

An aerial photograph of a cycling race, showing several cyclists in various colored jerseys (red, white, blue, green, purple) riding on a paved road. A large white circle is superimposed over the center of the image, containing the title and introductory text.

# Group dynamics

Cycling in a bunch is more about communication than technique, whether it's a big summer sportive or a local club ride.

**Steve Thomas** has some tips



**W**ith spring on the horizon, you can start to think again about big rides in the sunshine. If you've tended to ride on your own until now, try cycling in a group. It's a different experience. Take your pick from your local CTC group ride, a sportive, a reliability ride, or even a fitness-focused 'chain gang'. Whichever you try, there are similar issues when you're riding in close proximity to other cyclists.

Watching a Tour de France peloton turn and wheel like a flock of birds on TV, you'd almost think the riders were telepathic. But it all comes down to well-developed cycling skills, good communication, and a mutual understanding and respect for each other's safety. When you're not riding this quickly and the stakes aren't as high, you don't need such finely honed abilities. Nevertheless, the same group-riding principles apply.

As with any technique it takes time to learn well, but knowing just the basics will make the ride easier and safer for everyone. Riding like a solo cyclist in a bunch is an easy way to cause an argument – or a pile-up.

### Following a wheel

'Riding a wheel', 'on the wheel', and 'following a wheel' are common cycling expressions that many of us are familiar with. Yet following a wheel is not simply a case of riding behind another rider: it's doing so safely and to best effect. The main reason for bunch riding – beyond the sociability aspect – is to work together to make a ride easier and faster by fighting the wind as one unit. Effectively 'riding the wheel' makes this much more efficient.

You want to gain as much shelter from the wind as possible from the rider(s) in front, thus reducing your effort output. You also need to keep safe. To do this you need to see how the rider ahead rides: is he or she riding smoothly and consistently? Or constantly in and out of the saddle, accelerating and decelerating? How predictable is that rider? This will determine how close to them you can ride while staying safe.

In a relaxed situation like a club ride you can ride around a metre behind. But if the pace goes up, as it will during a chain-gang and may



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do on a sportive, you need to stay closer and ride smoother. The wind direction determines the best place for you to ride, and is the reason for the echelons you see in pro racing. But for most everyday purposes you'll just be riding behind.

Don't ride exactly behind. Allow for an overlap to the open side of the road, so you're staggered slightly. But don't actually overlap: stay six inches back at the very least, even if you're a superb bike handler, because the rider in front might suddenly move out to avoid a pothole. If you touch wheels, you could easily crash – and possibly both of you.

If you cannot hold your pace and position in the bunch, it's time to signal to the riders behind and then slowly move over and let them come forward. A shout and a gesture to the side before doing so is essential.

### Where and when to ride

The best place to position yourself in a bunch differs depending on whether it's a club run or a more competitive ride like some sportives. And it depends on a compendium of other factors: objectives; road and weather conditions; duration; terrain; how you're feeling; whether there are stronger or weaker cyclists in the group; and so on.

On a leisure or club ride, things are more relaxed. Unless you've got a rider or two who wants to take the lion's share of the work, the ride will be a social affair in which everyone works together and shares the load in a revolving chain two riders wide.

In a sportive situation, other riders may expect you to take turns on the front of the bunch. Shirking your stint will not make you very popular, and may be remembered and repaid later by the other riders. So if you can, take your turn on the front. You don't have to ride yourself ragged; even a token stint on the front is appreciated. If you are suffering or you're not as strong as the other riders in the group, stay further back and enjoy an easier ride. Don't be intimidated by other riders: they may treat the sportive like an important race but it's really not. You want to ensure you have enough energy to finish your ride.

In a sportive – or a race, for that matter – it helps to be towards (but not on) the front of a group. You've got a better view of what's going on, so you are less likely to find yourself in trouble if accidents occur, and it's easier to react properly when you make turns and climbs. Riding in the middle of the bunch is where most riders will find themselves most of

## Esperanto for cyclists

Warning shouts for cyclists vary from place to place, but the seven here are pretty common. The shouts start from either the front or rear of the group, and should be passed on through the bunch.

### 'Out' or 'Swing out'

There is usually an obstacle – a car or a slower rider – on the inside of the road, so move over.

### 'Car up' or 'Single out'

Usually a car behind, or sometimes a jam ahead. Get into single file.

### 'Right/left/inside'

A rider behind is coming past, so hold your line.

### 'Come through'

Come and take your turn at the front.

### 'Up'

Either a late warning of a pothole or obstacle, or a rider wants to slip in front of you.

### 'Swing up' or 'Swing off'

Swing off the front of the group and let someone else take a turn there.

### 'Easy' or 'Ease up'

Ease off the pace. Someone is having trouble behind, or a possible hazard has been spotted ahead.



(Above) It's unlikely there will be jostling, but the first hour of a sportive will see riders settle into their preferred rhythm and pace for the ride

the time. It's fine as long as you stay alert. What's happening up at the front? Have you got room to glide out of trouble if someone ahead suddenly brakes?

In a small bunch or on a social ride, the back of the group is a good place to recoup energy. In a sportive with would-be racers, it's not such a good place to ride. Whenever the bunch slows down, for a corner or climb, you get a kind of 'traffic bunching' effect, and those at the back have to slow down more quickly and then accelerate harder to compensate.

Don't worry about your position in the bunch too much. You will find yourself in all of these positions at some time or other. If you do want to make time – say it's a sportive and you want a fast finishing time – don't squander your energy. Be patient. Look for opportunities to move forward during lulls in the pace. Look for gaps in front of you that you can move into. Move forward on the path of least resistance.

### All for one

Cyclists riding close together can go down like dominoes if someone makes a mistake. To stay safe, you're reliant on the riders around you cycling smoothly, as they are on you.

The key thing to remember is to ride fluidly; it's sudden, jerky reactions that cause problems in a bunch.

Always remain aware of the riders around you, especially those behind. Staying relaxed is a huge factor here. Have confidence in the rider ahead of you. But if his or her riding makes you nervous, ride behind someone you do have faith in. Always brake steadily, not sharply. If you have to brake quickly, glance to your side and shout to the riders behind.

When you stand up on the pedals, get out of the saddle smoothly and stand upright. Don't lunge forward as you get onto the pedals, as this can push your bike back relative to those of the other riders... possibly into someone's front wheel!

If you intend to change position in the group, always check around you. If you need to move out, make sure the riders around you know. Tell them verbally or use a hand

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gesture – or, better still, both. Then manoeuvre smoothly.

If there's a corner, an obstacle or a pothole ahead, pass the word on to the riders behind you. If you get caught up in a developing incident, try to remain calm. Swerving out of a situation could cause even more carnage behind you.

If you need to look behind, do so when it's clear, as you will almost certainly drift sideways otherwise. This can be dangerous in a bunch.

When you need to blow your nose, either move out sideways or blow it into your hand and hurl it down low. Blowing snot on riders isn't pleasant.

### Get in line

It's rare that you'll ride on closed roads in Britain, so forget the big sweeping manoeuvres you see pro racers pull off on TV, where they swing from one side of the road to the other. You won't be doing this, and there are many situations where you'll need to ride in single file instead.

Err on the side of caution. Get into single file when you have a narrow road without a clear view ahead, a wet or blind corner or descent, or when you have traffic behind that can overtake safely. (Note that often

double file is safer, as drivers can then overtake the whole bunch in one manoeuvre rather than pulling out and realising part way that they won't get past you all.)

Listen for the chants of 'car up' or 'single out' echoing through the bunch, and a Mexican wave of hands showing you to move in (see 'Sign language for cyclists'). The rider on the outside is normally the one who should slip behind the rider in front, while other riders ease off or accelerate slightly to allow gaps to appear and be filled.

On training rides, single file 'line-outs' occur regularly as the pace increases. These are designed to make life easier and faster by leaving just the front rider(s) to handle the wind. As ever, the idea is to keep the pace smooth and consistent. Try not to vary the effort too much when the second rider in the line takes the lead. The front rider usually moves out a metre and eases slightly for the following rider to take the lead, and then maintains his or her pace, slipping back into the group at the rear or further down the line.

### Sportive survival

In a sportive event you can find yourself surrounded by hundreds or



(Above) Riding two abreast is sociable, allowed by the Highway Code, and often safer than single file

even thousands of riders. Experience and fitness levels can be wildly different. Any problems will usually manifest in the first hour or so, as the participants find their own level and the field begins to thin out. So stay alert at the start in particular, and don't ride too fast then.

As the event moves on, you will find your own rhythm. Keep at a pace you find comfortable, but 'surf' between groups as necessary. Follow wheels and keep sheltered, so you can move along with less effort. Avoid erratic solo riders and look to hop on and off the back of faster groups for a free ride, especially into the wind. Don't overtax yourself on the climbs, when groups fragment.

## Sign language for cyclists

Hand signals are often the easiest and clearest way to signal in a group. They're best combined with a shout – and should be passed through the group.



#### We're going right/left

A straightforward hand signal in the direction of the turn, sometimes pointed and waved. NB. A bolder signal is better to inform other road-users.



#### Move in/move out

A sweeping gesture with a cupped hand, showing the need to move in to the side of the road (singling out) or out to get around an obstacle like a parked car.



#### I'm changing my position in the group

Pointing and holding the hand there for a while, showing the direction a rider is intending to move to *within* the group.



#### Slow down

An up and down patting of the hand to the side.



#### Come past me/come through

A knee-level wave forward, gesturing the rider behind to come past.



#### Pothole/obstacle

Pointing at thigh level in the direction of an obstacle, sometimes with a wagging hand.

#### I have a problem

Not illustrated here, this is signalled by one arm up in the air, as if you were putting your hand up to vote or ask a question. It could be a puncture or a natural break required.