

RIDING IN THE BUNCH

How to Ride in a Group

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Pacelines are organized. They have specific rules. But in big groups like you find in centuries or charity rides, things will be disorganized. This can intimidate even experienced riders. Sooner or later you'll find yourself in a big group amid some riders with sketchy skills. It pays to learn how to survive (and also make yourself welcome) in a crowd.



- **Look for Risky Riders.** These are the unsteady people who wobble, appear nervous, have a tense grip on the handlebar, and frequently grab the brakes. Avoid them! Move up to keep them behind you, or slide to the other side of the road.
- **Stay at the Front.** This is easy to say but hard to do in some groups. At the front you have more control over your destiny because most crashes occur in the rear two-thirds of the bunch. It may take a bit more work to reach the front and stay there, but it's worth the effort.
- **Watch the Wind.** Wind direction determines on which side the greatest draft is found. If the wind is from the right side of the road, smart riders move to the left of the wheel in front of them for greater protection. If you're doing this, beware of overlapping wheels with inexperienced riders. They may swerve and take out your front wheel.
- **Be Wary on Climbs.** A major cause of group crashes is riders who stand abruptly. They slow for a second, causing the rider behind to hit their rear wheel and spill. To avoid this danger, let the gap open a bit on hills or ride a foot to either side.

To avoid being the one who causes such a crash, pull your bike forward as you leave the saddle. Don't lunge and make a hard pedal stroke. Keep your speed steady. When sitting again, push the bike forward a bit.

Cycling isn't a contact sport, but it's not uncommon to have your arm brushed when riding near others in a group. It pays to learn how to bump into other riders without swerving or falling. It's easy when you practice this drill used at the Carpenter-Phinney Bike Camps.

First, go with a cycling friend to a large grassy area like a soccer field. Ride side-by-side at a walking pace. Keep both hands on your bar. Start by gently touching elbows, then shoulders. As you gain confidence, lean more vigorously on the other rider. Soon, you'll be bumping each other with abandon and throwing in a few head butts for fun, all without going down. (Of course, always wear your helmet just in case.)

Riding relaxed is the key to absorbing contact without swerving. Have slightly bent elbows, a firm-not-tight grip on the bar, and loose arm and shoulder muscles. If you're relaxed, your body can absorb the shock before it gets to the handlebar.

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Common Bunch Riding Questions....

How long do I have to pull in a paceline?

Q. After our local training ride, a guy accused me of not pulling through. How much am I supposed to help and how much am I supposed to conserve for my own efforts?

A. Never do more than your share. Judge by speed, length of pulls and what you have at stake. It's not your responsibility to get the group to the finish. Do the minimum that maintains the group speed. To gauge your pulls and to tell if someone is sandbagging, don't guess. Use your speedometer to measure how fast and how long the pulls are. Sounds simple, but so few riders do it.

From June 2000 Bicycling

How long should I pull at the front of the paceline?

Q. How long should I pull at the front of the paceline? I feel guilty when I peel off. Any advice?

A. Tyle Hamilton: When it's your turn at the front, do only the amount of work you're capable of. If you go over your limit, it will catch up with you and you'll get spit off the back of the group. Gauge your effort so you'll have something left by the end. You can soft-pedal back along the passing paceline once your turn is done, but you need a little burst of energy to latch back on to the end. Make sure you can recover before it's time for another turn at the front. If you're feeling tired by the time you get to the front again, shift up a gear and spin for a few seconds--then fall back.

In one of my first races ever, the New England District Championships, I learned the hard way not to overextend myself. I bonked so badly I could barely stand up. It took about eight chocolate Ring Dings and four Cokes before I could see straight again. Anyone who witnessed my display of incompetence is probably still laughing.

TYLER'S 4 TIPS FOR HANGING WITH THE GROUP

Don't jump--or instantly increase the speed of the group when you reach the front. If you're at a place where you can't help but go faster--a slight downhill, a sudden tailwind--or if the goal is to gradually accelerate to a certain pace, do it with a steady increase over the course of your pull.

Don't feel obligated to match the duration of the other riders' pulls. You should match the speed. But there's no shame in taking a shorter turn at the front. A shorter pull that maintains the speed is better than a longer pull that drags everything down at the end--and if you blow, you're no help anymore.

If you get to the front as a hill begins, don't blow yourself out trying to maintain the line's speed up the hill. A decrease in speed is natural. The effort should feel the same--that's the constant in this case.

Set goals instead of just taking a pull until you feel you've had enough. Some good ones: 50 pedal strokes; 60 seconds; to the top of the next hill; 10 telephone poles.

From March 2000 Bicycling magazine

What should I know before riding in a group?

Q. You'd never ride with me, I'm a hazard in a group. I want to get steadier but I'm not even sure what to work on. Can you help?

A. Petra Rossner: Here are the nine things you need to learn to ride in a group.

1. Look back without wobbling. Practice alone: On a straight road, raise one arm level and point it backward. Look over your shoulder and sight along the arm--you'll be able to see if your bike swerves.
2. Know when you're in the draft. Listen for more wind as you draft. When you're in the sweet spot, there's much less noise. Stay there and you can keep your effort and pace steady.
3. Ride within 6 inches of the rider in front of you. Practice with an experienced partner. Start 3 feet away and work your way closer. When you lose your nerve, back off, then approach again. Each time you're within 6 inches, try to stay there slightly longer. Once you can consistently stay closer, it's like suddenly doubling your fitness--you can stay with groups longer and easier.
4. Maintain steady pedal pressure. Find a gear you can keep spinning at your group's typical pace (whether it's 18 or 25 mph). Constant pedaling not only produces more consistent speed than start-and-stop pedaling at higher gears, but it's more efficient and it steadies your bike.

