

Being a Good Paceline Buddy

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There is nothing like riding in a smooth paceline. Miles upon miles just fly by when everyone is working well together. The speed of the pack and the distance you can cover is just amazing. It all makes sense since 25% less energy is needed when drafting compared to riding alone. But being able to ride well in a paceline is not something that comes naturally. It is something that takes instruction and practice, lots of practice.

The only way that a group of riders can ride well together in a paceline is through a mutually shared set of conventions and a whole lot of trust. If you learn how to ride well in a pack the range of people who will ride with you is greatly expanded. If you fail to get the program down, you will be a hazard to both yourself and all of those around you.

Here is a quick summary of the basics for paceline riding as borrowed from articles in *Bicycling* and *Bicycle Guide* over the years. Read it and think about how you ride. Ask your riding companions to critique you openly. We all do stupid things and need to learn from them in order to get better. Nobody's perfect. Be open to constructive criticism and you will improve and become a good paceline buddy.

RIDE A STRAIGHT & STEADY LINE

There are few things uglier than a whole pack crashing due to someone's sketchy-riding. Riding a straight and steady line is the first key to being welcome to ride with almost any pack. Everyone in the line needs to maintain a predictable and steady line and call out and signal anything unusual. Sudden movements laterally across the road put everyone in danger, don't do it.

AVOID COASTING & SUDDENLY BRAKING

Whenever I hear someone coasting in the paceline I get tense. Coasting while in a paceline is very similar to jamming on your brakes, don't do it. Learn how to control your speed without coasting and braking hard. Sudden changes in speed, brought on by coasting and braking hard are transmitted through the paceline like a tsunami, small in the front and huge at the back with potentially disastrous results.

Ride slightly to one side of the rider in front so you can move into the wind to slow down slightly. Adjust your pedal pressure to make subtle adjustments in your speed. Feather your brakes to slow slightly while soft-pedaling. Don't overlap wheels. Be alert and constantly monitor the gap between you and the rider in front, don't space out. Anticipate speed changes by looking ahead.

RIDE A STEADY PACE

There is a common tendency for new riders to surge ahead when they are leading the paceline. This forces everyone in the back to accelerate and makes it especially hard for the rider coming off the front to attach to the rear of the rapidly accelerating pack. Keep the pace steady by checking your computer when you're #2 or #3 in the line to see what speed the pack is travelling at. When you get to the front, maintain a similar pace and peel off prior to slowing down. When the pace is steady a pack can travel far with very little effort. With constant surging everyone gets tired quickly and the pack starts exploding leaving solo riders in its wake. When the terrain changes the pace will naturally drop. To keep the pack together you've just got to play with the pace to see how everyone is doing and back it off if folks are falling off the back or laboring to keep up.

POINT & CALL OUT HAZARDS

The first rider is the eyes and the ears for the whole group. When riding first be extra-alert to any road and traffic hazards. The lead rider first needs to notice the hazard coming up and second has to point out and call out the hazard. The riders in the line need to do the same so everyone in the line gets the word, not just the front riders.

Some of the common calls: "slowing", "stopping", "glass-glass-glass!", "car up!", "car back", "turning" and "gravel". Don't count on others hearing you especially if it's windy or there is a lot of traffic noise. Combine the call with a hand signal. The most common hand signals are: "stopping" = hand behind your back with the open palm facing back; "turning" = arm extended in the direction of the turn; "hole" = point at the hole; "glass" = sweeping motion with the hand showing where the glass is.

Typically a rider in the back of the pack will call out “car back” when the pack needs to move right to allow an overtaking car room. When you hear someone yell “car back” it’s time to get skinny (get as close to the right edge of the road as safe). Don’t be the sole rider who won’t move over holding up traffic just so you can talk to your buddy.

DON’T OVER-LAP WHEELS

Make sure that your front wheel does not overlap the back wheel of the rider in front of you. Any sudden lateral move by the front rider and your front wheel will get knocked out of line and typically cause you to crash. The physics of the matter are simple: the back wheel is very stable and the front is not. Any sudden change in the line of the front wheel can result in loss of control. If you happen to rub tires with the person in front of you avoid your natural tendency to jerk your bike away, because that jerking away is what will put your wheel out of line and cause you to crash. Instead lean into their wheel and gently ease off.

CLOSE UP GAPS

Don’t let gaps (1 bike-length or more) open up between you and the rider in the front of you. There is nothing more frustrating and dangerous to have the folks behind you having to overtake you and sprint for the wheel you just let go. If you’re unable to close the gap, carefully move out of the line (check over your shoulder first so you don’t create a hazard) typically to the left and wave the other riders through on your right before the gap gets big. Typically gaps will open up on a hill, or a jam (speed-up). If you anticipate not being able to hang on, move to the back of the line before the hill so when you fall off you won’t take anyone else with you.

TAKE YOUR TURN AT THE FRONT

Take your turn but don’t campout in the front. For a paceline to work everyone needs to do his or her share of the work. If you’re feeling tired take your turn at the front but make your pull shorter. If you’re really just hanging on by the skin-of-your-teeth, take a couple strokes and pull right off (assuming it’s clear). If you’re feeling stronger you might want to take a little longer pull, but don’t be a hero and hog it. Hogging the front breaks the group’s rhythm and is irritating to the other riders who all want to contribute. By spreading the work around everyone gets a rest and contributes to the group’s effort.

EAT & DRINK IN THE BACK

Avoid eating and drinking when you’re in the front part of the line. There is a natural tendency to swerve and lose pace when eating or drinking. Try to do most of your drinking and eating when you’re in the back. Good riders are able to remove and replace their water bottle without looking and in one smooth motion without changing grip. Practice this when you’re riding alone and you’ll be amazed how good you can get. Opening bar wrappers can be tricky, maybe just pre-slit them prior to the ride.

BE ALERT

Don’t get fixated on the wheel in front of you. Always be looking over the shoulder of the rider in front of you to monitor what’s coming up. Call out and point out hazards wherever you are in the line. The riders in the back can usually best monitor what’s coming up the road from the back. Keep your eyes open and communicate.

OTHER TIPS:

Ban those Aero Bars

Aero bars have no place in pace line riding. Some riders think that it’s ok to ride the aero bars when they’re leading, but that isn’t safe. When you ride your aero bars you don’t have as good control over the bike, you’ll be unable to quickly point out hazards, you’ll be further from your brake levers and you’ll leave almost no draft for the riders behind. If you ride your aero bars in the pack you endanger everyone around you. Don’t ride your aero bars when you’re riding in a pack.

Riding is a Contact Sport

Don’t be afraid of bumping elbows and shoulders with other riders. Keep your upper body relaxed and don’t freak out if you get bumped.

Keep Your Hands on the Hoods

Keep your hands on the hoods when riding in the pack for maximum control. When riding on your hoods you have your hands near your brake levers to allow you to feather the brakes when needed.

Ride a Larger Gear

Typically you'll find it easier to maintain a steady pace when you're riding a slightly higher gear when you're drafting. When you get to the front of the line you'll probably want to drop down a gear or so and spin harder.

Get on the Lee in a Cross-wind

When riding in a crosswind the draft of the rider in front will drift to the lee. For example if we're riding with a cross headwind coming from the left, the draft will be bigger when riding slightly to the right of the rider in front. When road conditions permit it is useful to stagger the line to the lee side. Most of the time however we can't really do that without holding up traffic, bummers.

A little trick that helps, even when we're riding in traffic, is for the first rider to ride as far up-wind as possible and the next rider rides just leeward of him and repeat it through the line. Even if the road is pretty tight, by staggering every other rider, every two riders gets a little bigger draft.

Shorter Folks Sit Up In Front

If you're like me, on the short side, you might want to sit up when you're leading the line so the folks behind you have got some kind of draft to work from. When a 6+ foot tall person is trying to get the draft off a person who is 5'4" who's on his drops, there isn't much there. If the shorter person sits up the draft does increase significantly. Give the taller folks a break my short brothers & sisters sit up!

Rotate to the Left

Theoretically the paceline would rotate into-the-wind. However due to our narrow roads and traffic conditions it makes more sense to consistently rotate to the left. The rider who's pulling off the front would check over his left shoulder to make sure the way is clear and then slide off to the left and work his way to the back.

In a big (10+-person) paceline it can be a long way to the back. If a car's coming up on the group when the rider is sliding to the back then the rider needs to make it clear to the riders around him that he needs to drop into the line where ever they are. This can be accomplished by extending out their right arm and saying "dropping in". The rider who's opening up the gap should say "drop in" while the riders in the rear have to know to ease off a bit. The rider should not drop in until the back rider has opened up a gap leaving a large enough space to fit. Caution and communication are key.

Look Over Your Shoulder Before Making a Move

Always know what's going on around you both in the front and the back. Make sure that you look over your shoulder looking for overlapping wheels and over-taking cars before making any lateral moves, like coming off after your pull at the front.

Be Careful When Standing

Be aware that most rider's rear wheels jump around a bit when standing on hills. If you're standing, be aware of this and do your best to ride smoothly without throwing your back wheel around. If you're following, be cautious if you think the rider in front is going to stand, back off a bit.

In Heavy Traffic Break Up the Big Pack

When the traffic is heavy, it's a good idea to break big pacelines (10+) up into smaller packs of 5-6 riders. The reasons for doing this are safety and road courtesy. Sure, we can hog the road and back up traffic for miles if we feel like it, but really what's the point here. In the process we just give cyclists a bad name and possibly endanger ourselves in the process. When the pack is big it makes it a lot harder for cars to overtake us. By cutting down the numbers in each pack the time it takes the lead rider to drop to the back is shortened considerably. Also in big packs riders are not as aware of the traffic conditions as they tend to be in smaller packs. Save the big pack stuff for roads where there is more room and traffic is lighter.