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## Group Ride Etiquette

**By Coach Steve**

*John Tesh, CBS sports commentator: "The cycling peloton (pack of riders) is like the Internet - many people don't understand how it works, but when they do, it's cool."*

I've been asked many questions about what to do, and what not to do, during our group rides. So I'm writing this to elucidate some of the finer points of pack riding and hopefully make our cycling outings more safe and productive.

Safety has to be the number one concern when we ride on public roads. And the most important consideration is the responsibility of the lead rider to make all following riders aware of any impending danger. This means that the lead rider of any group should consider the *lack of* unobstructed vision behind, and therefore, the slower reaction time of the following riders. The lead rider must attempt to avoid all potholes, cracks, rocks, and road debris by taking a wide berth around these hazards. The lead rider should also make the followers aware by pointing toward the location of the obstacle and/or yelling (this is necessary to be heard over wind noise) a warning as well. Of course these hazards may include any other vehicle, on the roadway, or entering the roadway, from side streets and driveways. Due to sand, potholes, cracks and other road debris as well as the potential for vehicles to pull out suddenly, I recommend that as a group we ride farther out from the edge of the road than we would while riding alone.

When riding on open public roads, a single file formation is the only acceptable way to move as a group. Of course, there are times when we would all like to form a nice double paceline (side by side formation) but this can only be done when we know there are no vehicles passing. Needless to say, this is a very rare occurrence on Fairfield County roads. Distance between riders is another important issue. I recommend a spacing of one wheel length between riders normally and much more distance on very fast stretches or downhill. The drafting advantage of a lesser distance than this is negligible, but the risk of overlapping wheels in our only moderately experienced group is substantial.

Awareness regarding traffic flow is invaluable. When I pull-off the front of the paceline, I always take a quick look back over my shoulder to check for passing car. If there is a vehicle coming up fast, or at all, I wait to swing off (move to the back of the line).

It is each rider's responsibility to maintain the smooth flow of the group. When riding in a paceline, sudden movements of any single rider can be disastrous. This means that abrupt braking, swerving, and any type of erratic riding is always a dangerous, poor technique. When the lead rider is careful to make all the followers aware of what's coming sudden reactions are seldom necessary.

Each rider in the paceline is responsible for maintaining his or her place in that line. This means that if you let a gap open up everyone behind will be "dropped" either temporarily or for the rest

of the ride. And, they will be completely within their rights to verbally and physically abuse you after the ride. But, of course we Road Hogs are far too civilized to do this!

While leading the paceline, each rider must make his or her own best judgment regarding how long to lead. The proper way to pace yourself is to maintain the same speed as the former rider at the front, pulling longer if you feel strong, shorter if you can't keep the pace. If the speed is obviously beyond your capability, then you should stay at the back and tell each rider to 'pull-in' in front of you as they move toward the back of the paceline for their wind-break. Of course, if you are the one fixed to the back of the line, after the ride you may be victim of finger pointing and name calling with disparaging terms such as: Wheelsucker, wimp, or girly-man. Ouch! But we Road Hogs are far too sophisticated and restrained to ever say such things, right?

When a rider in front of you is clearly getting dropped, a quick decision is required whether to stay where you are, or "jump-across" the gap before it gets too big. If the group is moving very fast, the latter may not be an option. This is known as the "crunch" time in bike racing terminology - when the pace is so fast that the paceline string breaks, the riders who can keep the pace end up in the lead group, and those that can't are "off the back." The rider who is "going backwards" (struggling) and perhaps letting the gap open up has no obligation to tell those behind that he's "losing it" perhaps because if he's really doing all he can to hold on, oxygen is at a premium, and speaking is not an option. It's the responsibility of the riders behind to assess and respond to the situation in this case.

There are many other fine points of importance regarding pack riding but most are beyond the scope of this article. So, I'll just mention a few of the key tips: When a rider changes from a sitting to standing position on a hill for instance, his or her bike will suddenly move backwards as much as a foot-and-a-half. This is a temporary reduction in forward momentum due to a body position shift toward the front of the bike. Beware of overlapping his or her wheel when this happens!

It's generally best to match gearing/cadence in a group, but sometimes the experienced rider will gear "down one" to save energy while drafting and gear "up one" when they "hit the front" for extra power and top end speed.

Riders tend to let a much larger gap open up between cyclists when cornering, so with each position back from the lead rider increased proportionally, the total distance from engine to caboose can double or even triple. This means that the further back you are after the corner, the harder you will have to work to "get back on" the back of the paceline.

For subtle speed reductions in a fast moving paceline, it is possible to simply move from behind the "wheel" ahead of you rather than braking. To do this, just move to one side or the other (when there's space) thus slowing as you lose some of the drafting effect.

Crosswinds are rarely a consideration in our region of wind break by thick vegetation and tall trees. But, when there is a crosswind, the best draft is obtained by moving laterally from directly behind the wheel ahead, to the downwind side. How far 'off center' depends on the exact direction and speed of the wind, but I can tell you that in a huge crosswind I've spent many a road race or team time trial with my front wheel even with the cranks of the rider ahead of me - drafting efficiently.

Remember, concentration and awareness of what's happening around you is everything while riding so ride safely by expecting the unexpected!

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