

MASTERCLASS

Conquer group riding

Want to start group riding but don't know where to begin? Here to help are our cycling experts and their tips on etiquette, pack skills and building confidence



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One of the joys of cycling is spending time with like-minded and bike-happy people. And there aren't many sports where the food stops are taken as seriously as they are in cycling. Group cycling is another thrill, bringing support, camaraderie and the mental health benefits of shared experiences, plus the energy savings to be had from cycling in a pack.

But how do you make the move to riding confidently in a group? What's the key etiquette? And how about all the hand gestures and shouts? Read on to demystify the baffling behaviours.

HERE TO HELP



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PACK MENTALITY

Local cycling clubs welcome new members and some have written guidelines so that everyone is on the same page. They're also great confidence boosters and make cycling on shared roads more enjoyable. Velodromes offer taster sessions to help you learn road bike-handling skills, while some race tracks have allocated times for cyclists.



Wild bunch
Soak up the camaraderie on a scenic gran fondo

Closed circuits
Dial down on technique away from the traffic

Words: Anna Gardiner. Illustrations: Georgie Sturge

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SIGNALS DECODED

Group cyclists do hand signals for the riders behind, often to signify an upcoming hazard or change of direction. Here's what they mean...



Single hand in the air (up or down). Rider is signalling that they need to stop or slow down. Usually followed by the call, 'slowing' or 'stopping'.



Pointing down at the road. The rider is highlighting hazards such as bumps or potholes to avoid.



Hand behind and drawing a line horizontally back-and-forth. Hazard running across the road such as a speed bump or cattle grid.



Left arm signalling behind back. The cyclist is about to move out into the road, for example to pass a parked car.



Arm out left or right. We all know this one, but everyone in the pack needs to indicate when turning.

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THE KEY SHOUTS

Key shouts include those for potholes, speed bumps, manhole covers, animals, cars approaching in front or behind – basically anything that could cause an accident or punctures. Listen out for shouts, act on them and, most importantly, repeat them for the cyclist behind you.

"Car Up/Front/Back" Keep tight to the cyclist next to you and be prepared to cycle in single file.

"Hole" Pothole to avoid. This could be followed by a direction such as "hole left".

"CLEAR"

"WAIT"

"Slowing" Usually accompanied by a hand signal. The cyclist in front is slowing for some reason.

"Stopping" Brake!

"Wait" Usually at junctions to indicate there's a car coming.

"Clear" Indicating that a junction is traffic free, but always check for yourself too.

"Heads Up" There's a hazard ahead.

"Single out/single file" Get into single file safely and promptly.

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CODE OF CONDUCT

The main group cycling reference in the Highway code is Rule 66:

'Be considerate of the needs of other road users when riding in groups. You can ride two abreast and it can be safer to do so, particularly in larger groups or when accompanying children or less experienced riders. Be aware of drivers behind you and allow them to overtake (for example, by moving into single file or stopping) when you feel it's safe to let them do so.'



Mind the gap
Always keep a safe distance from those around you

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CLOSE CONTACT

A safe gap for a complete beginner to ride behind the cyclist in front is about two feet (60cm). If you're confident and can trust the person in front of you, though, then one foot/30cm between your front wheel and the back wheel of the rider in front is fine. There should also be at least a foot between your shoulders and the rider next to you. Be mindful of riders getting out of the saddle and initially pushing the bike backwards.



50%
Potential effort saving when drafting a rider in front

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DRAFTING GAINS

Drafting is moving into an area of low pressure behind another cyclist, thereby reducing wind resistance and the amount of energy required to pedal for the cyclist behind. The benefits can be huge, with some studies showing it can reduce the amount of effort needed by 30-50%. Taking it in turns to draft makes longer distances easier by reducing fatigue. Remember that with the drafting effect, people behind will be travelling faster than the leaders. To avoid them having to constantly brake, leaders should continue to pedal when going downhill.

Free ride
Save energy by riding close behind a friend

Do your share
Everyone should take their turn at the front

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TAKING TURNS

Depending on the group, the strongest rider should take a longer turn at the front. On pro training camps, the turns riding at the front are normally between 10-30mins. If you're ill, have bonked or are just hanging on, sit near the back of the group instead of tiring yourself even more by getting to the front and then initiating an early change.



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TECH TALK

Don't ride on tri/aerobars in packs as you won't be able to brake or steer quickly, and there's also the danger of the extensions hurting a rider if there's a crash. Always hold onto the handlebars properly, because if you just rest your hands on the hoods or tops they might slip off if you hit a pothole. In the winter or wet weather, mudguards are a must to stop yourself and others around you getting covered in detritus and dirt.



Barred
Tri/aerobars aren't safe when riding in groups

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SINGLE OR DOUBLE?

Sometimes it's sensible to ride single file on a busy road. Decide based on the situation as, just because it's legal to ride two abreast, doesn't mean you always should. If riders at the back call, 'Car up!', listen and act on their calls, don't look back and check for yourself as you'll move off-line and may cause an accident. Always dress to be as visible as possible.

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GROUP SIZE

A group can be any size really, but it's sensible not to go above about 10 people unless it's a confident and experienced group that can ride as a tight unit. Although cyclists are entitled as much as any other road users to use the highways, for safety reasons – i.e. not annoying motorised vehicle drivers – a smaller and more compact unit is arguably safer.

“It's sensible not to go above about 10 people unless it's a confident and experienced group that can ride as a tight unit”

GROUP-RIDING KIT

Three kit picks that'll help keep you safe when riding in the bunch



Santini Guard Nimbus £149

Aim to keep yourself visible to other road users when riding. For example, this Santini rain jacket offers both reflective details and bright colours in its women's and men's versions.



Specialized Flux 250R £65

This simply-designed model kicks out a lot of light (240 lumens) for visibility not only to the rear, but the sides too. There are four modes and it's well protected from both the weather and road spray.



SKS Bluemels Longboard £39.99

These well-priced mudguards simply refuse to rattle and their curved profile and generous lengths with rear flaps mean little spray escapes. They come in black, silver and latte.

HONE YOUR SKILLS

A trio of settings to see you become a group-riding whizz



Velodromes

A number of velodromes in the UK offer taster sessions to help you learn bike handling skills. There's a decent geographical spread of indoor and outside centres, including Newport, London, Derby and Glasgow.



Circuits

There's also a wealth of outdoor cycling circuits that offer races and/or sessions for riders to experience group cycling. Castle Combe in Wiltshire, London's Hillingdon and Manchester's Tameside are just three.



Clubs

Joining a club can be a good confidence builder that'll make cycling on shared roads more enjoyable. British Cycling has a club finder here: britishcycling.org.uk/clubfinder