

Join the Pack Safely

SIMPLE, SMART WAYS TO LEARN GROUP-RIDING SKILLS

By: Alexa Stieda

I can still remember back 30 years to my first successful group ride as a junior in Vancouver, British Columbia. It was empowering to feel accepted by the seasoned riders and exhilarating to feel the sheer force of a group of cyclists versus the speed I could achieve on my own. To get there I learned lessons the hard way, just like most riders--pros and recreational alike--who pick up pack skills on the fly, through observing, trying, getting cussed at and eventually catching on. Here are key skills to master before jumping into a group.

Pedal smoothly. First things first: You need to learn to ride steady on your own. Many beginners use too low a cadence, which makes the bike surge forward with every pedal stroke--annoying and even dangerous in a group. I recommend riding at least at 90 revolutions per minute (rpm) on every ride. Keeping your cadence high will also allow you to adjust to speed changes in small increments, rather than braking or all-out acceleration. To keep your rpm constant, change gears frequently to match the terrain and wind conditions. Remember: Don't look down at your bike's drivetrain as you shift. Practice solo until you can do it by feel.

Get close and be predictable. Packs are most often formed of one or two lines of riders to maximize the wind-breaking benefits. To feel the draft, go with one or two other riders to a quiet, flat road and practice riding single file. Gently move laterally a foot or so to find the space where there is the least wind resistance. That's the sweet spot. This position will vary depending on where you are relative to the wind, much like sailing.

Take turns at the front to share the work. When you're ready to pull off the front, let the rider behind know with a hand or voice signal, check over your shoulder for cars, gradually pull out of line and then ease up just enough to drift slowly to the back of the group. Next, ride two by two, trying to get within an arm's reach of the shoulder next to you. You should be riding near enough to carry on a conversation without those behind you hearing what you are saying--really, that close. Build to a group of four to six riders before you join a larger pack.

Look ahead. No matter where you are in the pack, it is essential that you watch the road surface in front of the group. Those at the front should be pointing out dangerous objects coming up--holes, rocks, dogs and the like--but everyone is responsible for sharing this awareness. Gaining confidence in lifting your gaze from the wheel in front of you takes time, but you can jump-start it by going to a grass field with a friend and riding single file to practice. You'll find it's not so hard if you both ride steadily and predictably.

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