

How to Ride in a Paceline

By Fred Matheny for www.RoadBikeRider.com

Solo rides are a great part of the cycling experience. Nothing beats cruising along and looking at the scenery, or attacking a climb at your own pace and intensity.

But riding with a small group can be even more fun. You cover ground faster, meet people, and experience the thrill of shared effort.

Paceline riding isn't difficult to learn. Here are the basic skills:

1. Riding a Straight Line

Start by learning to ride like you're on a rail. Practice by holding your line during solo rides. Put your wheel on the road's white edge line and keep it there. Relax your upper body, keep a light grip on the handlebar, and fix your peripheral vision on the line. Keep your actual focus 20 or 30 feet in front of the bike. Remember, the bike will go where your eyes go.

2. Following a Wheel

Drafting another rider saves you at least 15 percent in energy output. It's foolish to be bucking the wind all the time when you're with other riders. Share the work by drafting them and letting them draft you.

Position your front wheel 1 to 3 feet behind the rear wheel you're following. The closer the better, in terms of the draft, but closer also requires a lot more attention. When necessary, turn the cranks without putting pressure on the pedals ("soft pedal") to maintain correct spacing.

Use the brakes sparingly. Jerky braking creates chain reaction problems for riders behind you. If you need to brake, feather the levers lightly instead of clutching at them.

If a gap opens, don't make things worse by accelerating too hard, overrunning the wheel in front, then grabbing the brakes. Instead, ease back up to the rider in front. If you don't become proficient at following a wheel, you can waste more energy than you save by constant yo-yoing.

Look past the rider directly in front. Don't stare down at his rear wheel or you won't see things that may cause him to brake or swerve.

3. Paceline Pointers

First rule: Be predictable. Close riding demands that everyone be on the same wavelength. There must be a basic understanding of what is and is not expected behavior in a given circumstance. Experience helps.

Don't accelerate when it's your turn at the front. Note your cyclecomputer's mph and maintain the group's speed when the lead rider pulls off.

After your own bout against the wind, pull off to the side agreed upon and stay close to the others as you soft pedal and slide back to the rear of the paceline. This enhances the drafting effect for the whole group. It also keeps everyone as far out of the traffic flow as possible, making paceline riding possible even on busier roads.

As you come abreast of the last rider in the line, pick up speed and then slide over behind his wheel as he comes past. When done correctly you won't need an energy-wasting acceleration in order to latch back on. Once in the caboose position you can take a drink or stand to stretch without disrupting the paceline's smoothness.

Protect your front wheel. If your rear wheel is struck a fall is unlikely because it has nothing to do with steering the bike. However, if your front wheel is contacted it will often be twisted off line faster than you can react. You'll almost certainly go down. Help prevent this by never overlapping someone's rear wheel.

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