

15) RACING TECHNIQUES

So, You Want to be a Cat 3? by Bill Laudien

I've been riding the B group this season and it's enlightened me to the fact that many riders lack an understanding of some of the basics. This isn't a criticism of them as much as it's a comment on the effect of not having a club system that teaches new riders how to ride their bikes. There are countless books and articles on how to train, but all those intervals are pretty useless if you're riding the entire race on the wrong side of the field and attacking on the down hills.

I'll also point out that there are a fair number of upper category riders who, despite their incredible strength and abilities, could still use a primer on some of this stuff. We've all seen our fair share of cat 2's pull off to the wrong side in a paceline. Anyway, I offer up this information as things that I've learned over the years. I'm not a particularly accomplished rider, but I've found that this information has been helpful in getting me through races against better riders and has added to my enjoyment of racing. I hope it does the same for you.

1. ANTICIPATE THE WIND

The first thing you need to do is figure out where the wind is coming from. Then visualize the course you are riding and where the wind is in relation to that course. Anticipate the wind and position yourself accordingly. In many instances, your position relative to the wind is far more important than your position front to back of the peleton. Use the corners to switch side of the field. Sometimes you may want to ride in the wind temporarily, if it means that you'll have shelter for a longer stretch exiting a turn.

2. RIDE PROPER PACELINES

You SAY you know how to, but I bet you don't. Here are the basics.

a) **Pull off INTO the wind** - This one drives me crazy. If done properly, as the relief rider (the one who just got done his turn) fades to the back of the field, he shields the riders moving up in the line. If done improperly, the riders moving up in the line are first pulling into the wind before their turn and then resting as they slow down . . . a total waste. It's very very simple . . . pull off into the wind. (I think that the reason that most new riders do this wrong is that they expect to be screwed by the next riders coming through. But more

often than not, if you take the first step to pulling off the proper way, all other riders will follow)

b) DO NOT ACCELERATE - The lead rider should pull off or signal the second rider to come through and then the lead rider should **SLIGHTLY** decelerate. The second rider should **maintain pace**. It's the lead rider ending his turn who dictates the pace of rotation. The second rider should not storm past by sprinting or acceleration quickly. Speed is not what tires you out. Accelerating tires you out. The wind breaking efficiency of a paceline is ruined if energy is wasted with riders constantly changing pace. You can increase your speed 25% with the same effort with a steady paceline with subtle changes in speed.

c) Draft while going backwards - On a more leisurely ride, or when an attack first goes away, people can take long turns at the front. But once the group is settled in and is at speed, the paceline should be a **steady rotation**. This allows for maximum speed at minimum effort. The way this should work is that the pulling rider's turn (rider-A) should last just until he clears the wheel of the previous rider (rider-B). Then when rider-A pulls off and starts floating backwards, rider-B is drafting off him. Some folks think that they are doing the group a favor by taking **LONG, HARD** pulls. The only things being accomplished with long hard pulls are that you break the rhythm of the paceline and you completely flick the guy who pulled before you as he has no one to draft off of and he has to sprint to get onto the back of the line.

d) If you follow the rules for pacelines as listed above, your paceline should **NOT** be a guy pulling super hard and then sitting up and going right to the back. What **SHOULD** be is guys making short efforts a hair above their limits then steady efforts a hair below their limits, riders drafting as they move up the line and as they move back in the line.

3. CONSERVE ENERGY

This is the most important thing that you can do, especially in longer races. You should play a game with yourself within each race to see how little of an effort you can make. Think of your body as a bank account with \$100 where you have to pay \$1 for every minute of riding. But you have to pay \$5 for every minute of accelerating (sprinting). Typically, the guy who wins is the guy who has the most amount of money at the end of the race. Here are ways to conserve energy:

a) Look ahead - See what the riders at the front of the field are doing. If they are sitting up, then there's no reason to charge into the back of the field only to have to slam on your brakes. This is especially true out of corners. Conversely, if you see riders starting to attack and you know the pace is going to increase, you can slowly start to increase your pace instead of having to rapidly react when you notice the rider in front of you take off.

b) Do not brake unless necessary - The previous instruction should help with this. Braking means that either you went too hard and now have to slow down or that you'll have to accelerate after whatever you're braking for. In either event braking usually means wasted energy of some sort.

c) Do not accelerate into dead air - Trite but true. If you need to sprint or move up either find a wheel to follow, or leave a spot between you and the wheel in front of you then accelerate into that wheel. Pulling out of line and then sprinting into a wall of air is a complete waste of energy.

d) Ride the wave - especially on circuit courses and criterium courses you'll find patterns of behavior. You'll see places where the field will accelerate and places where they sit up. Often out of corners they'll accelerate . . . then sit up. Figure out those patterns and take advantage of them. If you know of a section where the pace is to increase, try to position yourself toward the front before that acceleration then let yourself float back during the acceleration. You'll maintain a steady pace while everyone else is spending their \$5 :) . Conversely, if you know there is a slow section, use that time as a chance to move your position in the field. This theory also works well with hills as you can start a climb in the front, make less of an effort as you float back and arrive at the top still in the field.

4. STOP PULLING FOR NO REASON

One of the main tactical difference between the cat 1/2 races and all other events is that no self respecting cat 2 would take a hard pull unless he had a good reason to. Conversely, cat 4 races usually play out with everyone sitting around until someone attacks, then everyone killing themselves to catch the poor guy, then everyone sitting around again. Save your big efforts to either attack or to bridge to a break. Don't make a big effort just to give all the other riders a free ride. Plus, if you want to ever be in a successful breakaway, you cannot contribute to the chase at any cost mentality. If there are knuckleheads who want to ride like lemmings, let them. Then when you counter attack, they'll be too tired to chase you. When you are racing, you are

at war. Remember that there are more enemies in the pack (and on your wheel if you are pulling) than there are up the road. If someone is going to beat you, at least give a chance to the guys up the road making the effort and not to the passive riders taking advantage of your hard work.

5. ATTACK WHEN IT'S HARD

ANYONE can attack when it's easy. Anyone can attack downhill. Anyone can attack in a tailwind. If you feel fantastic and the pace is easy don't even bother attacking, because there are 99 other guys in the field who feel as great as you. **The key to a successful attack is to break the will of the other riders.** It's not easy to break the will of a guy whose HR is 130 and whose been coasting for the last 5 minutes. If you are fit, among the fittest of the riders in your group, then you want to attack when it's hard. If you're suffering at a level 8 (out of 10) and you're one of the strongest guys, then you have to suspect that the other riders are suffering at a 9 or a 10. That's when they're ripe for the cracking. These opportunities usually occur in crosswinds, on hills, and at the end of races.

A corollary to this rule is that it's often a good idea to attack when the pace is slow in order to make the race harder. I often attack at the beginning of races or when the pace slows, but I never make a full commitment to those efforts. Jumping and then cruising at 80% usually isn't that draining, but can often stir up the field and induce counter attacks and a period of hard racing. Being off the front when that happens also allows you to slip back into the front of the field and in good position for a counter attack with a real effort.

6. TEAMMATES

While Cippolini's red train is quite the site to see and Lance's armada can blow a tour stage open, team racing at the lower categories need not be so involved. Here are ways that I think teammates can most effectively assist each other.

a) Moving through the field - Don't move up alone. If you are going to make an effort, at least bring a teammate with you.

b) Counter attack each other - If your teammate is away in a break and that break gets caught and you do not counter attack, it's an INSULT. Your teammate's effort to get away caused the chasing riders to tire while you sat on. That's exactly the situation that you're looking for as a rider and as a

team. Don't let that effort go in vain. Counter. Even if you get caught, the stage is set for him to recounter or for another of your teammates to hit the pack again.

c) Leadouts - mostly leadouts are a waste of time at the lower levels. If you have two guys strong enough to both be at the front, you're usually both best served by sprinting and getting two results. There are exceptions to that.

- If you're both out of position, one rider should sacrifice himself to get the other into position before the sprint.
- If it's a tricky or dangerous finish, you want to attack in tandem very early and conduct your leadout before the technical sections. This will get both riders clear of the chaos and should ensure victory for the rider being led out.
- If you're unsure about where to start the sprint and you have two guys in front, then have one guy start the sprint very early with a strong attack. If he's right and gets clear, he wins. If not, then the riders chasing him act as a leadout to the second rider. This gives you two chances to win.

7. SPRINTING

I'll try to keep this as simple as possible. Sprint early. Most new riders wait too long and find themselves in the middle of a mess. You're usually better off going early and avoiding the chaos. Even if you get passed and finish 5th, it's better than being trapped and finishing 12th or worse yet, ending up on the pavement. Also you'll never really know how far you can sprint until you've gone too early a couple of times. Once you've seen how far you can go before you blow, then you can make the necessary adjustments based on wind, terrain, and circumstances.

Lastly, gear selection is somewhat important. You are attempting to accelerate as quickly as possible and then hold your speed as long as possible. Unless you are Mark Light or Karl Woitas, you can do neither in the 12. Sprint in a gear that you can accelerate and then shift if you need to. Also, once you are up to speed, do not be afraid to sit down and spin. You're much more aero seated and in a long sprint you can often get a few more RPMs out of your gear while in the seated position.

CONCLUSION

There are some other things that I haven't touched on here and that I'll try to explain later. But hopefully this should provide you with enough of the basics to see some immediate improvement on your weekly training race.