

Thoughts on Pack Riding Skills

Mike Masters / Summer 2007

After witnessing a few crashes on recent group rides, I got together with some of my cycling buddies to discuss what to do about it. The general consensus was that there is a lot we can do as cyclists to make group riding safer. The ultimate result of our discussion is this article on pack riding skills. Whether you are new to cycling or an experienced veteran, I hope you'll find something you can use in this article.

Before the Ride

Before you start, make sure your equipment is functioning properly. Make sure the wheels are seated properly and the quick release is tightly closed. If the quick release doesn't leave an imprint in your palm, it's not tight enough. Make sure the brakes are adjusted and functioning properly. Check the tires for abrasions and proper inflation, and make sure you have what you need to change a flat tire. It's a good idea to carry a spare tube, patch kit, tire boot, tire levers, and a CO₂ pump with at least two cartridges. All of these items are available at your local bike shop and will fit easily into a small saddle pack. Make sure your water bottle cages are tight so you won't lose a bottle if you hit something rough in the road. A loose bottle is a treacherous condition for the cyclists behind you. If you have any lights or other accessories attached to the bike, make sure they are secure and won't drop off if you hit something rough. Make sure your drive train is functioning properly. You should be able to comfortably and reliably shift into all of your gears without fear of dropping the chain or losing your momentum. Make sure you have proper identification on your person. Carry a photo copy of your driver's license and insurance card. It's also a good idea to carry a cell phone, a map, some packaged food, and a small sum of money as well. You can use a zip-lock bag to keep items in your jersey pockets dry.

In the Pack

Once on the road, communication and attentiveness are paramount. You are one among many. Your actions will have an impact on those around you. Be predictable. Avoid surprises. Make your intentions and actions well known. Call out "Slowing!" if you are about to slow. Call out "Stopping!" if you intend to stop. When slowing in the peloton, feather the brakes lightly. Try to avoid abrupt braking. Call out "Right Turn!" or "Left Turn!" as you approach turns. Imagine there are lanes within the turn and make sure to stay in your lane. For example, do not start the turn from the inside and end up on the outside. This causes problems for the cyclists around you. Hold your line and take the turn smoothly as a group.

Road visibility is limited in the peloton. Call out potential obstructions. For example "Hole Right!" "Gravel!" "Tracks!" etc. If possible, guide your bike smoothly around obstructions. Avoid swerving. It is better to soak up a pothole than to swerve violently around it and endanger the cyclists riding close to you. When encountering an obstacle, keep your elbows and knees bent, not locked. Get your weight off the saddle and onto the pedals and handlebars. Most of your weight should be supported on the pedals with your knees bent. This will allow your body to flex when you encounter the obstacle. Use

your legs and arms like shock absorbers. If you remain stiff with your arms locked and your weight on the saddle, you are in for a jolt that could cause you to suddenly change direction or lose control of the bike. By staying loose, you can soak up a pothole or other obstacle while maintaining control of your bike and riding in a straight line.

Smooth, fluid, predictable motion should be your goal. Avoid the temptation to stare at the wheel in front of you. Its relation to the cyclist is fixed. Keep your eyes up so you can see what is going on in the peloton ahead of you. Be aware of your surroundings. Anticipate potential problems and be prepared to react. The peloton can be a monotonously boring place for long periods of time, but it can also produce brief periods of intense alarm. Something as simple as a squirrel, a loose dog, a broken chain, or a flat tire could be the catalyst. Stay alert at all times. Don't get lulled to sleep by staring at the wheel in front of you.

It's best to be a few inches to the right or left of the wheel in front of you rather than directly behind it. This will give you some room to maneuver should the cyclist in front of you slow unexpectedly. It is natural for the vertical distance between bikes to vary somewhat with changes in terrain or intensity, but you want to keep the distance relatively small and constant on average. Don't let a gap form between you and the bike in front of you. Also be very careful if your wheels overlap. This is called cross-wheeling, and if you touch wheels while cross-wheeling, there is a good chance that the rider in back is going down. If you do touch wheels, use body English to steer the bike away from the wheel in front. Body English is when you shift your weight and position on the bike to change direction. For example, you might twist your hips and jut your knee out to move the bike to the right. If you don't quickly get your weight shifted away from the wheel in front, an accident is certain to follow.

If you are climbing with a group and you wish to stand, be aware of the impact this will have on the cyclist behind you. When you stand, your pedaling RPM will drop and thus your speed will drop. From behind, it appears that your wheel suddenly juts backward, and this can cause trouble. To help alleviate this problem, shift up to a higher gear before you stand. Try to keep your rear-end over the saddle when you stand, and push the bike forward. It's also a good idea to announce "Standing!" to alert those behind to take notice.

If you have a mechanical or other issue that requires you to stop, raise your hand, make an announcement, and be cognizant of those passing from behind. For example, you might raise your hand and announce "Flat Tire!" By raising your hand those behind can easily identify you and steer clear. Avoid turning abruptly to get off of the road as others may be passing through that space.

Aero bars are designed for time trialing and have no place in the peloton. They position the cyclist in a more forward, head down, aerodynamic position. More weight goes on the forearms, and the hands are positioned out front, away from the brakes. The bike is generally more twitchy and difficult to handle. For all of these reasons, aero bars are inappropriate for pack riding. If you see someone riding on aero bars, be particularly cautious of this person.

Be aware of the ability and condition of the cyclists around you. If you notice someone who has difficulty riding in a straight line, is flailing on the bike, or has difficulty breathing, and is obviously struggling, uncomfortable or otherwise riding beyond his or her level of ability, be particularly cautious of this person. If you are riding beyond your level of ability, be particularly cautious of yourself. We are all human beings, and as such, our reflexes and decision making abilities deteriorate as we become fatigued. Try to stay crisp and alert all the way to the end of the ride. If you are riding above your level of ability, move to the back of the peloton.

Drinking, Eating, Etc.

It's a good idea to drink and eat with your left hand. The right break caliper operates the rear brake. If you have only one hand on the bars and you need to apply the brakes, it is a much more stable situation to apply the rear brake. By eating and drinking with your left hand, you are able to keep the right hand positioned on the rear brake. If you need to brake while eating or drinking, put the heel of your left hand on the bars to increase your stability. You can hold a water bottle or food item while stabilizing the bar with your left hand, but you won't be able to activate your front brake, so your stopping power will be diminished. The bike is much more difficult to control with only one hand on the bars, especially when braking, so pay close attention when eating and drinking.

If you have items to attend to, such as removing a vest or arm warmers, cleaning your glasses, or unwrapping a packaged food item, it is a good idea to move out of the pace line before you execute the task. Look over your shoulder to verify the space is clear. Smoothly accelerate up beside the cyclist in front of you. This will pull the cyclist behind you into position without opening a gap in the pace line. Then pull off and attend to your task. You will likely drop back as you sit up and complete your task. When finished, rejoin the pace line. Do not under any circumstances sit up and ride with no hands on the handlebars while in the pace line (unless you are the absolute last person in line).

On the Front

On the front of the peloton the goal is to set a smooth and constant pace. Several cyclists will usually work together and rotate off the front to share the work. If they are working properly together, their transition should be imperceptible to the rest of the peloton. If you get into rotation, when it comes your time to pull, focus on keeping a steady pace. Do not accelerate. Do not slow down. Keep a nice steady pace so that those behind you cannot notice the change. A pull can be short, twenty pedal strokes for example, or it can be much longer. If you are new to riding on the front, it's a good idea to keep your pulls short. When you come off of the front, steer to the windward side and flick your elbow to alert the next cyclist that you are pulling off. Only then do you start to slow down and fall back along the outside of the pace line.

There are several other items to keep in mind when pulling: When going down hill, the person on the front must keep working. Those in the draft may coast or they may even have to feather their brakes to keep from running up on the person in front. The person

in front has to keep pulling, even downhill, in order to keep the peloton from pushing forward and bunching up. When transitioning to an uphill section, it is very important for the person on the front to maintain the pace. If the front of the peloton slows going up the hill, the back of the peloton pushes forward as it comes on strong from the decent. By keeping the pace up through the beginning of a climb, the front helps to mitigate the natural slinky effect of a long pace line on rolling terrain. Remember, the idea is a smooth and steady pace. When you are on the front, you have to ride with the whole peloton in mind.

Practice Makes Perfect

Great riding skills are not developed overnight. They are acquired over time with practice and experience. There are several things you can do to help improve your pack riding abilities. For starters, practice riding in a straight line. Find a smooth stretch of road with some shoulder and a white line. Try to ride as long as you can on the white line. It's natural to focus your attention just in front of the bike at first. As you get more comfortable, practice looking far ahead and staying on the line. Also practice making small adjustments to your direction using body English. Keep your hips loose and try to steer the bike with your hips and knees. The more loose and fluid and comfortable you become, the better. Practice riding with no hands on the bars. This also helps improve your balance and handling skills. Again, keep your body loose and flexible and steer the bike with your hips.

Practice eating and drinking on the bike with your left hand. Learn how to open packaged foods with one hand and your teeth. Practice braking with only one hand on the bars. Get comfortable fishing around for items in your jersey pockets while riding a straight line. Placing your hand near the stem will increase your stability when riding with one only one hand on the bars. It is natural for the bike to veer in the direction you are looking. To counteract this tendency, practice looking over your shoulders and down at your rear cassette while riding in a straight line. These are all useful skills you can practice on your own that will improve your pack riding ability.

Here's another idea. Find a buddy who also wants to improve and practice riding very close to each other. Practice riding with your buddy on the right and on the left. As you get more comfortable, you should be able to ride close enough to rest your hand on his or her back. The key is to remain loose and relaxed and in control of the bike. If you bump, don't panic. Soak up the bump and continue on. You get into trouble when you are rigid and stiff or you overreact. Learn to ride like a sponge, not a billiard ball.

No matter how young or old, how experienced or inexperienced, we all have room for improvement. Take a look at yourself now and then and spend some time working on your weakest element. Share with those around you and learn from who you can. Try to rekindle a little of the spirit from your first ride with no training wheels, and always remember to express a little gratitude when you hang up your bike after a safe ride.
