

15 Tips for Riding in a Paceline

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- By John Marsh | [Road Bike Rider](#)

This paceline primer includes a combination of advice from me, Jim and from Coach Fred's ebook [Solutions to Road Cycling Challenges](#).

1. A Paceline is a Pact

When you form a paceline, you've made an implicit agreement and a promise to everyone else in the group. You agree to work together, safely and steadily, to further the group's goals. You're also promising to know the basic rules of paceline riding by making yourself alert in order to ride together as a group.

2. No False Moves

The essence of paceline riding is predictability. Any abrupt moves or unexpected actions dangerously disrupt the paceline. If a rider near the front gets squirrely, his reactions will radiate through the paceline like a sports crowd doing the wave.

3. Don't Get Grabby on the Brakes

If you're getting too close to the wheel in front of you, soft pedal to let your bike slow gradually, then smoothly resume applying power. If that's not enough, feather the brakes, but never grab them. You can also move over gradually until you're slightly out of the draft, sitting up slightly so your chest catches more air. You should be able to slow enough to regain the correct spacing to the wheel in front of you.

4. Follow the Leader(s)

The riders in front determine which way you should rotate depending on the wind and traffic, usually. If the wind is from the side, rotate into it if traffic allows. If the side wind is strong enough, riders may overlap wheels and form what's known as an echelon (assuming there's enough space on the road).

If you're riding into a headwind, rotate to whichever side is safest based on traffic. In many cases, traffic alone will dictate the rotation side—regardless of wind direction. It should be easy to follow what the leaders set as the "rules." And, if they know what they're doing, it'll be the most efficient and fastest way to ride down the road.

5. Keep Some Safety Space

Unless you're riding with cyclists you know and trust, there's no need to ride inches from the wheel you're following. Allowing a gap of two feet or more gives you room to

maneuver in case of mishaps or obstacles in the road. This is especially important on organized rides or centuries where you're likely to form up with riders you don't know and can't necessarily trust like you can your buddies.

6. Look up the Road

Don't fixate on the rear wheel just ahead. Look around that rider and up the road so you can anticipate things (turns, potholes, traffic) that may cause a reaction by those ahead of you. Let the lower edge of your peripheral vision monitor the gap in front of your wheel.

7. Protect Your Wheel

Touching wheels with the bike in front of you is one of the leading causes of crashes in a paceline. And you will crash, not the rider in front of you—so be sure to protect your wheel.

If you do happen to touch wheels, don't panic. Remember to turn into—not away from—the wheel you're rubbing, so that you ease off the pedal pressure and fall back just enough to get clear of the wheel you're following. Then smoothly apply power to get back to your proper position. If you do this right, the rider in front of you might not even realize you've touched his or her wheel.

8. Don't Get Distracted

Most crashes in pacelines are caused by distractions outside of the paceline, like a dog running from a yard. The key is to always remember that the biggest hazard is the rider in front of you, not anything on the side of the road, up the road or behind you. Your job is to pay attention to that rider and not react to much else.

9. Ride in the Drops

Doing so keeps you in the most aero position, which helps with the overall energy savings you'll reap, and the overall efficiency of the paceline—which is one of the reasons you ride in a paceline. Riding in the drops also has the added benefit of protecting you from being "hooked" by another rider's bar. As riders are moving back down the line, or sometimes in a double paceline, there's a chance of being hit from the side and getting your bar hooked by someone else's bar, which can take you down in an instant. In effect, by riding in the drops, you "seal off" the bar ends with your arms, making hooking impossible.

10. Communicate

Pacelines are often quiet unless you're riding in a double pacelines at a conversational pace. When groups are going faster—and the danger is greater—let your fellow riders know what's going on. There's no need to shout out obstacles. Merely pointing at them is sufficient. But if there's a question about the next intersection, or a turn, it's far better to tell, or ask, than to guess.

11. Don't Increase the Pace on Your Pull

The biggest mistake novice riders make is getting too psyched up when they hit the front and end up increasing the speed several miles per hour. This opens gaps between riders and could blow some of them off the back. It makes the paceline ragged and wastes energy, as riders will have to surge to close the gap.

Granted, it can be tough to know how hard to pedal when you're suddenly feeling the wind. But the solution is easy: Take a quick glance at your computer when you're the second rider in line. When the leader pulls off, simply maintain that speed (assuming there's no wind or terrain change).

12. Don't Take Monster Pulls

There's no reason to sit on the front for 10 minutes while you try to impress the group. Generally, you should rotate from the lead after 1 to 3 minutes. If there are a couple of riders much stronger than the others, it might be appropriate to let them pull for 5 to 8 minutes to even out everyone's effort. Discuss this with the group so everyone knows what's going on.

13. You're the Eyes and Ears at the Front

As the lead rider, you're the eyes and ears of the group. You're responsible for the whole group's safety. You must point out road obstacles and watch for traffic at crossroads, shouting warnings when necessary. Try to be an "early warning system," keeping in mind that a shout may take several seconds to trickle down the line and may be "lost in translation" along the way.

14. Responsibility at the Back

When you rotate to the back of the paceline, you still have a responsibility. It's your job to check behind periodically for approaching traffic and calling out "Car back!" when a motorist is approaching. If the group is in a double paceline on a narrow road, someone will yell "single out" or "single up," and the double paceline will form into a single line so the motorist can pass safely.

When there are no traffic concerns, being last in line is a privileged position. Because no one is behind you to be disrupted by your actions, now's the time to take a drink or sit up and grab a snack from your jersey pocket. If you need to remove a vest or peel your arm warmers, do it while at the back.

15. No Aero Bars

Aero bars are fine for time trialing or long solo rides when they can help you to cut through the wind and take pressure off your hands. But aero bars are unwelcome in pacelines. A cyclist using aero bars in the paceline is less steady, and his or her hands are too far from the brake levers to be safe. Aero bars present particular dangers, both to themselves and to the other riders—and they should self-select out of pacelines.