

A GUIDE TO GROUP RIDING FOR BEGINNERS

By Colin Hughes, Phoenix CC (Cycling Ulster)



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INTRODUCTION:

This document is aimed at those who have recently started cycling with a club, but will be useful for more experienced riders to brush up on their skills. It outlines what to expect when riding with other cyclists in a group, or 'bunch' as it is known, in a variety of situations and discusses how to stay safe and take most benefit from each other's slipstream. It will not cover the real basics of how to ride a bike on public roads, the rules of the road etc.

Dangers on a bicycle come in many forms, but the most common are from other road users and obstacles on the road itself. In order to stay safe all the riders in the bunch must avoid hazards whilst not colliding with each other in the process. Communication between riders in a bunch is the only real way of doing this.

Some other basics are to ensure your bike is in good working order, that you carry a range of spares and that your clothing is appropriate for the weather. Food and drink is also important to keep you alert and make sure you get home having enjoyed your cycle. If you are unsure about these things the best way to find out is, as always, to speak to experienced riders who are generally helpful and more than happy to offer advice.

GENERAL RIDING:

There are quite a few guidelines that apply to any situation when a group of riders are riding together be it a weekend club run, or a leisure event. As outlined above there are two main things a bunch of riders must do to stay safe:

1. Everyone must avoid hazards (ie. potholes, other road users, etc.). This is achieved by communication using a series of hand signals and occasional verbal signals which should be acted on, to avoid the danger, and then repeated by each rider down the line, to pass the information on to those behind.
2. Riders must not collide with each other, particularly when in the process of avoiding a hazard; this is achieved by **moving in a slow, predictable way** and riding in a way that doesn't endanger other riders.

The second point is the most easy to deal with so let's look at it first. It is achieved by always making sure your movements within the bunch are **slow and predictable**.

There are many things that make riders' movements in a bunch unpredictable and dangerous. Some of the most common of these are:

• **Watching the rider in front:**

In a bunch you are quite close to the rider in front, if he/she has to react quickly to something your reaction may be too late. It is much safer to **watch several riders ahead**, you will see any sudden movements progressing down the bunch and be able to avoid them. You will still be able to see the rider in front of you through your peripheral vision. By using this method you try to predict what will happen, not react to it when it does.

• **Throwing a wheel:**

This is when a **bike moves backwards as a rider gets out of the saddle**. This is dangerous as the back wheel can easily hit the front wheel of the rider behind. To avoid this happening riders should take care to move their body forwards, and ensure they keep pressure on the downstroke, when standing out of the saddle rather than pushing their bike back. Also when sitting behind another rider be sure to sit slightly to one side of their wheel in case they throw a wheel at you.

• **Overlapping a wheel:**

When a rider, who is sitting behind another, has their front wheel overlapping the back wheel of the rider in front. This causes problems if the rider in front has to swerve to the side for some reason. If this happens the two wheels can collide and the rider behind can find it difficult to stay upright. To avoid this simply **don't overlap a back wheel**.

• **Overcompensating movements:**

If a rider near the front of a bunch makes an unexpected movement, either sideways or by grabbing the brakes, the rider behind reacts to it and instinctively adds a bit onto it. The next rider does the same, the next the same and so on. By the time this movement reaches the back of the bunch the small movement becomes a large movement causing riders to collide with each other or forcing riders onto the wrong side of the road. These movements are usually sideways and are known as 'switches'. **The best way to avoid this is for everyone to avoid any sudden movements, particularly near the front of the bunch.** However, sometimes

these movements cannot be avoided and so it is always best to look a few riders ahead and predict these switches coming down the bunch and try to move in a slower and more predictable way as they approach you.

- **Riding beyond your limits:**

Inexperienced riders who ride closer to other riders than they can cope with can also cause problems. **Only ride as close to other riders as you feel comfortable doing.** The riders around you may be very experienced and can ride closely with ease. With practice you will feel more comfortable riding closer to other riders.

- **Lack of concentration:**

All of the problems above can be exaggerated by **lack of concentration**. This can be for many reasons, including tiredness. Always remain aware of what is going on around you in the bunch and eat and drink appropriately to avoid becoming over tired. Towards the end of a long ride look out for signs of tiredness and lack of concentration in others; slow reactions, more erratic movements than usual, dropping their head, locking their elbows to name but a few, and be aware that they will react more slowly than usual.

When riding in a bunch you have different responsibilities depending on where you are riding, at the front, in the middle or at the back.

RIDING AT THE FRONT:

The most important member(s) of the bunch at any one time are those at the front. They are the eyes of the bunch as everyone else's view is obstructed by them. It is down to them to spot dangers in good time and ensure everyone in the bunch avoids the danger.

- **Pointing potholes/obstructions:**

If the rider(s) at the front spot a pothole, poor road surface or obstacle such as a large stone or brick, with plenty of time they should:

1. Slowly **move across** the road to a position where they will avoid the hole.
2. **Point** to where the hole is to allow those behind to avoid it and continue to point until the hole has been passed.
3. Slowly **move back** to their original position on the road.

If the hole or bad surface is larger than about 30cm (1 foot) the same process is used but a **waving hand** is used instead of a pointed finger, this **shows the obstacle is larger**.

For particularly dangerous holes riders may choose to shout 'HOLE' to accompany the hand signal. However, care must be taken to shout in a clear way without startling other riders, particularly the less experienced, as this may be more dangerous than the original hazard. Shouts of 'HOLE RIGHT' or 'HOLE LEFT' etc. should never replace the hand signals as following riders have only a vague idea of where the hazard is. Pointing is much more accurate, less startling and therefore safer.

- **Oncoming Traffic:**

Many vehicles approach and meet the bunch from the other direction and for the majority of these no action is required. However, if the vehicle is particularly large or might pass closer to the bunch than riders behind might expect, the same signal as above is employed except the right hand is used. This may also be accompanied by the shout of 'CAR DOWN'. **The DOWN referring to the vehicle moving down the bunch.**

RIDING IN THE MIDDLE:

Riding in the middle of the bunch should be reasonably easy. Just follow the riders in front, react to their signals, then repeat them for those behind. If you hear any shouts from behind, pass them on up the bunch and remember to avoid any unnecessary erratic movements.

RIDING AT THE BACK:

Riding at the back of a bunch is much the same as riding in the middle, with two notable exceptions.

1. You are the rider(s) who **warns the rest of the bunch about other road users who are overtaking the bunch.** When you become aware that a vehicle is overtaking the bunch shout, clearly but without startling other riders, 'CAR UP'. It doesn't really matter if it's not a car.
2. If the bunch intends to turn left or right, you are the rider(s) the traffic behind will see, so make sure you **check behind you to see what the other traffic is up to, advise the rest of the bunch when it is safe to move across the road**, if turning right. **Make your hand signals very clear to alert motorists behind.**

UP AND OVERS:

'Up and Overs' is the accepted name in this part of the world for the method a bunch of cyclists use to work together to move as quickly as possible while sharing the work into the wind. The name comes from the process of riding Up to the front and then moving over to move towards the back again. It works like this:

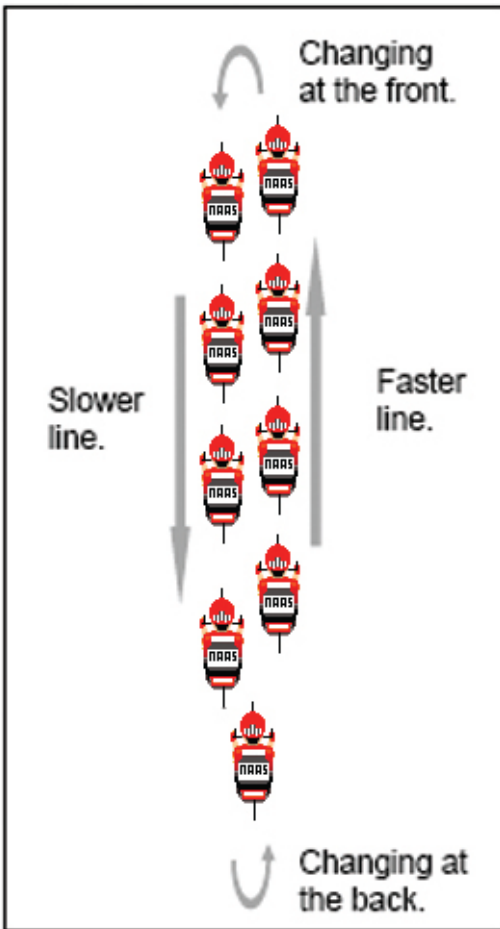


Fig 5

be behind, as in Fig 5. If you let a gap open, see Fig 6, you will have to put in an extra effort to get up to the rider in front. This also means that the rider who should be behind you may not fancy having to put in an extra effort to chase you, and when you arrive at the front you could find nobody following you and you end up riding into the wind for longer than you want to. This may also be made difficult by riders staying at the back and not getting involved in the Up and Overs. You may be expecting them to come past you but they intend to stay at the back.

There are several ways to avoid this. The most obvious is to remember the rider you sit behind in the faster line, then when they pass, you know you have to be behind them, or 'on their wheel'. This, however, is not always dependable as the order the riders are in may change for some reason. The best solution is that every rider, when they move into the faster line and pass the rider who should follow them into that line, says 'LAST MAN'. The rider then knows that they have to follow that rider into the faster line.

Changing at the Front:

This is the most difficult part of Up and Overs, or should I say, the easiest part to make mistakes with. It is not made any easier by the effort you have to put in as you hit the wind at the front. There are four common errors made when changing at the front.

1. Accelerating when you reach the front:

The rider in front of you will pull over and slow down so you don't have to accelerate to pass them. If you accelerate, everyone else has to too and the rhythm of the bunch is disrupted. **Try to keep the same speed** until you are ready to pull over into the slower line. This can be difficult as you need to put more pressure on the pedals to keep the same speed as the wind begins to hit you, but it will come with practice.

The bunch forms into two lines beside each other. One line is moving about 2 to 3 miles per hour faster than the other. As a rider gets to the front of the faster line they move over to become the front of the slower line and then gently slow to the speed of the slower line. They then slowly move down the bunch towards the back in that line. When at the back they then move across to the back of the faster line and speed up to the speed of that line. They then move up the bunch in the faster line until they are at the front and the process begins again. This means that each rider spends a short time at the front in the wind and the rest of the time recovering. This lets the bunch move at a good speed, but your time at the front can be quite tough.

It can be difficult to do Up and Overs well. The more smoothly and effectively it can be done, the less energy is wasted, and therefore the bunch can travel at higher speeds. Practice is the only way to become good at it, but let's look at some of the finer points.

There are two critical points when doing Up and Overs, when you are changing from one line to the other at the front, and again at the back. When you are in one of the lines all you have to do is to follow the rider in front and react to, and repeat any, safety signals.

Changing at the Back:

The difficult thing when changing at the back, into the faster line, is making sure you get straight onto the wheel of the rider you should

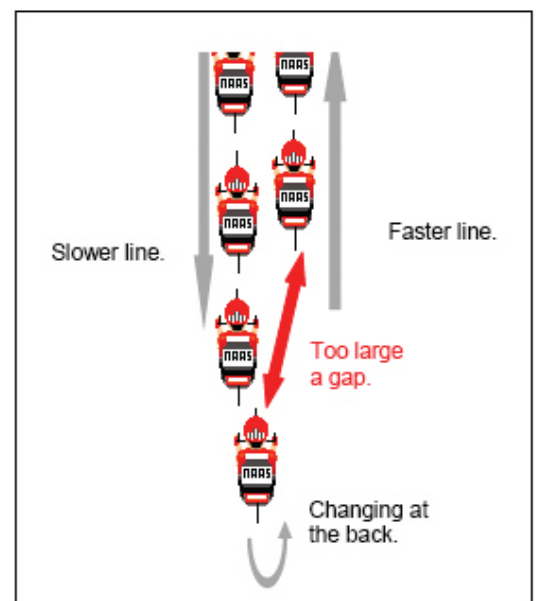


Fig 6

2. Not moving over quickly enough:

The idea is to ride past the rider who has just moved over and pull over just in front of them. If done perfectly they shouldn't have to increase or decrease their speed to be on your wheel. If you ride too far past them they have to chase your wheel and the rider who will pull over in front of you has to do a longer effort too. This upsets the rhythm of the bunch and the riders who have to make the extra efforts may become annoyed if it happens persistently. It can be difficult to get this right, particularly as inexperienced riders worry about cutting up the rider they are pulling in front of. If you always move slowly and smoothly across and leave some room on the inside, in case you have overlapped their wheel, there shouldn't be a problem.

3. Moving over but not slowing down to the speed of the slow line:

Doing this causes similar problems as not moving over quickly enough. Both the rider you are moving in front of and the rider who will move in front of you have to make extra efforts, again resulting in a loss in rhythm and annoyance. Getting this right takes practice. Remember to begin to reduce your speed as soon as you move across reducing it over two to three seconds. Keep pedalling as you do this, never reduce your speed with your brakes and only freewheel on a steep downhill or in a strong tailwind. While in the two lines learn how the difference in the speeds of each line feels and looks, this should help you judge the speed difference when changing.

4. Moving over and slowing too much:

This is the least common problem as inexperienced riders are apprehensive of slowing the bunch, and this apprehension leads to the problems above, however, it can occur from time to time. Again try to observe the speed difference between the two lines as you are in them. If you are slowing quite a bit because you are suffering physically, you just can't put any more effort into the pedals, it is best, for you and the bunch, that you **sit at the back of the bunch and only contribute when you can. You should let the rider(s) behind know about this. A simple hand movement to wave the rider behind through will suffice.** When the pressure is on even a small gap of two or three bike lengths can be near impossible to close and the rider who opens that gap without letting the riders behind know about it is never popular.

Other things to consider:

Inexperienced riders don't usually realise that they are making these errors, but the more experienced riders in the bunch usually speak up. A word of caution though. Riders can give advice in quite a short, sharp way when under pressure. Try not to take offence at this if it happens. Cycling fast is tough and if you make these errors others may have to put in an extra effort to close a gap, after doing that they simply don't have the breath for a pleasant, well mannered conversation about the situation.

Riders may choose to stay at the back of the bunch and not contribute to the up and overs. This may be for a variety of reasons; they need a short rest, they want to eat something (although most experienced riders can eat while doing up and overs) or a variety of other reasons. If you drop to the back for a short time, it is generally not a problem, however, if you stay there for quite a long period of time it is worth considering the 'Unwritten Rules of Road Racing' detailed at the end of the road racing section.

Smoothness is the key to Up and Overs. Smooth riding allows everyone to stay as close as possible to each other, hence they gain the most slipstream, energy is saved and this is turned into more speed.

CORNERING:

Quite a few crashes happen at corners and so safety first is the best approach. For curves in the road simply keep a good line and follow the riders in front. If you are at the front, choose a sensible line. You may be able to take the corner a bit tighter but remember those behind you with other riders around them who will follow your line. As well as looking for potholes etc. be on the look out for areas of oil, diesel, petrol, gravel or wet tarmac (if it's dry) as these may cause riders to slide. If you see them point them out in the usual way that you point out a hole. Also be particularly vigilant for approaching traffic. This may require you to listen for engine noise approaching the corner from the other side. If it is a right hand bend be careful not to cut the corner and give the shout 'CAR DOWN' and possibly add 'DON'T CUT' to the other riders. If it's a left hand bend be aware that the vehicle may cut the corner onto your side of the road.

At junctions the guidelines above should be followed but during Leisure Sportives you may also meet event marshals. A marshal's job is to point the bunch down the right road and to warn other road users of the event. Marshals are not allowed to stop the traffic to let the bunch pass, but on seeing the marshals most road users kindly stop briefly to let the bunch pass safely. Do not, however, take this as the norm. **Marshals cannot stop the traffic and some drivers will drive on.** Marshals may also shout to warn you of a danger, take heed of this warning as they will be positioned to see further round the corner than you can. This warning should be repeated by the riders in the bunch as they see the danger to give an idea as to how far around the corner it is. Alternatively a marshal may shout 'CLEAR' to the bunch. This means that they cannot see any dangers. This does not mean

that there are no dangers. If you go around a corner too aggressively and, for example, hit a car, **it will be you and you alone who will be held responsible**, so always keep to your own side of the road. **Also be particularly careful of gravel at road junctions.**

WHEN YOU HAVE A MECHANICAL:

If you have a mechanical problem during a group ride **try to make others aware by raising your arm**, then slip back through the bunch without making any erratic moves. Try to not let your speed drop too much if at all possible. Then when you are sure you are at the back of the bunch you can sort the problem.

ON SUNDAY CLUB SPINS AND LEISURE EVENTS:

All the points mentioned in the general riding section apply when riding in a bunch. But the points below apply when you are riding with other cyclists in, for example, a Sunday Club Spin or a Leisure Event.

Usually in these situations the bunch forms into two lines beside each other. Riders then ride in pairs until told to change by the group leader. At this point the rider on the right at the front of the bunch moves in front of the rider to their left and the rider that was behind them rides up alongside them. Everyone in the right line then moves up one place. This is quite similar to the 'Up and Overs' discussed in the previous section, except the changes don't happen continually but occasionally on the call of the Group Captain. How often the changes are made are down to the group leader and are based on how fast the group is moving and how strong the riders are at the front.

Every group should have a Captain. Naas CC have elected group captains who are in charge of their club runs. It is the job of the Group Captain and Vice Captain to call directions, i.e. left or right turns onto different roads, control the pace of the bunch and decide when the riders at the front should change by calling 'CHANGE' or 'UP AND OVER'.

Usually the group captain decides on the route of the club run and it is very important that the group leader and only the group leader calls directions. These directions should be passed on by the members of the group but no rider should shout their own directions or pre-empt the call from the group leader. You can imagine the consequences of this if someone shouts 'LEFT' for example and the group leader then calls 'RIGHT'. Confusion reigns as some riders turn left, others turn right and collisions are almost inevitable.

When at the front of the bunch ride steadily. The group leader will shout 'EASY' if you are riding too hard. If you find yourself riding slightly ahead of the rider beside you when at the front you are riding too hard. **This practice is known as half-wheeling, from riding half a wheel ahead of the other person and is considered bad manners** as they constantly have to try to match your pace.

While out with a group you should ride at a reasonable pace, as set by the Group Captain and look after everyone in the bunch. It is important to realise that the Sunday Club Spin is just that, a Club Spin. It is not intended to be a hard training ride, especially in the winter months. **It is important to let the bunch regroup if needed, making sure nobody is left behind, before continuing on your way. It is essential that everyone who leaves with the bunch, returns with the bunch. This is particularly important with young and/or inexperienced riders who may not know the way home. Leaving riders behind to fend for themselves is bad manners and is not the act of a true cyclist.**

At times, on particularly narrow sections of road or with a large build up of traffic, the group leader may call for the bunch to 'SINGLE OUT' or 'SINGLE FILE'. **In this instance the inside line allows gaps to open between each rider and these gaps are then filled by the riders from the outside line forming one single line.** When this happens make sure to keep well in to the side of the road and expect traffic to pass. Once the traffic has passed the signal will be given to reform into two lines which is simply done by reversing the process.

Again, when cornering keep a smooth line. The 'racing line' of cutting the apex may or may not be the best choice, think of those around you and behind you when making the choice for the best line through the corner. Leisure events can attract bigger fields, and therefore bigger bunches, than races. As in racing every movement gets multiplied down the bunch and so it is important to ride smoothly.

IN CONCLUSION:

There is a lot to take in, and you will make mistakes, but then we all did when we were starting. The key is to learn from the experienced riders around you, work together to make sure everyone gets home safely, and most importantly ... *enjoy*.