

Itinerant pedalers

It takes a special breed to earn a living dodging big-city traffic aboard a bicycle

On a recent windy Wednesday that kept other cyclists indoors, Jonathan Roach hit the streets of downtown, wondering at times if he would topple in the chilly gusts.

Postponing a ride isn't an option, even in the wildest of weather, because cycling pays Mr. Roach's bills.

Mr. Roach, 26, is one of a rare breed of bike messengers, also called bike couriers, dodging and weaving through the streets of Dallas and Fort Worth.

Alain Cansino, 34, president and creator of the Dallas Order of Messengers (DOOM), estimates that Dallas has fewer than 15 bicycle messengers. That's about half as many as six years ago and just a quarter of what they have today in Houston.

Most courier companies rely on automobiles, but there are times when a car just won't cut it.

It's 4:40 p.m. and your law firm needs something filed at the courthouse before 5. Good luck getting a car through downtown traffic.

If you haven't seen bike messengers before, you might have noticed them a couple of weekends ago when DOOM sponsored its first Alleycat race, bringing bike messengers from all over the state into downtown.

Alleycat races are designed to emulate the type of riding a messenger might do in an average day. The course is secret until the day of the ride, and it's not really a

GEARING UP



PAULA LAVIGNE

fixed route at all. It's a series of checkpoints where cyclists have to complete a task or pick up an item.

"It really is a lot more than riding around in circles as fast as you can," says Mr. Cansino, who likens it to a scavenger hunt.

During a real day, bike couriers can deliver between 15 and 30 packages, covering anywhere from 10 to 20 miles, Mr. Roach says. Most trips involve law firms delivering documents to other law firms or to courthouses.

It's not all mindless pick-up-drop-off-sign-here tasks, he says.

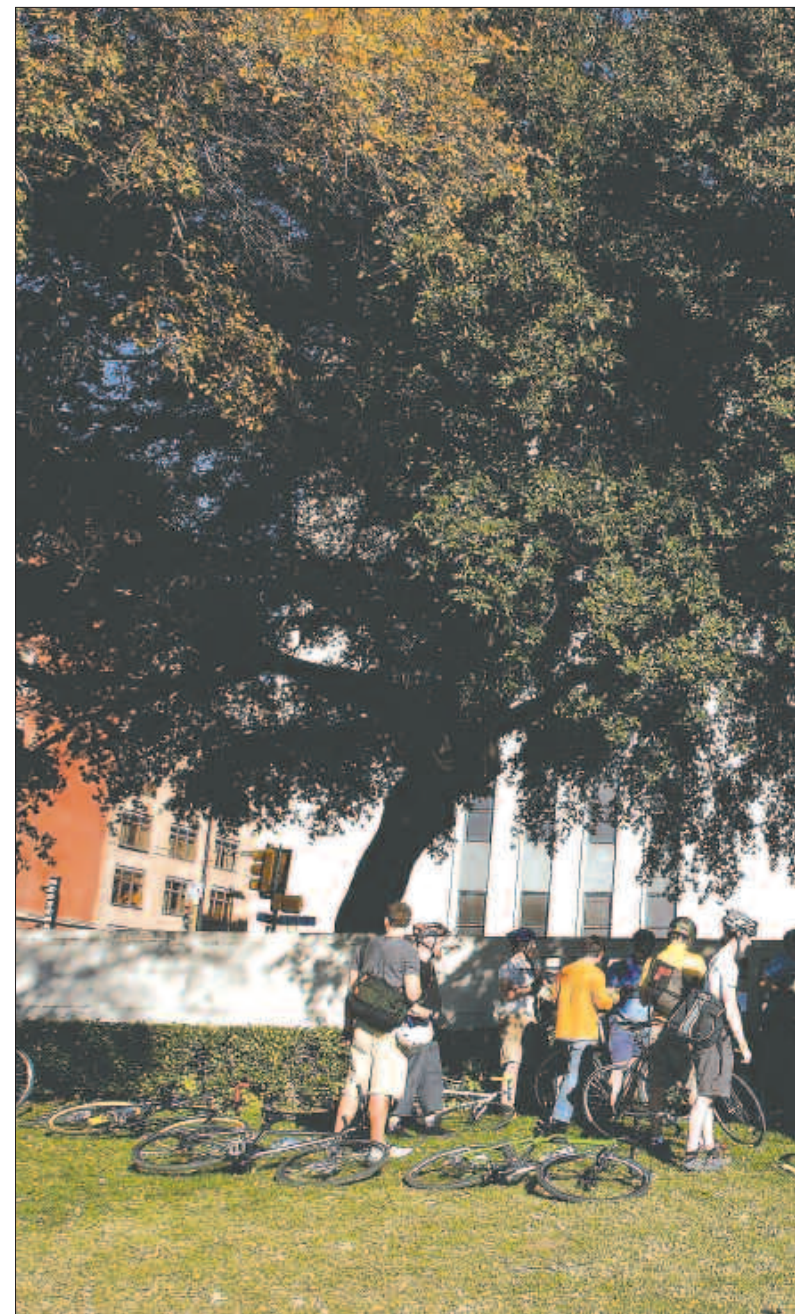
Mr. Roach says sometimes couriers are asked to request certain documents based on legal criteria, similar to work done by a paralegal.

And there are the unusual demands, such as the businessman who needed a courier to retrieve a forgotten cellphone and keys at home, and the parent who needed someone to deliver a child's basketball shoes before practice.

Diversity is what draws people into the job, says Mr. Cansino, who left bartending in 2001 to be a bike messenger.

"For 12 hours, all I saw was those four walls," he says. "Now I get to see the seasons change. You really don't have to answer to anybody. It's really how much you want to give and get back out of it."

Skirting the dangers of downtown drivers takes some skill, and it's not without risk. Mr. Roach has been hit by a car a couple of times and he's seen a lot of close



calls, especially among drivers pulling heedlessly out of parking garages.

Being the best isn't about who has the sturdiest bike. (Mr. Roach rides a 1980s road bike with skinny tires.) And how fast you ride isn't nearly as crucial as how well you navigate.

"Dallas is a small enough downtown where it's really easy to get to know the traffic patterns. You know which red lights you can run and you know which ones are dangerous," he says.

Bike messengers' daredevil and devil-may-care attitudes separate them from your average cyclist racing around White Rock Lake.

Sure, the Lycra crowd might have more expensive bikes and can ride whenever they want, but Mr. Roach says he wouldn't change positions. Having to ride his bike for work is the only way he would ever spend that much time in the saddle.

"You're not going to ride in the rain or out in January when it's 40 degrees ... if you're just going out for exercise," he says.

"The people I meet in elevators, when it's sprinkling outside, will say, 'Oh, you must hate your job today,'" he says. "And I think, 'Well, not really. I'm not stuck in a cubicle like you.'"

E-mail plavigne@dallasnews.com

