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How to Better View (and understand) the Tour de France



6 Ways to Be a Savvier Pro Racing Viewer

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The first weekend of the Tour de France has begun, and whether you're watching the daily stages for the first time because *Unchained* on Netflix has you hooked, or you just want to follow the race more closely, we've created a little guide to help you instantly recognize what's happening at any given moment in the race.

Because let's be honest: Any event that takes three to five hours a day to unfold is going to have some lulls, which means TV commentators have a lot of airtime to fill. So much that sometimes, they forget to tell you what's actually happening.

Here's a handy guide to knowing at a glance what's happening in the race without waiting for the announcers to wrap up storytime and fill you in.

What you're seeing: *Small groups lined up diagonally on the road.*



Getty Images

What it is: Echelons, a French term for a [paceline](#) staggered diagonally due to crosswinds. Echelons are an unmistakable sign that the race is fracturing apart under pressure.

Why it happens: Normally, a rider is most sheltered from the wind directly behind the rider in front. In a big pack, that means almost everyone in the field is somewhat protected in a draft. But with crosswinds, the geometry of that shelter changes: With winds from the side, riders stagger diagonally in a draft. At some point, there's no more road for them to fit on; they're in the gutter. If a team (or teams) wants to be aggressive, they'll push the pace at the front to try to catch out riders farther back in the field by forcing splits in the group. You can take (or lose) a lot of time in echelons, and any stage where terrain and weather conditions heighten the chances of crosswinds makes for some edgy, exciting racing as all the riders fight to stay up high in the pack.

The angle of the echelon is an indication of wind strength, as well as the direction it's coming from. Truly devious teams will attack or force the pace from the lee side of the road, which limits or entirely cuts off riders behind them from getting a draft. The French term for this tactic is a *coup de bordure*, and it's the surest way to force a split.

What you're seeing: *The pack in a wedge-shaped formation*



Getty Images

What it is: A direct indication of how hard the field is chasing a breakaway.

Why it happens: Again, [aerodynamics](#). Since each rider is most sheltered when directly behind another rider, this causes the pack to naturally form a wedgelike shape as even the riders up front seek a bit of a draft. The key is the angle of the wedge trailing the lead rider: The sharper it looks, the faster the group is going, which is a direct result of how hard they're chasing. If you see a very thin, sharp-looking wedge, that means the race is really going and that something exciting may be about to happen. If that wedge is slanted to one side of the road, it could be due to a crosswind. You'll see it most often on sprint stages, and usually in the last 20 to 30 kilometers.

What you're seeing: *The pack evenly spread out across the road.*



Getty Images

What it is: The field totally disinterested in riding hard.

Why it happens: This is the corollary to the wedge, when the pace slows enough that the peloton bunches up and there's not much gain from a draft. This happens when the pack has collectively decided that it's okay to let a particular rider or riders build a lead in the breakaway, or when it's trying to delay the catch of said breakaway.

You may see this early in a stage and anytime the pack is trying to let the break stay clear a little longer. The main breakaway in a given stage is usually established early—sometimes from the first kilometer. There's a fierce fight both to make the breakaway, and by teams behind to claw it back if they don't like the makeup of riders in it. Once the mix is right, the pack usually shuts off the chase for a bit to let them gain some time. It's not an exact science. Sometimes a lone rider breaks away, or a small group that can't ride fast enough to really keep the pack at bay.

What you're seeing: *A solo attacker, looking back.*



Getty Images

What it is: A breakaway that's (probably) not gonna make it.

Why it happens: Human nature. While riders use radios to talk strategy with team directors, that information often lags real-time events, so it's not a reliable way for an attacker to gauge how far back the chase is. Looking back isn't always either; with TV and radio motorbikes, photo motos, course marshals, support cars, and more, there's a lot of traffic that can get in the way of a rider's view. But a glance back can usually tell a rider how close the chase is and, with some luck, how fast they're gaining. But it's also a kind of tell. The more you look back, the more concerned you are about the catch.

What you're seeing: *One team leading on a climb.*



Getty Images

What it is: Pacemaking to set up the team leader's move.

Why it happens: Teams pace on climbs to control the race, but the reason differs, depending on what point in the stage the climbs are. In the early or middle part of a stage, teams pacyline multiple riders on a climb to keep a steady gap to the break and discourage other attacks. On later climbs, teams set pace for two different reasons. A team trying to defend a lead will put multiple riders on the front to keep its leader protected, riding at a tempo high enough to discourage attacks, but not so high the team blows up, since they want to conserve numbers to respond to attacks. Slightly slower, defensive racing serves them best, until the final couple of kilometers when the leader may try his own attack. Conversely, a team that's trying to take the lead may try its own pacyline. Their pace is usually a little higher. They don't mind burning off a few riders as long as the attrition also hits other teams, including the race leader's. The idea here is to reduce numbers to the point where the leader has few or no teammates left and is vulnerable to an attack.

What you're seeing: *The pack in a double wedge formation.*



Getty Images

What it is: Dueling leadout trains.

Why it happens: Leadouts are a means for sprint teams to control a race. Leadouts are really hard to do. And not since the days of HTC-Columbia has one team decisively controlled final sprints. So sometimes you see two teams at the front, on opposite sides of the road. They're each trying to impose their will on the other and control the pace and position of their riders. Dueling leadout trains are also a sign that a sprint could be wilder than usual. Watch for this dynamic in the last five kilometers, where more teams will vie for control on the front.

Okay riders, I hope that helps. Until next time,

Make Every Ride Epic,

Darryl