

# In Praise Of Small Wheels

by Mary Frances Dunham

**M**y daughter has a problem. The office where she works no longer has space for storing the bicycle that she rides to get there. After losing two bikes in just three months, parking her bike on the sidewalk all day is out of the question. The solution: Use my small-wheeled, foldable bike -- a Dahon -- that can fit under her desk.

The Dahon is eminently practical for city use. Compact to begin with and foldable in just seconds, it seems perfectly designed for NYC's scanty parking and storage spaces. A Dahon takes up little more room on subways and elevators than a baby stroller. When folded it can fit under a subway seat. The Dahon's oversized rim and chunky frame enable it to withstand the "slings and arrows" of NYC life as well as an All Terrain Bike.

Although gearing limits the Dahon to 15 mph, a Dahon cyclist can sometimes move through city traffic faster than other bicycles built for speed. Its compactness allows the cyclist to penetrate closely packed traffic, while its low-slung unisex chassis allows a quick dismount for negotiating traffic-clogged streets. The seat can be lowered with a flick of a quick release lever, so that the cyclist, while astride the bike, can "walk" it through crowds of street-blocking pedestrians or gridlocked cars. Another flick restores the seat to normal height for pedaling a clear course.

Until I tried my first "folder" seven years ago, I thought that a cyclist on small wheels would have to pedal double-time to keep up with a cyclist on a standard bike, like a small child must run to keep up with a walking adult. But wheels aren't like legs. Long ago Galileo proved that a small ball and a large ball will roll down a hill at the same speed. By the magic of gears, a small-wheeled vehicle can travel as fast as a large-wheeled one. A cyclist on a 3-Speed Dahon needs no extra force or pedal strokes to stay even with a cyclist on a standard bicycle operating at the same gear setting.

Foldable bicycles are sometimes called "collapsible" bicycles, a term guaranteed to frighten the uninitiated cyclist into thinking the bicycle may suddenly fall apart or undergo some kind of jack-knife action in mid-ride. Actually, foldable bicycles properly locked in position are firmer than standard bicycles, by virtue of their solid, almost over-built, frames.

When I bought my first "folder" in 1981, there were few others around town. While



Dahon Folding Bike

children empathized with my bike's BMX-like appearance, their elders often laughed at my child-like vehicle. More than one quipster asked whether my bike had shrunk in the wash. "When will your bike grow up?" was a remark that I feared had personal implications.

Today, however, small wheels are making sense to a growing number of NYC cyclists. I usually see at least one foldable bicycle per outing -- perhaps a well-worn American "folder," occasionally a sleek Moulton (actually a take-apart bike, not a foldable one), and quite often "one of those cute Dahons" like mine. The shop where I bought it (Metro Bicycles on Lexington Ave. at 86th St.) has just ordered a new stock.

For names of the various models of folders available, or an exchange of information, call Mary Frances Dunham, 212-472-9491.

Photos: Jason Eskenazi



Author Dunham touts folding bike

# City Cyclist

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## KOCH PLEDGES SUPPORT FOR BIKES Ban Abandoned

Saying that he wants to see more New Yorkers riding bicycles, Mayor Koch has withdrawn plans for a midtown ban and instructed his administration to work with Transportation Alternatives and other bicycle groups to improve cycling conditions.

The Mayor's about-face came at an April 12 City Hall meeting with T.A. president Charles Komanoff, past president Charlie McCorkell, and Roger Herz of Bicycle Transportation Action. Although the Mayor said he was merely "deferring" the proposed ban, and would consider re-imposing it if the recent decline in bike-pedestrian accidents was reversed, mayoral aides said a new ban was extremely unlikely and called the decision a "clear win" for the cycling community.

The demise of "Ban II" (the first ban was overturned last September through a lawsuit brought by T.A. and messenger companies) capped a 4-month campaign touched off by official publication of the ban proposal last December. By the time the City Council adopted a unanimous (32-0) resolution opposing the ban in March, the ban had been opposed by numerous civic and environmental groups, the 5 borough presidents, 2 additional Council members, Comptroller Goldin and City Council President Stein, leaving

only Koch and Staten Island Councilman O'Donovan as holdouts. Public opinion seemed to turn against the Mayor as cyclists publicized their contribution to NYC's environment, commerce and spirit while also riding more considerately.

Perhaps sensing the shift, the Mayor turned to Police Commissioner Ward at the April 12 meeting to get him off the hook. Ward cited "new" police statistics -- many of which T.A. had published three months ago in City Cyclist -- showing a downturn in bike-pedestrian accidents citywide and in midtown.

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