed for people," she said. "So they are hectic, chaotic and oftentimes dangerous."

Thompson's took the red line to Davis for the race. She rides the T to work, and says it's great when it goes well. But some days, it can be a nightmare. Also competing in the race was an electric bicycle. It was ridden by Gabriela Ziritt-Hauser, whose husband runs a store in Boston that sells them.

"It has a motor in the rear wheel, and this is the battery," she pointed out.

They're still pedaled like any other bike, but that battery can give riders an extra boost. Ziritt-Hauser said it can go up to about 20 miles an hour. And as she hopped on, it was time for the race to get started.

"3... 2... 1... Rush hour challenge begins!" an organizer yelled. "Go guys!"

Mark Gravallesse was the driver in the race. He headed down into a garage, paid the \$21 to get his ticket validated, and hopped in. Gravallesse works for Howard Stein Hudson, a transportation planning and engineering firm in Boston.

"The problem is, in an urban environment like this, especially in Boston, an old city with a lot of one way roads, it's very difficult to design a lot of these nice facilities because of a lack of space for the vehicles, the parking, the bike lanes," he said.

In a city like this, he said, creating a space that's usable for everyone poses a fun challenge. He pulled onto Storrow Drive, and immediately crept along in a sea of cars.

"15, 10, 5," he said, calling out his speed. "Slowing down. Almost zero," he said, laughing.



Rush hour traffic on Storrow Drive Monday evening
Photo Credit: Craig LeMoult/WGBH

After about a half hour of stop and go traffic, he arrived in Davis Square, found a parking spot and headed to a block party that served as the finish line. He was ushered on to a stage where he found out the results.

The electric assist bike was first, the pedal bike was second, the runner was third, the Hubway was fourth. The car came in fifth.

Stacy Thompson of the Livable Streets Alliance said the fact that the electronic bicycle won the race shows that there's always some new mode of getting around.

"On the flip side, it's still really hard," she said. "Almost every participant encountered a challenge today. And in some cases it was dangerous, whether it was a scary intersection, or something else. So if we're going to be open to these new ways of getting around, we need to fix the problems we have today."

The point, Thompson said, is not that any one mode of transportation is better than the others. She said the point's that as we continue to plan our transportation system, we need to develop one that's going to get everybody where they need to go during rush hour, no matter how they're getting there.