

What You Need to Know **Before You Go on Your First Bike Ride with a Group**

So, you've been riding your bike alone for all these years or maybe occasionally with another person and you're deciding that maybe you'd like to join a group. Maybe you just bought a fancy new bike and you'd like to do the same. Riding with a group of cyclists for the first time can be a pretty scary undertaking even without all the tight spandex...

Will I be able to keep up? Will my bike be good enough? Will I know anybody? Will they wait for me if I get behind? What if I cause a crash? What if I can't get up that hill? How do you use all those gears? What if I have a flat? What should I wear? How far do they go? How fast they go? Will I make any new friends?...and there's probably lots more going through a rookie group rider's mind.

The biggest difference between riding a bike solo and riding a bike in a group of cyclists is that now you are not just worrying about yourself but you have an implied responsibility for the safety of others in the group and that is determined by how you ride as a part of that group...more on that in a bit.

The best things that happen when you ride with a group of people, are that you make new friends, you gain self-confidence, you learn new skills involving cycling, you get to reduce the effect of the wind by getting behind another cyclist and the fringe benefit of all of this is that through improving your fitness you also improve your quality of life in a variety of ways. Cycling in any of its forms is one of the best ways of improving heart health while being easy on your joints.

What we like to tell people who are joining our group for the first time is that above all else, the way you operate your bike, needs to be predictable. That means that you ride in a very straight line, that you signal when you are slowing down or making any kind of maneuver to change your position in the pack. When we ride in groups we normally ride two abreast and will be following the bicycles in front of us within anywhere from 10 cm to a metre in order to gain any kind of advantage from a headwind.

So how do you ride safely in such close quarters? It certainly can be done. Last year the Silver Spokes Cycling club had an accident free season. The club has group rides every day of the week except Friday and there was not a single crash incident.

Let's look at how exactly you can become a safe rider. While you are riding along, the key concept to keep in mind is that you do not want to touch the wheel of the bike in front of you. If two bike wheels touch each other, it will be the trailing bike that usually goes down. You are responsible for how you follow another vehicle just as you would be in a car. Now here is where the safe riders are separated from the sketchy ones (and I would say that the majority of our gang belongs to the first group) A safe rider does not accelerate quickly or brake hard. A safe rider does not swerve off of a straight path. A safe rider will always

have a right hand on the rear brake ready to “tap” on it if necessary. Note that bicycles do not have brake lights to signal slowing like cars do, so the only signal that the trailing rider may get that the bicycle ahead is slowing is that the back wheel of the bike ahead is suddenly closer...yikes...don't touch that wheel or you go down. Tap on your brake too hard and guess what? The person behind you has to take evasive action. Do they, in turn, brake hard or maybe have to veer off...oh no... into the person beside them or the ditch to avoid contact with the wheel in front? Now we're beginning to see the domino effect of group riding.

So, how do we avoid the dreaded wheel touch? For beginning riders and all but the most experienced we suggest never overlapping your front wheel with the back wheel of the bike in front of you. Overlapping means coming closely up behind the bike in front on either side of the wheel so that if the rider in front swerved slightly to your side, your front wheel would get touched. Ouch! Torn spandex and road rash.

Now as a group rider, you have a responsibility to keep other riders in the pack, particularly the one right behind you, safe. Here is how you do that. The bottom line is that your changes of speed and direction should be subtle, predictable and communicated. As you ride along realize that if you find yourself needing to brake suddenly, that effect will go right down the line and someone may go down. As you follow the bike in front, focus more ahead of that bike for anything unusual while maintaining a safe distance behind the wheel. If you find that you are losing ground on the wheel in front, accelerate slowly until you catch up and decrease pressure on your pedals as you regain position. Using brakes even lightly should be a last resort. You can also sit more upright to allow the wind to catch your upper body to slow you down ever so slightly. If for some reason you do need to brake more than just a slight tap call out “slowing” or give the slowing signal with your left hand to the riders behind you.

What about things like cracks in the pavement, potholes and other road hazards? Remember that we want to be predictable. Braking hard or veering off course in a group may spell disaster. In groups it is the responsibility of the lead riders to call out or signal road hazards like cracks or holes so the whole group can negotiate the obstacles subtly and safely. We don't want anyone having to quickly veer off line to miss a pothole or road kill.

When we teach group skills to people new to the activity we suggest that a great goal to aspire to when becoming a group rider is to be that rider that everyone else wants to follow because they know that you will follow a predictable line, avoid hard braking and accelerating because you are always conscious of the person behind while taking care not to touch a wheel yourself.

So we know how much fun riding with a pack of riders can be. When the group works together by staying in close proximity all the riders benefit. Riders who want to challenge themselves stay closer to the front where more effort is required to cut through the wind and as you place yourself further to the back of the pack the effects of the wind are greatly reduced. So if you need a bit of a

break from the wind or you feel that the designated pace is plenty fast for you, can “hide” in the group...and there is nothing wrong with that.

There are so many more things that would be interesting for a new rider to know like changing a flat and general bike maintenance, the effective use of gears, efficient spinning technique, nutrition, hydration and so much more, however safety is always paramount and having read this article will give you a taste of the culture of safety within a cycling group. We all look out for each other.

And by the way; we have rides for all ability and experience levels that cover different distances at pre-set average speeds. You will make many new friends and nobody gets left behind.

If you made it this far...thanks for reading...and stay safe

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