

Group Riding Tips

Standard staggered formation. You should be 1 to 1.5 seconds behind the staggered bike, which would put you 2 to 3 seconds behind the bike directly in front of you. If you like to ride slow or are new to group riding get up front. Those who like to ride fast should ride in the back. New riders may think they want to ride in the back, but the reality is just the opposite, they need to be near the front.

Spread out a little around tight corners. Most will need a little extra space. We don't want anyone riding off into the ditch. No wheelies, stoppies, etc. People should also not slow way down from the group, and then zoom back up to the group. While it may be fun to goof around with your bike when you're alone, it can create problems with the safety of the group.

Rules: Who Needs Them?

The following guidelines for riding in a group are not gospel. There are situations in which they don't apply. Some organizations may have different terms for these concepts, as well. These guidelines have been tested for many miles, however, in clubs whose members ride all brands and models of motorcycles, and they have sound safety rationales to support them. If you as a rider find yourself in a group which does not follow these guidelines, you can usually find someone who will explain what rules that organization follows, if any, or how they differ from what you learn here.

At most responsible group rides, a riders' meeting will be held prior to departure, in order to clarify what is expected of all the riders who are to participate. If you find yourself uncomfortable with the riding style of a group at any time, DROP OUT. Your safe arrival at your destination is far more important than conforming to rules you don't like or don't understand. People who ride in a group usually appreciate knowing what they are expected to do, and what to expect from others who are taking part in a hazardous sport in close proximity to them.

Road Captains and those who frequently ride lead or drag are particularly urged to become familiar with these terms and guidelines in order to explain them to other riders who may show up for a scheduled ride without having any group riding experience.

Some Common Group Riding Terms

- 1 **Road Captain:** a person who devises group riding rules or guidelines for an organized group ride. And who communicates these guidelines to the group, and who generally plans and lays out group rides. The Road Captain may or may not ride lead for a particular ride.
- 2 **Lead Bike:** a person who rides in the most forward position in a group and who relays information to all other riders in the group via hand signals. The Lead Bike determines the group's direction, speed, choice of lane, and formation. He or she often must make quick navigation decisions in the face of road hazards, changes in road surface conditions, poor signage, construction and other obstacles while

maintaining control of his or her bike and communicating to those following. If there are three groups on a ride, there will be three Lead Bikes.

- 2 **Drag Bike/Tail Gunner:** a person who rides in the last position in a group. The Drag Bike must secure a lane for the rest of the group during lane changes into faster traffic (move first to block oncoming traffic) and close the door (move to block passing traffic) when a lane is lost in a merging lane situation. Usually this is the most experienced rider in a group, for the Drag Bike is the rider who stops to assist a rider who has mechanical trouble, loses control, or drops out of a ride for some other reason. The Drag Bike should be prepared to render aid to a downed or disabled rider in a group. If at all possible, the Drag Bike should have a co-rider who can assist with traffic control if a serious problem arises. If there are three groups on a ride, there will be three Drag Bikes. The rider in this position is sometimes called the **tail gunner**.
- 3 **Cage:** any vehicle that is not a motorcycle, but particularly an automobile.
- 4 **Cager:** The enemy, anyone driving a cage.
- 5 **Group Parking:** a formation in which all bikes in a group follow the Lead Bike in single file into a parking lot, making a U-turn such that they can all line up next to each other in the space available with the rear of their bikes against the curb or edge of the lot, the front tires pointing outward.
- 6 **Parade formation:** a formation in which all the motorcyclists in a group ride two abreast.
- 7 **Staggered formation:** a formation of motorcyclists in a group in which the Lead Bike rides in the left track of a lane, the next bike in the right track (slot), and the next bike in the left track, and so on. Bikes in a group generally maintain a minimum interval of two seconds travel time between bikes in the same track, and one second travel time between each bike in the group. In a staggered formation, a rider still commands and may ride in the entire width of his lane as needed. Group riders may also ride single file or two abreast. The Drag Bike may ride in the left or right track depending on the number of bikes in the group. It is preferable for the Drag Bike to ride in the left track, so as to have the same visibility line as the Lead Bike.
- 8 **Single file:** a formation in which all the cyclists in a group ride in one track of a lane.
- 9 **Slot:** any position within a group in the right track of a lane, farthest from oncoming traffic.
- 10 **Track:** the zone of a lane in which a rider maintains his position in a group. A lane of traffic is split into five zones: the left track is the second zone from the left,

the middle of the lane (generally not used) is the third zone, and the right track is the fourth zone from the left. Two zones on the sides of a lane serve as margins. A rider may vary his path of travel from his normal track as is required by a road hazard or by an incursion into the group's lane by other vehicles. When departing from a stop, the rider in the left track normally pulls out before the rider on the right, returning to a staggered formation.

Normal Group Riding Maneuvers

Entering Traffic: When the Lead Bike for each group sees that all riders are helmeted, sitting on their bikes, motors running, and ready to depart, he or she will check for traffic and enter the roadway. Usually the Lead Bike will not attempt to exit a parking lot unless there is room for all or most of the group to follow immediately. If the group is split, the Lead Bike will normally take the slow lane and keep the speed relatively low until the group can form up in the positions the riders will keep for the duration of the ride. This may mean traveling slower than surrounding traffic, to encourage fourwheelers to pass and allow the group to form up. Occasionally this cannot be accomplished until the group has made a lane change or entered a freeway, depending on where the entrance ramp may be. Regardless of the Lead Bike's signals, a rider is responsible for his or her own safety at all times.

Ride Your Own Ride.

Once all members of the group are together, the group will take up a staggered formation and will stay in it most of the time during the ride, unless the Lead Bike signals for a change or the need for a change is obvious. Reasons for changing out of a staggered formation could be a passing situation or poor road surface (single file), dog or other animal charging the group (split the group), or coming up to a traffic signal (two abreast while waiting for a light). When a group of motorcycles is changing lanes, many safety considerations come into play. Should every rider move into the adjacent lane at the same time? If not, should the Lead Bike go first, or should the Drag Bike move first to "secure the lane"? What if another vehicle sees a gap in traffic and tries to cut into the group? If part of the group gets separated from the other riders, should everyone change relative positions (tracks) so that the new Lead Bike is now riding in the left track? The recommended procedure for a group lane change maneuver depends on how the surrounding traffic is moving at the time. The goal for the bike which moves first is to create a gap into which the other bikes can fit. Regardless of what other riders in the group are doing, each rider must personally check to see that the new lane is clear of traffic before entering it.

Changing Lanes as a Group

There is virtually no time (absent an emergency) when a group of riders should all move at the same time into a different lane, in regular traffic conditions. The wide gap required for a whole group to move is difficult to find in heavy traffic, and if it exists, it will be an invitation for other drivers to jump into it, perhaps while the group might be moving. Spacing Out; especially on less-congested rural back roads, the riders in a group may spread out to create larger intervals between motorcycles. This allows a rider to relax a bit, to enjoy the scenery and the ride. If no four-wheelers are trying to pass the group,

this is fine. However, the riders should remain close enough to each other to be able to see hand signals being passed back from the Lead Bike. It is possible that a rider will also “space out” in terms of losing his concentration and will forget to practice safe riding strategies. If a rider is not riding safely enough to avoid endangering others in the group (because of lack of experience, medical problems, fatigue, or some other reason), the Lead Bike will usually discuss the problem privately with that rider at the next stop. If a problem cannot be solved reasonably in this way, the Lead Bike has absolute discretion to request that a rider leave the group and is entitled to expect the group to support this decision. In the case of a mechanical or minor medical problem, it is not unusual for another rider to accompany the distressed rider to get help. Sometimes if the Lead Bike just re-assigns the riders to new positions within the group, this is enough to bring a spaced-out motorcyclist back to a state of alert awareness.

Checking Out the Curves

On any stretch of curvy road and in any corner, a group may ride in single-file momentarily, to enable each rider to corner at his own speed and to have as much room as possible for maneuvering. This is especially important to riders with little experience in a group, as they may “wobble” or be nervous about making turns with another bike to their side or riding close behind them. This is an accepted variance to staggered formation; **usually the Lead Bike will not signal for single-file at each turn** but will expect the riders to choose their own path of travel.

Exceptions to Normal Guidelines

The often-heard rule, “Ride Your Own Ride,” means that any guideline for group riding can and should be ignored when it doesn’t make sense. Determining whether this is the case and acting prudently is each rider’s individual responsibility at all times. Under normal circumstances, the Lead Bike will choose a lane, will determine the speed at which the riders are to travel, will suggest the formation which makes maneuvers most safe, and will navigate.

Common exceptions to these guidelines occur with a rider who is not yet experienced with group riding. If a maneuver looks too dangerous or awkward for the new rider to complete safely, he or she should do what he needs to do to protect him and avoid an accident. This may mean passing up a turn or taking it very slowly, or parking somewhere not with the group, or going more slowly through a curve than the riders ahead of him.

Each rider commands his entire area within a lane and may move to left or right in it as required.

Another exception: the Drag Bike may not travel in the same path as the rest of the group. If, for example, a two-lane road is narrowing so that a lane is about to be lost, the Drag Bike will frequently “close the door” by moving out of the group’s staggered formation into the lane which is soon to disappear. This is to prevent a four-wheeler from trying at the last minute to pass part of the group and then have to cut into it when the pavement runs out. Even if the riders near the back of the group observe that the

Drag Bike is no longer in the position where he has been riding most of the time, they should maintain their own place in the group.

Rubber-Band (“Yo-yo”) Effect

Reaction time for a motorcyclist when confronted with an unexpected threat is, on average, about one second. If the need to react is anticipated (such as when a turn has been announced), then riders can usually react within about half a second after the bike ahead begins to react. When a group of riders change speeds very gradually, however, it usually takes two or three seconds for a rider to recognize this and begin to change his speed to maintain his position in the group. This doesn't sound like much time, but experienced group riders manage their risks reasonably well with a minimum one-second interval between each bike and a minimum two-second interval between bikes that are traveling in the same track.

When the group has more than six bikes in it, however, gradual changes in speed within the group can become tricky. When a Lead Bike begins to accelerate, the second bike doesn't instantly start to travel at the faster rate. Instead, a gap grows between them while the second bike is reacting -- and it continues to grow until the second bike is fully up to the increased, stable speed of the Lead Bike. Clearly, once the speeds are the same, the gap will remain the same size. However, since most groups prefer to keep a one-second minimum interval between bikes (two seconds between bikes in the same track), the new gap caused by the Lead Bike's acceleration may be larger than is desired.

When this occurs, the second bike must go faster than the first one for a brief time in order to “catch up.” If we assume that the Lead Bike speeds up from 60 to 70 mph over a period of two seconds, the second bike will have to ride at 75 mph for two seconds (after his reaction time passes) in order to close the gap. Then he will take another one second to decelerate back to 70 mph to create a gap of the proper size. If there were only two bikes in the group, this example is easy to follow. But when the group is larger, and the bikes involved are riding further back in the pack, the “rubber band” effect can be especially dangerous to all bikes from the middle of the group to the Drag bike.

For example, the third bike in the group has this problem: About two seconds after the second bike has begun to accelerate, the third bike responds. Now, however, the second bike is moving at 75 mph rather than at 70 mph like the Lead Bike. The third bike must use even more effort to catch up to the second bike than the second bike did to match his speed to the Lead Bike's new speed, if the gap is to stay relatively constant. He will have to move at 75 mph for four seconds, not two, to catch up. The fourth bike will have to accelerate to 80 mph!

In a group of only six motorcycles, the last one will find the gap between himself and the fifth bike has grown to 143 feet before it begins to close, once he starts to speed up, given these average reaction times. And it will be at least 11 seconds after the Lead Bike first began to accelerate before the sixth bike does so.

Now, imagine what happens in the group if, while this is taking place, the Lead Bike

must apply his brakes! This rubber-band effect becomes extremely important if the Lead Bike happens to make an abrupt and major change of speed at certain critical moments, such as when approaching a sharp turn or a tricky curve. Those who ride as Lead Bike or near the Lead Bike for their group should be aware of the importance of avoiding sudden changes in speed if at all possible, so as to reduce the risks to those following.

The rubber-band effect can be reduced by following these guidelines:

- 1 Lead Bike changes speed more gradually
- 1 All riders watch farther ahead than just the bike immediately in front of them in order to notice and to react quicker to changes in speed
- 2 All riders restrain the impulse to “crank it up” in order to quickly re-establish normal spacing.
- 3 Lead Bike does not increase speed within 15 seconds of entering a curve which may require braking or some slowing down to maneuver it safely.
- 4 All riders abandon the one-second spacing rule when riding twisties.

Common Hand Signals (See the Illustrated Hand Signals)

Hand Signals

Certain hand signals are optional in group riding: turn signals on the bikes ahead will usually advise a rider that a turn is coming up, for example, and hand signals in a turning situation may actually add to the danger for some. However, other hand signals are extremely helpful to the rider who has no other means to communicate. The most important two hand signals are these: pointing to an obstacle in the road, warning the rider to avoid it; and pointing to the tank.

- 1 **Pointing to the tank:** No matter what your reason, pointing to the tank on your bike, will be telling everyone that you need to stop as soon as possible. This may be because needing fuel; to make a “potty stop”; because you are having a mechanical or equipment problem; because your co-rider is uncomfortable; because a medical problem; a crisis of confidence; or for any other reason at all. Such a signal should be relayed throughout the Group. If possible, the Lead Bike may orchestrate a stop by the whole group. If not, the affected bike can count on the Drag Bike to stop with him to try to help him.
- 1 **Back off** -- Palm of left hand shown to group, pushing motion toward rear of bike
- 2 **Ready to ride** – “Thumbs up” high enough in air to be visible to Lead Bike
- 3 **Single-file formation** -- One finger points to the sky on top of the helmet
- 4 **Slow down** -- Left arm is held out straight, then goes up and down
- 5 **Smoky alert (police or emergency vehicles)** -- Hand taps top of helmet several times Speed up or close ranks in formation -- Left arm makes “windmill” sign
- 6 **Staggered formation** -- First finger and little finger point to the sky on top of the helmet, also known as the “Hook ‘em, Horns” sign.
- 7 **U-turn** -- Left hand makes circle in air over head