

Group Biking for Fun and Safety: Rules of the Road

By Dave Beyer

If you are riding with a group or even with one other cyclist, you have a responsibility not to do anything that would compromise the safety of the other rider(s)! No way around it – you assumed that responsibility when you joined the group.

Whether you're going on a casual group ride or joining a challenging pace-line that'll push you to the limit, a few key rules will enrich your biking experience.

Imagine, on one hand, riding with other cyclists; psychedelic patterns of bikes, helmets, and jerseys; a sense of shared exertions; camaraderie, but no fear. What could be more exhilarating?

Then picture, on the other hand, riders cutting in front of you, blocking you in, never letting you know what's going on, leaving you behind at every stop sign, unpredictably braking or sprinting. The result: constant angst, occasional panic, risk of injury, and no fun.

The reason those two experiences are vastly different is straightforward: Whenever two or more riders get together, a set of rules come into play to help ensure everyone's safety and enjoyment. Do you know what those rules are? Do you practice them? Do you insist that all group members know and practice the same rules?

When you're finished with this short article, you'll know the basics. Then you're on your own when it comes to practice.

Here we go, seven essential rules of the road:

1. BE CONSISTENT AND SMOOTH.

- Stay relaxed, loose and fluid.
- If you do nothing else, remember: A cyclist is probably behind you and another cyclist behind him. Unpredictable moves will cause a problem for the entire group behind you. Multiple bikers are depending on you; so try not to do anything unexpected.
- Speed up, slow down, and change directions gradually. Brisk changes will make riders behind you work harder, take much of the enjoyment out of their ride and may cause a wheel-touch, which can put the cyclists behind you down.
- Don't accelerate to fill a gap and then suddenly brake. Close gaps slowly and smoothly.
- When you stop pedaling you will instantly slow down (yes, even going downhill). So keep those pedals in motion when someone is behind you. Soft-pedaling beats no pedaling.
- Standing up as you ride causes your bike to stop for a split second. And that's long enough to stress the rider behind you. The best bet is to accelerate slightly and, when you stand, do it on the down-stroke.

• **2. GO EASY ON THOSE BRAKES.**

- If a biker is behind you, never brake without early and clear warning.
- When descending in front of a pack, keep pedaling (lightly) so the group will not have to brake.
- Instead of braking, sit up or move out of the draft to catch some air.
- If you must brake, feather your rear brake smoothly and lightly to slow down. Be sure to communicate that you're slowing.

3. FOLLOW THE WHEEL IN FRONT OF YOU.

- Protect your front wheel. Stay alert. Without training and practice, even a slight touch of your front wheel on another's rear wheel virtually guarantees a spill for you.
- Ride in a straight line. If a rider behind you is overlapping a wheel (he really shouldn't, but ...) and you sway unexpectedly, he will fall. Maybe you won't go down, but you'll have contributed to a nasty pileup.
- Don't ride beside another rider. Stay 20-24" from the lines on the side of the road. Not only is that a safer practice, it also helps non-bikers by not impeding traffic. Bikers need to put forth a good image. A tight, organized line shows that we're willing to share the road.
- Drafting (roughly one-to-four feet behind the wheel in front of you) is very efficient. You'll expend 15 to 30 percent less energy than the leader -- and it looks cool to boot. But don't focus on the wheel in front of you. Instead look forward several riders to see what the group is doing. Do this only with skilled cyclists and say "on your wheel".
- When you draft, don't let gaps open. If you're not at ease drafting, then pull out of the line and move to the back of the group.

4. COMMUNICATE.

- Call out your actions and road conditions: "Turning." "Slowing." "Stopping." "Dog." "Car back." You get the idea. Learn and use standard hand signals as well as verbal commands. They're indispensable to inform bikers behind you that they may be required to take some action.
- Short, brusque commands can seem rude or offensive. In fact, they're just time-savers. Don't take them personally.
- If you're passing or coming alongside the next biker, holler "On your left." That command is crucial to protecting yourself, the rider in front of you, and anyone behind.
- Give advance notice of turns, obstacles, and road hazards. Telling the group about a pothole when you're on top of it, or a turn that's underway, is too late. Allow time to plan and react.

- Talk to any bikers who aren't following these rules. This is an urgent matter for group safety. All bikers should be trained in, and constantly practice, the rules of safe riding. If a rider thinks the rules don't apply to them, ask them to ride at the back of the group.
- If you don't understand a signal or command, don't be afraid to ask. You need to know.

5. ABOUT CHANGING POSITIONS.

- Never change lateral positions without looking first.
- When you want to stop or slow down, or you're not comfortable with your position, for whatever reason, first signal and pull out of the line, then drop back. Do not slow down before pulling out.
- If you need to drop back, signal your intentions -- typically by patting your hip on the side you expect other riders to pass. Then pull out of the pack (usually to the left) and slow down.
- When you change positions, match the group's speed *before* sliding back into line. Otherwise, you'll have trouble catching up, especially if you're already tired.
- Be conscious of the other riders when you pass them or they pass you. And give them a turn at sharing positions. It's more fun for everybody. Most important when you or another biker is shifting position: look, talk, be predictable, and be considerate. Safety depends on thinking as a group member.

6. ABOUT LEADING A GROUP.

- Start the ride slowly to allow riders a warm-up period. Keep it slow for 15 minutes so the group can sort it all out and warm up.
- At stop signs and corners, wait for the back of the group to catch up and then resume speed gradually.
- Keep your speed and effort steady. Avoid unnecessary braking or even coasting.
- If you take the lead and you'd like the group to go faster, wait until the previous leader is back in line, then accelerate gradually. Your responsibility is to all the riders behind you, including the one you've just passed.
- If you've formed a pace-line to share the lead:
 - Don't hog the front. The idea is not to prove how strong you are, but to work and ride together, feel comfortable changing positions, and share the lead.
 - Save energy. If you're tired of leading, drop back. Some riders choose to lead for a few seconds; others for several minutes. Short pulls are okay with the group.

- If you only feel safe with 15 feet between you and the bike ahead, or you want to ride side-by-side so you can talk, or you're inclined to slow down in the middle of the pack so you can sightsee, then a pace-line ride isn't for you.
- Don't fool with water bottles, computers, or equipment while leading.
- Aero bars are almost never allowed in pace-lines or group rides. Headphones are also taboo.
- When leading, always see the group through obstacles. Don't pull out of line before a narrow bridge, rough road, parked car, traffic, or other potential trouble spots. Consider how any move or decision you make will affect the group.

7. ABOUT COMMON COURTESY.

- If your group leader publishes a start time of, say, 10:00 a.m., that's when the ride should begin. Showing up late is asking your fellow bikers, who respect each other's time, to delay their departure so you can be accommodated. That's not what group biking is about.
- When the group takes a break at the 7-11, and the leader says "clip and spin," be ready to ride. It's not the time to begin a discussion, take a phone call, or start to adjust your gear. Don't expect everyone to wait.
- When stopping for any reason get totally off the road. Not doing so is dangerous and disrespectful to motorists.

There you have it – all the essentials of group riding!

Of course, it's easy to read about cycling protocol, and even easier to talk about it. But the key is practice. Take one rule at a time; concentrate on it; master it. Here are just three examples:

- **Consistency:** Practice maintaining a constant speed, even when the rider in front of you isn't doing so. See if you can limit the use of your brakes. Change speeds gradually. Take it smooth and slow; the other riders will love you. Think about the impact of every move on the members of the group.
- **Straight lines and communication:** For practice only, get on the white line on the right of the road and stay on it. In normal riding stay 20-24" from the line. Look ahead, not down. Relax your arms. Pedal smoothly. Watch for glass, rocks, and other hazards. If you see anything, tell the riders behind you. Practice both your verbal commands and hand signals.
- **Drafting:** Start six feet (that's one bike length -- no more) behind someone you trust. Stay there until you're relaxed, no matter how long it takes. Then move to five feet. Then four feet. Ultimately, when you're ready, try to stay just one foot behind the next guy's rear wheel. Once you're comfortable, you can choose whatever distance you're in the mood for – one foot up to six feet –or whatever the situation dictates.

Remember: You have an obligation to bring good personal biking skills to the group you're joining. It's about minimal risk and maximum enjoyment. Agree on the rules; practice the rules; enforce the

rules; create trust. You won't be perfect; and don't expect perfection from the other riders. But if you understand and use these basic rules of the road, your cycling days will be much safer and a whole lot more fun.



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