

Lehigh Wheelmen Association

Guide to Riding in Groups

For All Riders

For as much fun as solo riding can be, group riding extends and enriches your bicycling experience by adding social dimensions as well as technical and physical challenges. In addition are the benefits of being introduced to the rich matrix of light-traffic roads offered by the Lehigh Valley's beautiful countryside.

Since successful group riding depends on communication and trust of each rider this article is meant to offer a common understanding of riding etiquette and signals.

Please read all sections of this article regardless of your level of skill and experience so we can all share the joys of riding together as comfortably and safely as possible.

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Before your first group ride

Familiarize yourself with the LWA group ride designations and honestly assess your riding level in relationship to those descriptions. If you have a question contact the ride leader.

While riding alone practice riding in straight lines as if on rails. This applies to cornering at intersections as well as following bends in the road. For instance, if prior to a turn you are riding three feet from the edge of the road maintain that three-foot margin as you round the corner onto the new street. As with all dynamic sports, look where you want to go, not at what you want to avoid.

Train yourself to ride at a consistent pace. When riding in groups consistent speed and cadence is essential to everyone's comfort, safety and peace of mind. Most groups should be able to stay together over shallow grades. Practice for this while riding solo by applying adequate pressure on the pedals to maintain your tempo if not your speed over rolling inclines. Climbing steeper grades has its own challenges and riders will ascend at different speeds. This causes a group to get strung out going up long steep grades. Don't panic if you get dropped on a hill; climb at an even tempo that you can sustain. Most ride leaders will regroup at the top of the climb or next intersection.

Study the Glossary of LWA Signals included later in this article. It is important to understand how to respond to and give signals properly

Learn to follow a cue sheet. If the group ride leader offers cue sheets take one. Generally if the ride has cue sheets there is no regrouping. If you then find that you can't hang with the group you can ride the route on your own. If you decide to leave the group please make sure the ride leader knows of your decision and your intended route.

Cleat Pedals – It is a good idea to learn to ride with bike shoes and cleat pedals. Clipping in not only gives you more power and ability to use varied leg muscles, it also gives you the secure link to your bike critical to group riding. Learning to detach reliably from them is a matter of developing a little muscle memory. This is best achieved by practicing repeatedly clipping in and out with your bike in a trainer or holding onto the walls of a hallway at home.

Join a ride

Introduce yourself to the ride leader and tell them of your ride experience. Be honest. If it is your first group ride, let them know it is your first but that you believe you can maintain the pace. (Refer back to the first item about ride designations in the previous section.) Spend most of your time toward the rear of the group and observe the other riders.

Ride consistently and predictably. Make no sudden stops, no sudden turns and do not weave from your path. Provide appropriate hand and/or voice signals for any changes in your speed or direction.

Obey traffic laws. Bikes are considered a vehicle and subject to rules of the road. You can be cited for infractions. When riding on LWA group rides please obey all traffic laws.

Observe Riding Etiquette. A partial list is included later in this article.

Wear a helmet and carry a spare tube and inflator. These are required of each rider joining a LWA ride. Also recommended is a master link appropriate for your chain.

Carry your cell phone. Program your ride leader's cell phone number. A plastic zip bag will keep your phone sweat and rain free.

Carry ID. A copy of your driver's license (or expired one) and a copy of your health insurance card will suffice. If you have special medical needs or allergies to medication, carry a card denoting them. An alternative is an ID bracelet.

Drafting and Pace Lines

Riding in the draft of another cyclist saves significant energy, from 15% to 50% depending on wind speed, rider speed, incline and distance apart. The wind shadow or draft envelope extends for about a bike length behind a single bike. To take advantage of

the shadow your front tire needs to be within about three feet of the front rider's rear wheel. Experienced riders will often ride within inches of each other, but this takes a great deal of skill and focus. Begin within a half bike length and as you become more experienced your gap will gradually close. Even as a new pace line rider you will discover you can ride faster and farther when cooperating with other riders who help share the brunt of the work at the front. You will hopefully also experience the joy of riding in a well coordinated pace line, truly one of the most exhilarating experiences of recreational road riding.

Pace lines are very much part of riding with "A" level groups and race groups as well as some "B" level rides. Even "C" level rides, in spite of not generally organizing into pace lines, offer opportunities to "get on someone's wheel" and rest in their draft. Drafting each other on "C" and "B" level rides is a safe and effective way to gain pace line skills. Club pace lines, those of any club, are nothing quite like the well-oiled team time-trials ridden by professionals, but we can dream. One purpose of this article is to help make our pace lines safe, efficient and more rewarding by getting everyone on the same wavelength.

Typically LWA pace lines form as either single lines or parallel double lines. Larger groups typically use double lines on appropriate roads to allow cars a quicker passing opportunity. Ideally the front rider or riders will "pull" their line for a period of time extending between 30 seconds and several minutes before signaling with an elbow or hand and pulling off to the left of a single line to slow down and move to the back of the line for a chance to rest in the draft of the others. In a double parallel pace line the right line leader pulls over to the right side of the line and the leader of the left line moves to the left allowing both columns of riders to advance between them as they move to the back of the line. This article is concerned with group communications and does not pretend to cover the many nuances of pace line technique. There is plenty of information available on the web about pace line technique by searching "pace line riding"

[Link to website with pace line illustrations](#)

Do's and Don'ts of Group Riding

Hand Signals – DO use hand signals because bikes don't have brake lights or turn signals. Hand signals are used to relay information about road condition, debris, pedestrians, autos, other riders, stop signs and lights, turns, speed changes and pace line leader rotation. Give signals for four or more seconds in advance. DO pass signals along to the rider behind you. DO NOT use hand signals in situations where taking your hands from the handlebars is dangerous and voice signals are more effective and appropriate.

Vocal Signals – DO use voice signals because they are more immediate, you don't need to take your hands off the handlebars, and because every rider is not always looking ahead. DO use voice signals to augment hand signals, they are especially useful for immediate cautions such as potholes, gravel, pedestrians, mechanical problems, passing autos and sudden slowdowns. DO repeat voice signals to both reaffirm that you heard and effectively pass it along.

Pace Leading – DO maintain a consistent speed. DO NOT surge ahead when you take the lead. If you want to increase the speed of the group do it gradually so as not to split the group. The length of time a rider spends at the front will depend upon headwinds, the speed of the group, and individual strength. There's no need to impress anyone, just maintain the speed of the group for as long as you are comfortable even if it is only for 10 seconds. Even a short contribution to the group effort is appreciated. If you stay in front too long and begin to slow down other riders will want to pass you and break up the systematic pace line. When you are ready to move off the front flick out the elbow a few seconds on the side you will move toward and maintain your effort until you move clear.

Position – DO hold your line. DO NOT swerve or weave. Avoid sudden deviations from your line when moving around holes, debris, pedestrians, or parked autos. It is best to move minimally and in longer sweeping arcs around an object as well as after the object is passed.

Maintain Spacing - DO hold a comfortable drafting distance from the rider in front of you. DO NOT overlap the wheel in front or “half wheel.” Your primary responsibility is to keep from touching the wheel in front. If the rider in front of you moves laterally for any reason while your front wheel is overlapping theirs, you likely will not be able to avoid a wheel touch. Your secondary responsibility is to ride smoothly and consistently and signal those behind you to help them keep from touching your wheel. DO anticipate the accordion effect of riders slowing down on rises and maintain your spacing. DO increase your spacing on fractured pavement surfaces.

Look ahead – DO NOT fixate on the road or the rear wheel of the rider in front. DO look ahead often. Try to anticipate what the riders in front need to do.

DO NOT draft on steep downhill descents – Higher speeds, higher risks and the severe injury potential of high-speed crashes simply do not warrant the additional risk of downhill drafting on recreational club rides. DO maintain spacing of at least two to three full bike lengths on coasting descents.

Pullbacks – Beware that when a rider rises to stand on the pedals the bike is frequently pulled suddenly rearward a few inches. DO maintain a greater space even as the tendency is for the line to compress as an up-grade begins. DO NOT be caught napping!

Mechanical Problems – If forced to stop due to a flat tire or dropped chain Do try to stop in a straight line as gradually as possible. DO NOT turn laterally across the direction of travel.

Passing - DO let others know when you are pulling alongside or passing. DO try to pass on the left, but in either case alert them before overlapping their wheel with “On your left” or “On your right”

Common Sins of Pace Line Riding

Sudden braking Feather-light braking to maintain distance from the bike in front is often necessary, but sudden braking can result in serious accidents. Look ahead to anticipate what those in front might do so your response is controlled and predictable.

Overlapping the wheel of the rider in front of you. When your wheel overlaps the wheel in front any lateral movement from that forward rider can result in a wheel touch. A simple touch of a wheel in a pace-line can spell disaster for so many.

Failure to signal Nobody likes rude surprises.

Random Suddenness Don't do anything suddenly.

Glossary of Hand and Vocal Signals

Use Vocal signals when it is risky to remove hands from handlebars.

Left turn signal- Left arm out to the side. "LEFT TURN"

Right turn signal – Right arm out to the side. "RIGHT TURN"

Slowing – Hand behind seat, palm open, facing back. Augment with vocal signal. "SLOWING"

Stopping – Hand behind seat palm opening and closing. Augment with vocal signal. "STOPPING"

Move Left around Object – Tap hip with right hand as a signal for pedestrians, slow riders, parked or stopped cars, etc. Augment with vocal signal: "LOOK AHEAD" or "HEADS UP"

Road Surface Hazard – Point down to side of hole, gravel, "road kill" or other road surface hazard to avoid. Move away from indicated side. Augment with voice signal "HOLE", "GRAVEL", "ROAD KILL", "GRATE".

Glossary of Vocal Traffic Alert Signals

"CAR UP" Any Vehicle - car, truck, tractor, horse & buggy - approaching from front.

"CAR BACK" Any Vehicle overtaking from behind.

"STOP, CAR" Vehicle is entering intersection being crossed, requiring riders to stop. Since car and clear sound too similar to people behind you the key word here is "STOP" adding the word "CAR" means you're serious.

"LOOK LEFT" or "LOOK RIGHT" Vehicle is approaching intersection but still with enough distance from the intersection being crossed so as to be safe for the immediately following riders to proceed. May be followed by "STOP, CAR" as vehicle approaches intersection.

“CLEAR” No vehicles approaching the intersection being crossed. Each rider is responsible for looking and repeating for following riders. If an approaching car becomes visible but still far enough for safe crossing use the appropriate “LOOK” warning. Avoid adding directional words “left” or “right” to “CLEAR” to avoid confusion with “CAR LEFT” or “CAR RIGHT”

“ON YOUR RIGHT” or “ON YOUR LEFT” Alert the rider in front when you are passing.

Group Etiquette

In Pennsylvania we cyclists may “own the lane” but relatively few drivers are aware of this part of the law. Be courteous to people in cars with which we share the roads. They have serious weight advantage on us and relatively few drivers appreciate what we do. Form a single file when the roads warrant it to permit them to pass.

Talking is fine, but taking your eyes from the road to look at the rider you’re talking to is not a good thing. It’s not rude to keep your eyes on the road as you talk while in a pace line.

Spitting and blowing snot rockets is rude when others are close behind you. Pick your moment with care.

Drinking from a water bottle while in a pace line is risky. Move to the back when you want to drink.

Do not talk on your cell phone while riding. Refrain from using ear-buds of any type while riding in a group.

Avoid getting lost. If you are riding off the front of the group and don’t know where you’re going wait for the ride leader or someone who does.

If you leave a group ride please make sure the ride leader knows of your intentions, even if you have to do it by text or voice message.

If you are a stronger rider in a group that is slower than expected be considerate of the ride-leader who needs to look after the weakest riders as well as the job of guiding the group. Rather than compound the leader’s problems by leading off the front to string out the group, help keep the group together. Be the leader’s wingman/woman and offer encouragement to others, pace stragglers back to the group, and occasionally go to the front and suggest it’s time for the faster riders to permit a regrouping. In other words show a little leadership on the ride-leaders behalf. In that way you’ll get your fair workout in spite of a slower pace group.