

Ride Like A Pro: Group Ride Rules!

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by Simeon Green

There are a series of basic rules to follow in order to ride properly in a group, and yet it is often surprising how few people know these rules.

You might think this doesn't apply to you, after all, you are a Cat 1 and winner of the Thursday night or Saturday morning World Championships... so like I said, it's amazing how many people don't know how to ride in a group. If you are new to the sport, this will help for your next group ride, if you are old to the sport, this should be a useful recap of what you already know.

Rule 1: It's Not a Race

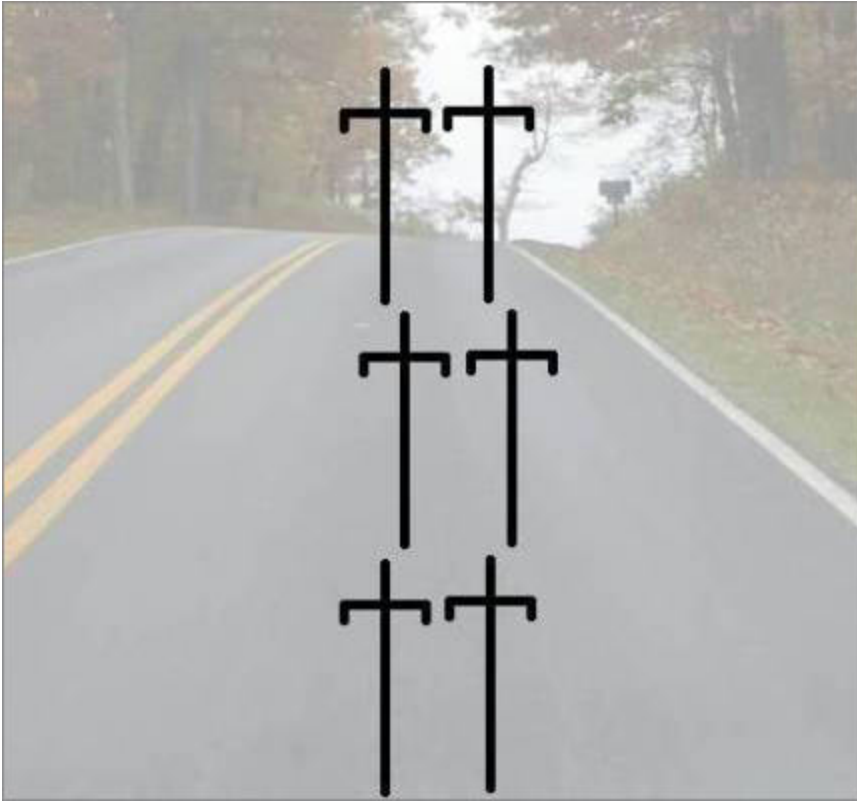
A group ride is NOT a race. You are not to "Attack" off the front or try to show everyone how strong you are. That's what races are for.



This is not how your group ride should look.

Rule 2: Bar-to-Bar

This is probably THE most important rule. Whenever riding in a group you should be riding 2 by 2, side by side (with only a few centimeters between you, you should not be able to fit a bus between you and rider beside you) and be perfectly handlebar to handlebar.



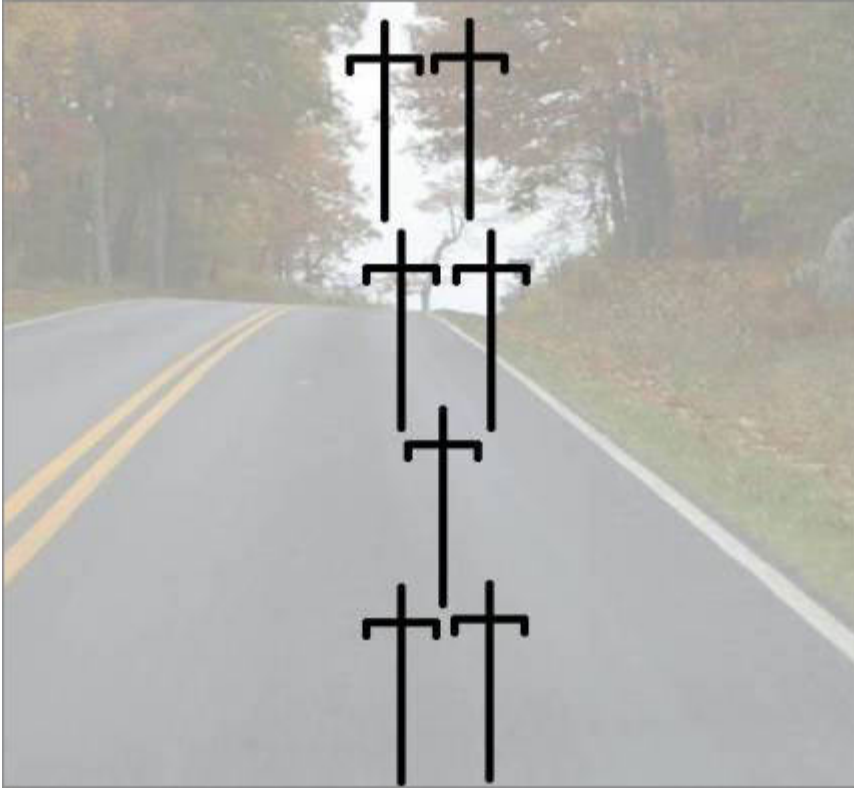
Do not at any time sprint ahead and disrupt the flow. Even if there is a corner coming up, stay side by side and go through the corner like a well oiled machine. Riding with your bars ahead of the rider beside you is called "half-wheeling" and is a major faux pas. It's up to you to keep up with the speed of the slower rider next to you. And for goodness sake, please try to keep to the side of the road, there is no need to take over the whole lane and annoy car drivers.



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Bar to bar - keep it tight.

As with everything, there is an exception to the rule. If there is an uneven number of riders in the group and you don't have anyone to ride along side, you should place yourself in between the two riders ahead of you, with your front wheel between their two rear wheels. This allows the riders behind you to remain bar to bar and to keep the group tightly together. The riders behind you should ride with their front wheels either side of your rear wheel. It's not acceptable to sit directly behind the rider ahead of you and leave a gap to your side.



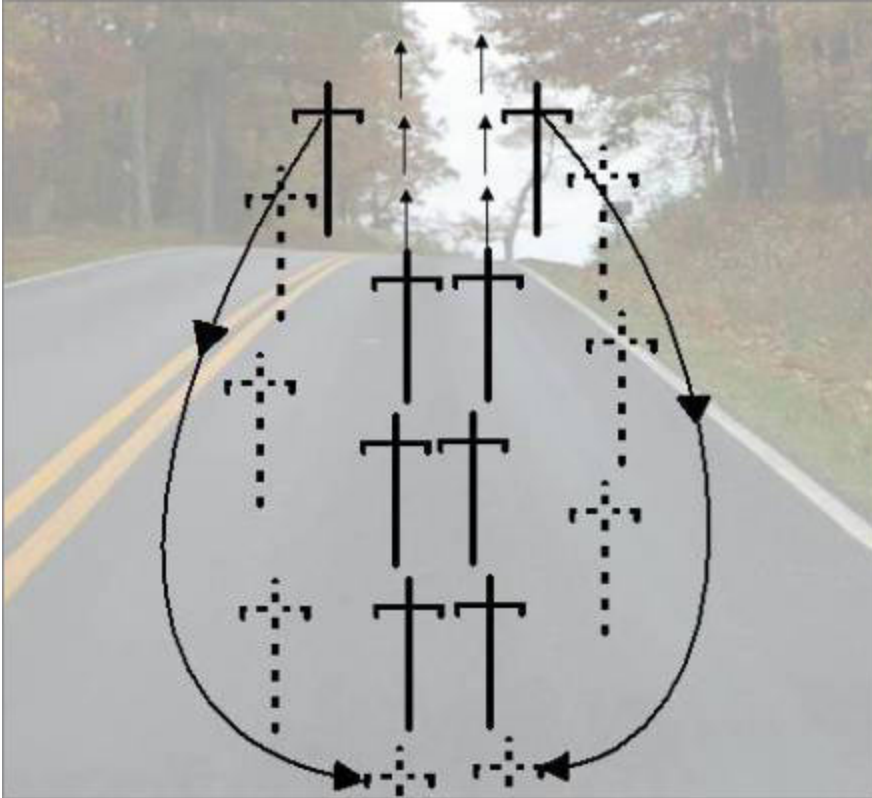
Now, before you spark up and say that riding between the wheels of the riders preceding you is unsafe, let me point out, that if everyone is riding bar to bar as they should be, you are guaranteed the space of a handlebar's width within which to move, which should be ample. So even if the two riders ahead of you knock into each other, you should have plenty of space. This is a pretty safe place to be.

Rule 3: Peeling Off

When you are tired of riding at the front (or after about 30 seconds...which ever comes first), and you feel it is time for you to go to the back, make sure the rider beside you knows you are tired and want to go back. Once you have both established that you are going back, check briefly that there isn't someone overlapping your back wheel, then both riders slowly and gradually move to the outside and let the group come through the middle. Do not suddenly veer off to the side, peel off in a steady and controlled manner.

Rule 4: Pulling Through

When the two riders ahead of you peel off, it is your job to come through to the front and pull the group along. If you do not want to ride at the front because you are tired or less fit than the rest of the group, it's too late to avoid it now. Once you are in second wheel, you **MUST** come through to the front. Do not speed up, and do not get out of the bar-to-bar formation. Maintaining a steady speed, squeeze through the gap and go to the front (Fig 3). When the two riders ahead of you peel off, don't slow down and look around as if you don't know why on earth they would be pulling off to the sides of the group. Maintain your speed and go straight through without hesitation.



Rule 5: Too Tired To Go To The Front If you do not want to go to the front, sit at the back and let the riders coming back from the front of the group slot in ahead of you. It is not acceptable to work your way up to the front of the group and then look around acting lost and confused, slowing down because you don't feel strong enough to be at the front. If for whatever reason you do find yourself at the front, go through and take what is known as a "token pull". You go to the front for a couple seconds, agree with the rider beside you that you are both peeling off, and go to the back.

Rule 6: Gaps There should be NO gaps in a group ride. As soon as you see a gap, fill it by riding into the space in a steady and controlled manner. There is no need to sprint into the space and then slam on the brakes, just gradually fill in any gaps as soon as you see them.

Rule 7: Moving About In A Group If you need to go to the back of the group, or need to move out away from the side of road because the road is damaged (for example), just steadily move in whatever direction you want to go in. The key to all group riding is to do things gradually and steadily. Even if there is a rider right next to you as you pull out to the side of the road, if you do it gradually, the other rider will naturally have time to move over with you. If you do anything sudden you will likely cause a crash. This is also very important when "peeling off" and "filling a gap".



Any questions? The pros at training camp demonstrate this fundamental well - obstacles and other such problems of the road are easily indicated with a simple point.

Rule 8: Obstacles and Hand Signals: Now, this is a very important rule. I've recently seen in both the US and Australia that people in group rides have gotten into the habit of yelling. I'm not too sure where this habit has come from, so let's set a few records straight.

When you see a hole in the road, it is absolutely NOT acceptable to yell "HOLE" at the top of your voice, then weave around it at the last minute. It is also unacceptable to yell "SLOWING" when you slow down. If you can't see the riders in front of you are slowing down, then maybe you should stick to monopoly on a Sunday afternoon.

All obstacles should be warned of by a simple hand signal. This does not mean pointing at something for 5 minutes after you have passed it. When you see an obstacle in the road ahead of you, put your hand down and give a signal that lets the riders behind you know in which direction they should go to avoid it. Traditionally a quick wave of the hand will suffice.

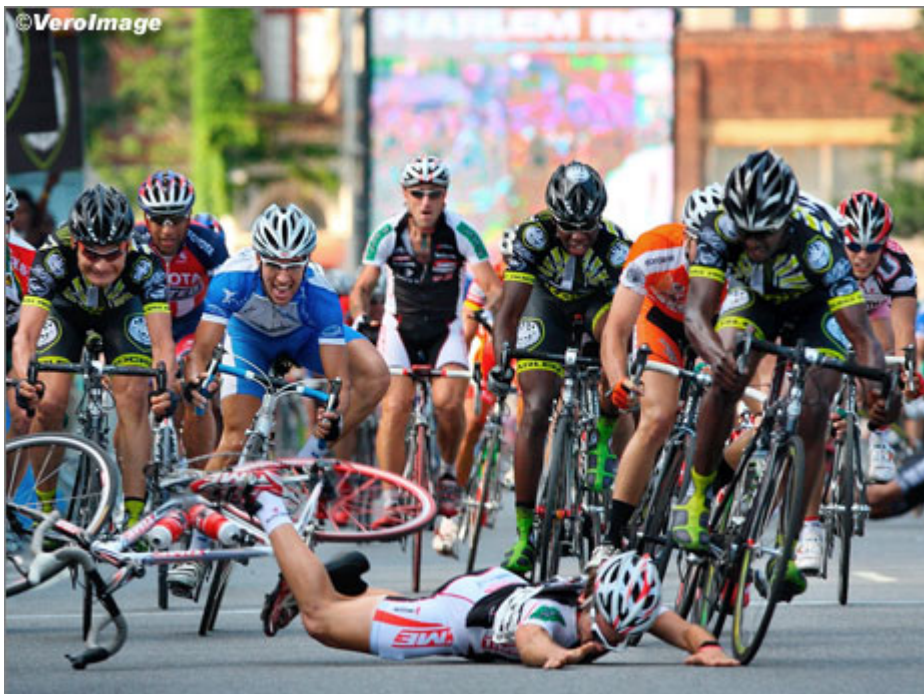
If you only see the obstacle at the last minute, ride through it! Better to get a flat than to take down the whole group. On the subject of obstacles, please only point out those that are worth pointing out.

What obstacles are worth pointing out? I hear you cry. That's simple. An obstacle worth pointing out is one that will damage a bike or person behind you. Please don't point out manhole covers unless they are deeply set in the road, and don't point out leaves or small cracks in the road, and certainly don't point out obstacles in the next lane.

Rule 9: Yelling As I have said above, yelling is a big no-no. You don't see the Pros riding around Europe on their pre-season training camps yelling "CARRRRRRR... HOLE, GRAVELLLL... RED LIGHTTTTTT". The problem is this: when you are more than two riders behind the person yelling, all you can actually hear is a general "BLURRRRR" being yelled. So while everyone should be keeping their eyes peeled for general speed changes and obstacles, suddenly the majority of riders are looking around wondering what the obstacle is that has just been yelled out. No one actually knows if you have just yelled "HOLE" and have not pointed it out, meaning some riders are scanning the ground left right and center looking for an imaginary hole. Other riders are craning their necks thinking you yelled "CAR", while yet more riders are looking behind them thinking you yelled "George has a FLAAAT!" Yelling is strictly forbidden!

Rule 10: Slowing and Adjusting Speed

This is probably the biggest crash causer on group rides. For some reason, when someone slows down ahead of them, a lot of riders jump for their brakes and yank the heck out of them, almost skidding and taking everyone down with them. You should be riding ever so slightly to the side of the rider in front of you; so when they slow down, you either stop pedaling and start to slightly overlap your front wheel with their rear wheel, or you touch the brakes gradually, once again using the "wheel overlap" as a buffer zone so as not to slow down too suddenly for the riders behind you.



Crashing just isn't much fun...

These may seem like a pointless bunch of snotty European old school rules, but they come from very simple principles of general safety for a group ride. So stick to them, and spread the good word to your fellow new-comers to the sport. For any Pro rider worth his salt, these are not even thought of as "rules". They are instinctive and are a natural part of riding. This may be why some road riders can come across as rude and arrogant. Ride etiquette is so second nature to them, that in their eyes, the only reason anyone would break them, would be on purpose.