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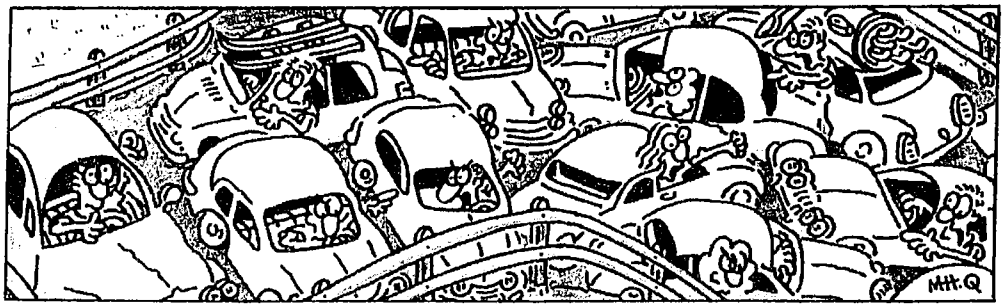
Rush-Hour Combat

The Competitive Commuter Game



BY MICHAEL HARRIS QUINT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

By Mitchell Bard
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Special to The Washington Post

Marty Block starts out from Northwest each morning driving down Blair Road. As he approaches the Takoma Park Metro station, he sees traffic backing up. He knows the light stays green for less than 10 seconds so he takes a quick right turn down a side street and drives two blocks before turning left to cut back toward Blair. If he times it right, he will just make a green light and ace out most of the people who had been ahead of him.

A little farther up, he sees a line of cars approaching the intersection with New Hampshire Avenue, where another short light would keep him stewing for five or more minutes. By now, he knows automatically to take a quick left and a right to get onto New Hampshire, where the longer light allows him to leave the line of cars on Blair in the dust. He has more tricks up his driving sleeve before he reaches his office on the Hill—where he works as a management information director for a lobby—and will explain them as he goes to whomever may be in the car with him.

"I have the light sequences memorized," says Block, a competitive commuter who daily tries to shave a few seconds off his trip by outsmarting some of the 190,000 fellow travelers who enter the District boundaries during rush hour.

We've all come across competitive commuters on the roads—drivers who weave in and out of traffic, zoom through yellow lights, refuse to let anyone merge and honk at drivers who don't move the second the light turns green. Presumably, they drive fast to get to their destination more quickly.

But do they succeed?

Rarely, says William McGuirk, acting chief of the District's Traffic Signal Division in the Department of Public Works. "People have to understand that the flow of traffic is dictated by the time of the signals. We timed them so the next light in that direction turns green 15 seconds later. If you run a red light, you'll go to the next intersection and it will be red. You've only gained 250 feet in travel distance."

This may seem like a short distance to most people. But it constitutes victory in the minds of competitive commuters, who feel the thrill of beating the system, the glory of getting ahead and the power of leaving someone behind. Competitive commuters drive aggressively to feel more in control over their life, says Baltimore psychologist Harry Olson. Behind the wheel, they are the King of the Road, a powerful position many lose the minute they walk into their office.

"Sometimes driving faster is a time savings," says Olson, who specializes in stress management. "But more often, they drive competitively because they don't like the idea of getting stuck or being controlled. You can choose the route, you are not a victim of the snarl. That's more important than saving time. . . . Behind the wheel, you are, literally, in the driver's seat."

Lyn Schwartz, communications director of a nonprofit organization in the District, thrives on outmaneuvering other drivers. At work, she is bound by organizational rules, mission statements, board decisions. But on the road, it's Schwartz against nature. She growls at drivers who get in her way as she zips down 16th Street during rush hour, gets ticked off at passive drivers.

"While I'm driving," says Schwartz, "I call the shots . . . I know intellectually that I don't get there (to work) faster, but at least I'm not sitting placidly. There is a part of me that feels I shouldn't have to be in this traffic."

Many competitive commuters find driving a challenge, and immerse themselves in it with as much intensity as they would a tennis match. McGuirk—who drives a Jeep so he can look five cars ahead—says that some people will pick out someone with, say, a Louisiana tag, and decide to race. "They play cat-and-mouse," explains McGuirk. "When you beat him by three seconds, there's a feeling of accomplishment."

Competitive commuters like Block and Schwartz acknowledge that cars are lethal weapons, but they consider themselves good drivers. They may, for instance, switch lanes continuously, but they always signal. They will run yellow lights, but never reds. Some commuters, however, drive recklessly, risking their own lives as well as the safety of others, says Neil Bernstein, a clinical psychologist in the District.

"Some of the people who constantly feel a need to beat the system are unaware of the risk they are taking," he says. "When you talk to them about the danger, they deny it. They don't think anything can happen to them, it's an adolescent sense of invulnerability. . . . They also have an exaggerated sense of self-importance, that 'My time is more valuable.' "

People who are always rushing, always on the edge and high-strung may be prone to stress-related disorders and should seek help, says Bernstein. "Constantly rushing makes people uncomfortable. These people are creating more anxiety in their lives than is necessary and they need to look for healthier ways to release their aggression."

Competitive commuters also run the risk of aggravating other drivers. Schwartz, who gives other drivers the finger if they turn without signaling, has fortunately never experienced a violent reaction to her reproaches. A few years ago, frustrated commuters in Los Angeles actually began shooting at each other. Though it has not gotten that bad here yet, McGuirk advises drivers to be courteous. "You don't want somebody blowing up on you. You don't know the mental makeup of the other driver."

Ironically, psychologist Olson says studies show that longer commutes can help people with high-stress jobs relax. Few competitive commuters, though, seem interested in unwinding. Listening to a book on tape or pondering the organization's strategic plan is much too distracting from the challenging job at hand—plotting the quickest way to get to their destination.

Some people just feel the need to keep moving. For Block, the motivation to take shortcuts is to spend as little time in his car as necessary, because "when you're in your car, you could be shot, have your car stolen, be robbed, carjacked, be a witness to any of the above, or be in an accident with someone who has 'my fault' insurance."

But many shortcuts are short-lived. "If one person thought of the idea," says McGuirk, "pretty soon he'll have a trail. You then get community groups up in arms. They say, 'Hey this used to be a residential street, now the Safeway truck comes through.' When enough complaints come in, the city takes steps to keep commuters out. That is why you see reversible one-way streets and signs that say, 'Do Not Enter, 7 to 9:30 a.m.' "

These signs may annoy competitive commuters but, as lawyers do for loopholes, these drivers seek new paths. If none can be found and they are stuck in congested streets, the competitive drivers become city inspectors—timing the traffic lights, counting potholes. "One guy who drives on 16th Street," says McGuirk, "will call us when he notices a light is one or two seconds out of sync. He knows exactly when the light should turn green or red."

While commuters may believe planners have conspired to keep them stuck in traffic, McGuirk says the opposite is true. "We just got finished putting in a new signal system. A computer control signals system with three different planning times: morning rush hour, evening rush hour, and all other times."

Still, he adds, there are limits to what can be done. The District already has 11,000 miles of roads, 7,600 intersections and 12 miles of Interstate. "The only way to get more vehicles through the intersection is to have more pavement. But we're filled to capacity and there's not a whole lot you can do."

Maybe the best way to tame the competitive impulse is to drive with family members and small children, since many commuters change their habits with passengers in the car. Schwartz, for example, says her best friend won't drive with her, but "she lets me drive her 3-year-old because she knows I'll drive more responsibly with a child."

Renee Comet, Block's wife, admits her husband is calmer since their daughter was born. But, she says, he still drives too fast and makes her crazy with his running commentary on the traffic. "Renee used to say 'Wow,' when I took a turn too fast," Block admits. "Now my 2-year-old daughter says it whenever I turn." Comet says he is even worse when he's the passenger because he tells her when to go and where to go. "I'm much happier driving by myself," she says.