

TTIPS VOL. 15/22 – Safety Paceline Group Safety

From The Rider's Phrasebook

*What cyclists say: "Hold on, there is something wrong with my bike."
What cyclists mean: "Let's stop so I can rest."*

INTRODUCTION

Recently several KABC groups have adopted "pace line" techniques that entail all riders following a leader in a single-file line while periodically and predictably changing the lead rider. Because KABC groups ride mostly on single-lane roads, it is likely that all our groups ride in single-file lines also. Often while riding like this, we follow closely the rider in front of us, especially when riding in a true pace line.

Riding in single file offers significant advantages to the group, especially as group speed increases. On the other hand, riding closely in single-file formation requires deliberate consideration of additional safety measures to ensure individual and group safety.

Have you ever felt intimidated, unconfident, or fearful while riding close and fast? If so, you are not alone; others do too. Accordingly, I thought it would be appropriate to review safety precautions and offer a few additional tips that may keep us all safer as we ride together.

RIDER LEADER CONSIDERATIONS

Splitting the Group: Designated ride leaders may wish to split their groups into smaller numbers at the start of the ride. Factors bearing on their decision are traffic/route characteristics; number of riders; rider experience; and weather. On heavily travelled roads it is difficult for motorized traffic to safely pass long lines of bikes, but they will try anyway. This can lead to dangerous situations where a passing vehicle is suddenly forced into a "head-on" situation with oncoming traffic. In such situations the passing vehicle is compelled to move prematurely back into his/her lane resulting in a hazardous predicament for bikers. Splitting the group offers a greater degree of safety for cars and riders.

Warming Up: Ride leaders might consider a slightly slower start. Obviously, this lets riders loosen up their muscles a bit. Perhaps as important, however, doing so allows riders time to adapt to riding in close company. Close riding is a perishable skill that requires focus, concentration, adaptation, and supreme control of the bike. Warming up is especially important when riders of varying experience and skill levels are in the line.

Rotational Intervals: Ride leaders might consider how much time any single rider should take their turn on the front. The purpose for a pace line is to allow the entire group to cover distance in a way that is more efficient and less tiring than any single rider could achieve for the entire ride. In heavy head winds or cross winds, or on less-than-optimum asphalt conditions, it is appropriate to rotate the lead rider more frequently. Irrespective of the original rotational intent, all riders should feel free to rotate off the front when they are tired or may be unable to pull as long as others pull. Not only is there no shame in rotating early, doing so conforms to our intent to sustain a particular pace. Also, it is perfectly acceptable in KABC group rides to stay.

Experience Level: When new riders join for their first ride, the ride leader might offer those riders the opportunity to stay on the back until they are acclimated to the group's riding style, tempo, speed, and communication habits.

DEVELOPING TRUST/BEING PREDICTABLE

Safely riding in pace lines and other group settings requires trust between and among all group riders. To the greatest degree possible, riders need to understand implicitly what their fellow riders will do in any given situation. Perhaps the best way to develop and reinforce trust with other riders is to be predictable. In this context, we mean that other riders will know, almost without deliberate thought, what fellow riders will do in any given riding situation. Consistently following the club's protocols and communication habits are a great start to developing predictability.

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS/FOCUS

It is easy during long rides to break concentration, look at scenery, talk, or otherwise just lose full focus on the tasks at hand. Riding near other riders - whether front to back or side to side - requires total focus and concentration to maintain safety. In military aviation training pilots are encouraged to compartmentalize their thinking such that, when in the cockpit, they think of nothing but the tasks at hand regarding mission accomplishment, from beginning to end, AND NOTHING ELSE. If you are riding close to other riders, and you are not compartmentalized within your current situation, you are tempting fate. When I ride in a pace line, I am constantly scanning the rider in front of me and those immediately in front of them, the road surface, and the right shoulder and side of the road (I talk more about the right side of the road in the next paragraph). That's what my eyes are doing. I am also listening to verbal cues issued by other riders. I only look at my speedometer and other performance readouts when I am the lead rider.

BAILOT OPTION

The Situation: Mostly around here we are riding in urban, neighborhood, or rural terrain. If you are "on the wheel" of the rider in front of you, and that rider or the riders in front of them fall, or they apply brakes dramatically without adequate warning, drop an item, or get a flat tire,

your ride is about to change instantly. Think this won't happen? Think again. During one recent ride a "spooked" horse moved quickly into the path of our pace line. We lucked out, but it got ugly quickly. It will happen at some point. When it does, you will need to take preventative or evasive actions, and your actions likely will be "reactive" rather than "deliberate." To a great degree, your (1) "mental rehearsal" of your options paired with your (2) situational awareness, (3) your following distance, and (4) immediate surroundings will determine outcomes. The faster you are moving, the faster your reactions must be.

Potential Outcomes: The first potential outcome is that you don't react, or react too slowly, and you hit the rider or obstacle in front of you and you fall too. The second potential outcome is that you reactively swerve left, hoping to avoid the obstacle while also hoping that the rider immediately in front of you does not swerve into your path. The problem with this is that you easily could swerve into the path of a passing vehicle or an oncoming vehicle. If you are on a path on the island you could swerve into pedestrians or oncoming bikes.....not good. The third potential outcome is that you avoid collision by stopping in time (while verbally signaling your intentions).....or, you successfully execute a "bailout" on the right side.

Bailout: As I mentioned above, a good habit is to include in your scan the right side of the road. Now, I know that we often ride in rural environments and the right side of the road is unaccommodating to bikes not only because it might be grassy, or it might be a ditch, but also because there is a mailbox there. But a controlled exit onto a grassy shoulder is far preferable to collision with a vehicle. And yes there are mailboxes there. But, understanding that you will be "reacting," sure knowledge of the presence of a mailbox will nearly always allow you to avoid it if necessary as you seek a softer landing.

Emergency Stop/Panic Stop: Your bailout should be accompanied by an "emergency or panic stop." On a road bike a properly executed emergency stop, also known by some as a panic stop, allows greater control of the bike by lowering your center of gravity, lessening the possibility of an uncontrolled skid, and decreasing your potential to go over the handlebars. How do you do an emergency stop? Here's how. Simultaneously:

First - apply your brakes firmly but avoid skidding if you can (if possible, never lock up your front wheel into a skid because you will lose steering authority and then it is highly likely your front wheel will "washout" to one side or the other);

Second - focus your eyes on your escape route. If your bike is under control, it will go where your eyes are looking.

Third - bring your pedal cranks parallel to the ground;

Fourth - move your bottom as far back on your saddle as you can;

Fifth - bend your elbows and lower your torso by bending forward at the waist;

Sixth - drop your heels lower than your toes. Doing so allows you to prevent forward motion of your body toward the handlebars while your bike is slowing.

COMMUNICATIONS/SIGNALS

Signal verbally your intentions to slow, stop, and turn, and if it is safe to take your hands off the handlebars, use hand signals. Call out obstacles or other road hazards. Please signal your intentions first, then execute the move. I ride sometimes with a buddy who will stop pedaling for a few strokes, and then call out "slowing." By that time I'm almost in his saddle with him. Not fun.

FOLLOWING DISTANCE

You don't need to be inches from the bike in front of you. The amount of advantage you preserve by being inches from the wheel in front of you, rather than being a wheel length or bike length further back, is negligible, unless you are in the Tour de France.

LEAD RIDER RESPONSIBILITIES

The rider at the front of the formation is responsible for leading the following riders along the planned route, through intersections, and around all hazards, and should signal them verbally and if possible, with hand signals. Usually only the lead rider can completely see all the approaching road hazards. The lead rider also should accelerate gradually (not quickly) after stop signs, turns, and other occasions for slowing, while allowing the riders in the rear sufficient time to get back in formation, and at speed.

LAST RIDER RESPONSIBILITIES

The last several riders should verbally call out all vehicles approaching from the rear and passing from the rear. Other riders should pass the word up the line.

REORGANIZING THE RIDE

Groups in a line naturally slow when encountering turns in the route, stop signs, traffic signals, gravel, or other sub-optimal ground conditions. This usually causes a whiplash effect where the lead elements of the line attain pace, but the trailing riders need to spring to catch up. While this is fine when racing, it generally detracts from the intentions and purpose of group rides, and under our normal conditions, can cause undue safety concerns as trailing riders force their moves through intersections to keep up with the pack.

THINGS FALLING OFF OF BIKES

Sometimes water bottles, cell phones, or other objects fall from bikes or are dropped by riders. When this happens, riders must resist the reflex to grab a handful of brake lever or otherwise

slow quickly without sufficient signaling and reaction by the group. If something falls from your bike, remain calm, signal your intent to slow or stop, wait until it is obvious that trailing riders understand and are reacting appropriately, and then slow.

DOGS

On our rural routes, dogs often chase the line. When this happens, observing riders should call out "dog on the right/left." As the dog approaches, and if it is safe to do so, yell "stop" in a loud and authoritative voice while extending an arm and hand toward the dog. Often this causes sufficient surprise in the dog to make them cease and desist. Try not to swerve, and don't try to outrun the dog....you won't.

All right riders, I hope this was helpful and provided some food for thought. Until next time,

Make Ever Ride Epic,

Darryl