

Riding with the Group

Club cycling implies riding with others. Because it doesn't happen automatically, cyclists who want to ride with others usually adopt one of three tactics, or a combination of tactics, to increase the likelihood that this will happen. You might choose to become so fit that you can ride with most anyone, slow or fast. Riding with a fast group also implies a high level of skill and some degree of aggressiveness. On the other hand, you might choose to bring a friend to the ride, someone whose level of cycling ability and goals for the day match your own. Or you may choose to become astute in picking the best ride for you, i.e., finding the rides most likely to attract others who have similar goals for the day.

The bright side of all this is that as you become a seasoned veteran of club cycling, you will quickly improve as a cyclist in all three areas: You will become fitter; you will develop cycling friendships; and you will become very savvy at picking your rides to match your goals. As with any sporting club, some patience will lead to improved experiences in the sport.

Picking the Ride

Fitness and friendship are important, but coaching you in those areas is beyond the scope of this short article. In contrast, picking the ride is not hard to learn and is mostly a matter of carefully studying the club Calendar or Impromptu Ride notice. Scan the ride notice for key words. "Fast-Friends Friday," "Show and Go," "100 miles hilly" and "legs of steel" should reveal something to you. Rides marked "Slow-and-Easy" or "Sweep" indicate that the ride leader or his appointee will ride in the back with the slowest person. "Food" and "Social" should tip you off to some other characteristics of the day's plans. If you still have questions, call the ride leader whose name and telephone number are listed with the ride notice. Every RBC ride has a leader, and one of the leader's responsibilities is to welcome new riders and to answer questions about the nature of the ride he or she is leading. If you are unsure of your abilities as a cyclist, choose a ride that you are reasonably sure is within your ability. You can always bump it up another notch the following weekend.

Starting, Stopping and Turns

A group of cyclists is like school of fish or flock of birds, all moving together. For safety reasons, this movement needs to proceed smoothly: Sudden changes in speed are anathema. You are expected to announce a slowing of your speed, even when it's obvious that an intersection is coming up, with the verbal announcement, "Slowing." Do not stand to accelerate without first looking behind, because standing initially causes your bike to suddenly slow down. Do not brake suddenly.

Ride in a straight line. Pay close attention to the road ahead, because if you are unexpectedly confronted with the choice of either running over a pothole or zigging to the left, thus bumping into one of your mates and causing him to fall, you have to run over the pothole.

You are expected to call out obstructions such as potholes and gravel that can cause the cyclists behind you to fall. Use voice and hand signals to indicate when you are going to turn. Look around to be sure that you are not turning into another cyclist or into the path of other traffic. Announce when you are stopping. When stopped, get off the pavement so as to not cause a cycling traffic jam.

Pass other traffic on the left. You are not expected on the right. Especially do not pass city busses and other cyclists on the right. When overtaking, give an audible warning well in advance of the action. Shouting “on your left” at the last moment or using your bell at the last moment is not helpful and merely frightens the other person into doing unpredictable things.

A benefit of Club membership is the booklet “[Bicycling Street Smarts](#)” by John S. Allen.

Getting Dropped

Cycling by its nature involves the riders’ testing each other and riding at the pace that each feels is stimulating yet sustainable for the chosen distance and terrain. Cyclists can be dropped (left behind) if they do not have friends present or others in the group who are committed to not doing this. Unless you are the World’s Greatest Cyclist, getting dropped will happen to you eventually, and it’s important to not take it personally. It’s part of the nature of the sport. Even the divine Eddy Merckx got dropped a few times. Unlike tennis, ice fishing, bowling and golf where the gang sticks together for the whole game no matter their ability levels, their competitiveness or their natural gifts, cycling requires an effort to keep the group together. Slowing down can often be more effective than trying in vain to speed up: Be aware of how the others are arrayed along the route, and slow down, if you are alone, and if you know there is someone behind you who is trying to catch up. It’s often safer and more enjoyable to ride with another cyclist.

Pack Riding

Two or more cyclists may choose to ride in a pack, staying close enough together that they can talk to each other and also so that they can shelter each other from the energy-robbing wind. When each cyclist takes a turn riding at the front of the pack, it’s called a pace line and the front rider is “taking a pull.” In order to be effective, a pace line requires the cyclists to ride quite close together, and in order to be relatively safe, a pace line requires experience, discipline and hyper alertness of all participants. Since a minor mistake by one cyclist in a pace line can cause several cyclists to fall to the unyielding blacktop, everyone in the group needs to agree to be there, they need to know the risks, and they need to be skilled at this type of riding. True pace lines are rare on RBC rides, but riding in a closely-spaced pack is not, and it requires all of the same acceptance of risk, the same skills, the same alertness and the same sense of personal responsibility. If you are unfamiliar with pack riding, the club offers clinics where the details of road safety are addressed.