

## GROUP RIDING TIPS PT2: HOW TO GO FASTER

The first instalment dealt with the basics of riding in pairs and moved on to a group ride situation where one pair at a time shared the work to keep the group going at a steady pace. Having mastered this, it's time to get a bit more adventurous and work on techniques for raising the speed of the group above that which an individual rider can manage.

The principle of these rides is the same one as interval training. Short periods of high effort are followed by periods of relative rest. Each rider pulls the group along for a short time at a pace higher than they could sustain by themselves, then shelters behind other wheels to recover until it's their turn again. This type of riding can be excellent training if done properly. It's known as a rotating paceline, chain-gang, bit-and-bit, through-and-off and so on: different names for what is essentially the same thing.

One important point: you won't be riding along in pairs, chatting away to your partner. These riding techniques involve much more moving around in the group so you need to keep your mind on what's going on around you. They're also for fast training rides so you shouldn't have enough puff to talk anyway.

All of the skills from the previous ride guide still apply here. You must use hand signals and vocal warnings where appropriate, follow wheels and generally ride in a smooth and predictable manner. The difference is now you will easily be hitting 40-odd kph on the flat so you really do need to be alert.

### THE CHAINGANG

This is a tried and tested method to get a group of riders to really shift. The idea is simple. It takes some concentration and practise to get it right but when it's working, it's very effective. It works as follows:

- a) Riders form into two parallel lines, side-by-side, one moving ever so slightly faster than the other.
- b) When a rider from the faster, advancing line reaches the front of the group, they pull over into the other line, slowing to match its pace as they do so.
- c) The next rider from the fast line repeats the process, providing shelter to the new rider on the front of the slow line.
- d) When a rider reaches the back of the slower, retreating line, they move to the side and accelerate up to the pace of the fast line.

Here are some simple diagrams. In this case, the lines are rotating anticlockwise.

Starting off as two lines, the lower one going a bit faster so that rider 1) pulls ahead of rider 6):

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--4}- --5}- --6}-          --4}- --5}- --6}-  
--3}- --2}- --1}-          --3}- --2}- --1}-
```

Now rider 1) moves over to shelter rider 6) and number 4) joins the back of the fast line.

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--4}- --5}- --6}- --1}-          --5}- --6}- --1}-  
--3}- --2}-          --4}- --3}- --2}-
```

Rider 2) hits the front and moves over to shelter rider 1). Next thing is for 5) to get in the fast line.

--5}- --6}- --1}- --5}- --6}- --1}- --2}  
--4}- --3}- --2}- --4}- --3}-

Repeat, repeat and repeat.

This is easy enough to describe but good execution of a chain-gang depends on everybody getting a whole load of little details right. So what are these details? Let's go through them.

#### WHAT DO I DO WHEN I GET TO THE FRONT?

So, some experienced riders have started the group rotating, you find yourself in the fast line and you're running out of riders ahead of you. What do you do? Actually, you do as little as possible. Keep riding at the same speed that was taking you up the group and when you're a length clear of the lead rider in the slow line, move smoothly over to take your place at the head of their line. Then ease up on the pedals a little to allow the next rider from the fast line to pass you and repeat the manoeuvre.

A few pointers here:

Don't hang about at the front. As soon as you have clear space to the side, move over. If you're in second place in the fast line, you should feel as if you're coming up almost on the shoulder of the first rider.

You really don't need to slow down much at all. A difference of only 2 kph is enough to allow the lead to change every 5 seconds or so. If you slow down too quickly, you'll have the rider behind grabbing for their brakes or ramming you in the back. You have to be particularly careful with this when there's a strong headwind. If you slow down too much, the speed difference between the lines becomes too great. This makes it harder to jump onto the back of the fast line when you reach the back of the group. The speed of the whole group may drop and it can be hard to pick the pace up again without getting untidy. This is a training ride, remember, so slow is bad.

Be wary about changing gear to slow down. This can result in an abrupt change in pace, especially if you mis-shift and change down two or more gears by mistake.

For goodness' sake don't speed up. Don't get carried away and push harder just because you're on the front. If you need to, glance at your computer to make sure you keep the speed constant. If you think the group's got slower, say so as you go around and try to get everyone to pick it up a little. Pushing through hard doesn't work. The next rider to come through now has to struggle to get past you, the slow line has to speed up to get in your shelter and the rhythm of the group is upset immediately. (In fact, if you want to disrupt a chase in a race situation, this is a good way to do it.)

If the rider ahead of you charges off, you must ignore them. Don't try to follow attacks: this is a group ride, not a race. Just move over as if they hadn't been there and carry on riding, letting them dangle off the front. There's no need to allow the rhythm of the group to get disturbed. Either they'll come back in a while, looking silly, or if they're super-strong they'll disappear into the distance. When that happens, you wonder why they bothered turning up to a group ride in the first place.

Stick close together. Now you're moving at speed and really need shelter from the wind, it's all the more important to keep it tight with small gaps front-to-back and side-to-side. You should feel as if you could bump elbows with the other line. As with all group riding situations, ride with gaps you feel comfortable with but be aware of larger gaps opening up. If one does appear, accelerate smoothly to close it; don't sprint across.

#### WHAT DO I DO WHEN I'M AT THE BACK?

When you have slid to the back of the slow line, that's the end of your rest. On hitting the back, move out and press on the pedals a bit harder to bring you onto the back of the fast line. Keep it steady as you move up the line, no sudden accelerations and don't let gaps open. You'll be at the front again in a short while, then you'll have done your bit and can drop back for another rest. It can be helpful to say 'last man' as you move onto the back of the fast line. This lets the rider know they're now at the back of the slow line and that they have to move up in their turn.

#### WHICH WAY DOES THE GROUP ROTATE?

This depends on where the wind is coming from. If it's a straight headwind, it doesn't matter much but rotating anticlockwise is often preferred. I have no idea why, perhaps because the Highway Code says you shouldn't undertake. If there's a crosswind, the rule is that the slow line should be in the wind. This offers more shelter to the fast line so that riders aren't already knackered when they reach the front. Therefore, rotate anticlockwise for a crosswind from the left and clockwise for a crosswind from the right. You may need to switch directions a few times during a ride, particularly at 90 degree junctions.

#### I'VE HAD ENOUGH. HOW DO I GET A REST?

If you have trouble coming through to do your turn, it's time to take a break. It's bad form to struggle at the front, taking ages to get there and move over, because, you guessed it, this messes up the rhythm. When you get to the back, drop well past the last rider in the slow line, making it obvious you aren't participating any more. You may need to call out to the rider ahead of you. Something like 'go on' usually works and the lines can begin rotating with you hanging off the back. Note that this isn't a good place to be. Your shelter gets interrupted every time someone swings over ahead of you and you don't get the training benefits of intervals followed by rests. If you find yourself regularly at the back of chain-gangs, you ought to join a slower group until your fitness picks up. Your training will be more effective if you're not missing turns.

If you recover enough to feel like you can begin to participate again, move out from behind the slow line to behind the fast line. This makes it obvious that you're going to rejoin the chain-gang and you can accelerate into the fast line when you get a chance. Someone may well notice you and wave you in.

#### LOOK, THERE'S A GAP!

On a fast-paced ride, gaps can open up as people tire or take too long to move from the slow line to the back of the fast one. If that happens, stronger riders should be prepared to preserve the flow by filling these gaps, even if it means jumping across and moving back up the line early. The retreating line will sort itself out if it misses a rider, a gap in the advancing line disrupts the whole group.

## HOW BIG SHOULD THE GROUP BE?

With fewer than 5 or 6 people, it's hardly worthwhile doing a chain-gang. Instead, it's often better to have a single paceline where the rider at the front does a turn, then pulls off to one side, slowing slightly to rejoin the back of the line. All the same rules apply here. Come through smoothly without sudden changes of pace and keep things tight. The difference is that you choose how long your turn is. Stronger riders can take longer turns but you must not tie up and slow the group down, neither must you work yourself so hard that you drop off the back. Keep something in the tank at the end of each pull.

To let the rider behind know that you're pulling over at the end of your turn rather than moving out into the road to avoid an obstacle, wave them through with a little flick of the elbow.

As the group gets bigger, the ratio of rest periods to intervals becomes greater. This can be a good way to really get some speed up; once you get a group of a dozen or so riders working smoothly together you can really motor. However, chain-ganging in large groups has some drawbacks:

- 1) More rests and less work means less training benefit.
- 2) There's likely to be a wider spread of abilities so the group will be too fast for some but too slow for others.
- 3) Larger groups are more unwieldy on the roads and obstruct traffic more.

For a good training ride, 6 to 8 is about right.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M IN THE RIGHT GROUP?

If you always have to start missing turns early in the ride, you're in the wrong group. Move down and get some proper training in. Your fitness and skills will improve more quickly than by hanging on to the back of a group that's too strong for you. If you're barely breaking sweat, you're in the wrong group.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF WE'RE DOING IT RIGHT?

A well-executed chaingang feels fast and smooth, like a well-oiled machine. It won't feel easy because you'll be working very hard. You may well go into the red during each trip to the front, barely recovering enough to be able to repeat the process for the duration of the ride. When you finish a chain-gang exhausted but exhilarated, you were doing it right.

This is how you'd ride in a breakaway group and here's an example:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5CfRsmtQ44&feature=related>