HOW TO...

Ride In A Group

Be Predictable

The golden rule for safe and enjoyable group cycling is "Be predictable." Other riders expect you to continue straight ahead at constant speed unless you indicate differently. This principle underlies all vehicular traffic maneuvers, but cycling in a group requires even more attention to predictability than solo cycling, since by choice we ride close together. Newcomers may view this closeness as foolhardy and frightening, but with thoughtful practice they soon learn the pleasure and efficiency of riding as part of a skilled group of cyclists.

How do cyclists in a group behave in order to ride predictably and safely? We have adopted a set of standard procedures for common situations. With minor variations, you'll find that these procedures apply wherever you cycle. We cyclists do not always follow good practices as well as we might, but—newcomers or experienced—we should all strive to improve.

Look Before You Make a Move

A good cyclist always looks before making a maneuver; this is especially important when the cyclist rides as part of a group. Make your own decision, using the cues provided by others in the group. Don't play "Follow the leader."

Use Signals

Cyclists use hand and verbal signals to communicate with members of the group and with other traffic. Here are the hand signals for turning and stopping: put your left arm straight out to signal a left turn, put your right arm straight out to signal a right turn, and put your left arm out and down with your palm to the rear to signal slowing or stopping. Putting your left arm out and up for a right turn is not as natural and informative as using your right arm. Some state vehicle codes have not yet been amended to allow the use of the right arm for signalling right turns, but in the interest of safety and clarity most cyclists use the right arm in preference to the left arm.

Give Warnings

Group riding requires an awareness of others. When riding in close formation, each rider must feel a responsibility toward the riders behind. You must warn of road hazards and of changes in your direction or speed. To notify the group of a change in path, the lead rider will often call "left turn" or "right turn," in addition to giving a hand signal. It is not necessary or desirable for each member of the group to repeat this voice instruction; a hand signal will do once the front of the group has established the new direction. The lead rider should announce the turn well in advance of the intersection, so that members of the group have time to position themselves properly for the turn.

Change Positions Correctly

Often we change our position within the group to ride and talk with different companions. Generally, slower traffic stays right, so we usually pass others in our group on their left. Say "on your left" to warn the cyclist ahead that you are coming by. Don't shout too loudly, or you may misguide other riders. On rare occasions you will need to move past someone on his or her right; say "on your right" quite clearly, since this is an unusual maneuver that must be performed with care.

Moving back in a group can be awkward when riders are closely spaced. You must avoid endangering those behind you, yet as you slow down you must not mislead them into thinking that they should slow down also. If you move back, first turn and see how the riders behind you are positioned. If they are close behind you and to the right, call out "dropping back," drop back on their left, and watch them as they pass on your right. If riders are close behind you and to your left, call out "dropping back" and drop back, allowing them to pass normally on your left. If riders are directly behind you, call out "dropping back" and maintain your speed until the other riders have cleared away from behind you before you begin to drop back.

Announce Hazards

When riding in a group, most of the cyclists do not have a good view of the road surface ahead, so it is important to announce holes, glass, gravel, and other hazards. We indicate road hazards by hand signals, and by voice where required for safety. Pointing down to left or right informs those behind to watch for trouble. Shouting "hole," "gravel," "oil," "glass," "bump," and so forth can help, but if everyone shouts for each obstruction we have bedlam. Save the yelling for important road hazards; you will quickly learn when to yell and when simply to point.

Watch for Traffic Coming from the Rear

Riders in front often cannot see traffic approaching from the rear, so it is the responsibility of the riders in the back of the group to inform the others by saying "car back." Sometimes when the road is narrow, when we are riding double file, or just when we suspect trouble, riders in front will warn of traffic approaching from the front with "car up." At intersections, if it would benefit those behind, you may announce side traffic with "car left" or "car right," but it is not necessary to do this if there is no danger.

These voice signals, using the word "car," are standard, and they are automatically and immediately recognized by the experienced cyclist. Use these signals even if the vehicle is a truck, bus, or motorcycle. When it really matters—when danger threatens—you want to evoke the quickest possible reaction from your companions.

Watch Out at Intersections

When approaching intersections requiring vehicles to yield or stop, the lead riders will say "slowing" or "braking" or "stopping" to alert those behind to the change in speed. When passing through an intersection, some cyclists say "clear" if there is no cross traffic. This is a dangerous practice that should be abandoned. It encourages riders to follow the leader, letting others do their thinking for them. Each cyclist is responsible for verifying that the way is indeed clear.