



Safer Group Rides

Almost all of us who have ridden in groups for a while know friends who have been accidentally hurt. It's not difficult to assure that group rides are safer.



CYCLE HANDOUT

Have a Leader

Leaders lead. Leaders must not be afraid to be unpopular occasionally.

Before You Start Riding

Until safer riding is established, and whenever new riders join a group, discuss safety before riding.

Once safer group riding is established, occasional group reminders may still be necessary.

Plan for regrouping several times. Have a plan for regrouping if changing lights separate a group.

Have a policy about waiting for/assisting riders with flats and mechanical problems.

Let riders know the route. If the route is unknown, riders will worry about getting lost and ride through lights.

Name names. Riders who know each other tend to be more concerned about each other's welfare.

Riders have a responsibility to communicate with the ride leader if they plan to leave the ride early so that others don't wait or look for absent riders.

Vehicle Code

Laws must be obeyed. There is no alternative. A bicycle is a vehicle in most states. Riders are often unclear about the meaning of a stop sign or traffic lights. Illuminate them.

Sometimes riders are confused about what to do in certain situations. For example, if a group approaches a stop sign, do only the first riders need to stop-may the others ride through as a pack?

If in doubt about what you should do in a traffic situation, sometimes, the "cop rule" helps: "What would you do if a traffic officer were watching?"

Think: "group." If the first rider coming to a yellow light goes through, others may be tempted to run the light. Don't risk the safety of your group.

Ride slowly in urban areas. If the group splits because of a traffic light and you are racing, trailing riders will be tempted to run the light.

Have a Structure to the Ride

For example, stay together for a certain distance (perhaps doing training exercises such as one-legged riding, big gears, small gears, sprints, etc.).

Anarchy/free-for-all sections should be predefined and work better towards the end of rides. Stronger riders may be happier to ride with reduced intensity, allowing groups to work more smoothly together, knowing that a faster section is coming.

Keep Groups Small

Depending upon the skill of the riders, speed of the group, traffic, and size of the road, a small group might be 6 to 20 riders. Have an assistant ride leader for each small group if possible.

Especially along narrow or urban roads, split into smaller groups.

Riders act more responsibly in smaller groups. Cyclists develop a different mentality in large groups.

Faster groups leave first. If groups coalesce at traffic lights, divide up again.

In the structured sections, the faster-paced group can loop around for slower riders.

Sure, it can be fun to ride in a large group, but danger increases. Ride in large groups only in non-urban areas, and only when individuals have mastered group riding skills and etiquette.

Continued



Notice Unsafe Riding

If dangerous behaviors are noted, discuss them with the group. For example, riders occasionally may not have considered the importance of looking back before changing position and have only to be told of this simple maneuver to increase pack safety. Avoid embarrassing individuals. If dangerous behaviors continue, counsel individually. Consider remedial drills. If dangerous behaviors still persist, forbid participation.

If your group acts irresponsibly, it is very easy for it to develop a bad reputation with local motorists and/or the police. It may take years to restore a good reputation. This hurts you, your group or club, or other riders.

Pacelining, Group, and Other Skills

Riders do better if taught these important skills. Unfortunately, riders are often initially exposed to riding etiquette only when they make mistakes. Unfortunately, they may be yelled at and discouraged. For more specific information about these skills, see references 2 or 3 below.

Equipment

Safety equipment lessens accident severity. Helmets are proven lifesavers. Gloves reduce traumatic and overuse injuries. Encourage all riders to use these safety measures, or forbid their group riding.

If defective equipment is noted, don't let riders participate.

Give Riders the Tools for Safer Riding

When a "safer riding" policy is initiated, spend significant time and energy alerting your group to this policy. Depending upon the group, consider a class to teach skills and road etiquette.

Ride Extra

It helps team building to have a meeting place after the ride—a local coffee shop or bagel place—where you can discuss what went well with the ride, what you need to work on, or an upcoming event.

For More Information

1. *Bicycling Medicine*, Arnie Baker, M.D., Simon & Schuster, 1998. Accident scene and general bicycling medical care, diagnosis, and treatment.
2. *The Essential Cyclist*, Arnie Baker, M.D., The Lyon Press, New York, 1998. Cycling safety.
3. *Smart Cycling*, Arnie Baker, M.D., Simon & Schuster, 1997. Group riding principles, including pacelines.
4. *Cycle Coach Certification*, Arnie Baker, M.D., Leukemia Society of America, Tucson, Nov. 1998.
5. *Effective Cycling*, John Forester, The MIT press, 1994. The cyclist as a vehicle.

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