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**ISLINGTON CYCLING CLUB**

**GROUP RIDING SKILLS GUIDE**

Our Group Riding Skills Guide provides practical advice on how to ride safely and efficiently in a group and how to communicate when doing so. It is principally aimed at those who are new to cycling in a group. It should, however, also be of interest to more experienced cyclists as different clubs have different practices in this regard.

The Guide is divided into four sections:

* Section One: Riding Safely;
* Section Two: Communication;
* Section Three: Group Riding Techniques; and
* Section Four: Equipment.

Naturally, if you have any questions on any of these issues, please ask.

Happy reading!

**Islington Cycling Club**

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1. **SECTION ONE: RIDING SAFELY**

So how do I ride safely in a group?

Well, put simply, one should focus on “the Seven Cs”.

* 1. **Concentration**

Pay attention to what is happening around, and, especially, ahead, of you and listen to signals and commands from other members of the group. By doing so you should be able to anticipate what is going to happen and not have to react to it when it does. And remember to watch the person in front of you and not their bike. Bicycles do not have brake lights and you will learn significantly more from watching a rider’s body language than from watching their spinning rear tyre.

* 1. **Consistency**

When cycling in a group there is no such thing as a pleasant surprise.

* *Hold your line*: Do not suddenly veer left or right.
* *Hold your position*: Keep your handlebars in line with those of the rider next to you. Don’t allow your front wheel to overlap with the back wheel of the rider in front. If you do and he or she has to swerve then you are likely to crash.
* *Hold the pace*: When leading a group, the more experienced of the two at the front should set the pace. This avoids the possibility of getting into an “arms race” with you and that other rider taking turns to up the pace. If you are moving towards, or away from, the front of the group, hold your pace while you transition. Accelerating at the beginning, or decelerating at the end, of your turn at the front (or “pull”) both serve to ruin group dynamics.
* *Stay smooth*: Pedal smoothly and evenly and don’t surge. Riding with a high cadence (i.e., spinning a smaller gear) increases your ability to react quickly.
* *Don’t grab your brakes*: Doing so is likely to cause the rider behind to collide with you.
* *Don’t throw your wheel*: Take care when you get out of the saddle on a climb. Doing so can cause your bike to move backwards relative to the rider behind you. This may cause an accident, or at least come as an unpleasant surprise! To avoid this move your body forward and keep pressure on the down stroke. You may also want to warn those behind that you are about to do this so they can be ready to slow down.
* *Don’t overcompensate*: If a rider ahead makes an unexpected movement, such as moving sideways or braking, many riders instinctively repeat the original movement “with interest”, by moving or braking in a more pronounced manner. If the original, and possibly small, action is transmitted and magnified down the group in this way the result can often be dramatic by the time it reaches the back of the group.
* *Look up:* Try to look past the rider in front of you. Doing so will allow you to anticipate hazards ahead. It is easy to hypnotise yourself by watching the spinning back wheel in front of you!
  1. **Communication**

Use the hand and verbal signals explained below (see Section 2) to communicate hazards such as potholes, cars, etc. If you hear or see such a signal being given, repeat it, to pass the information to those riders behind or ahead of you (as the case may be). Where possible use hand, rather than verbal, signals as the latter may be difficult to hear clearly and may cause confusion.

* 1. **Cornering**
* *Speed*: Bicycles decelerate much more effectively and safely when travelling in a straight line than round a corner. It is therefore important to moderate your speed before you reach any corner. And if you do have to brake while cornering, move your weight backwards as you do so.
* *Road surface*: In any corner, be mindful of the road surface. A handful of gravel or wet leaves can significantly reduce your grip (and so add a special thrill) to the most mundane bend, so stay alert.
* *Blind corners*: Approach any blind corner with particular care. You cannot assume that there won’t be oncoming traffic. Stay left, and control your speed.
* *Communication*: Finally, don’t forget that you are riding in a group. Communicate the need to slow and (if necessary) the change of direction and any relevant hazards accordingly (see Section 2 below).
  1. **Collective responsibility**
* *Safety*: In addition to being responsible for your own safety you are also responsible for that of the other members of the group and other road users. Act accordingly. If you haven’t read Highway Code, please do, especially in respect of road signs.
* *Navigation*: If the ride organiser has proposed a specific route in advance, please put it on your Garmin/GPS device if you have one. You may be glad you did.
* *Generally*: While one member may have proposed the ride, **everyone** should behave like a leader. Know where you are going. Look out for your fellow members and be ready to assist them if they get into difficulty.
  1. **Constructive feedback**

Be prepared to give club members constructive feedback when they don’t heed the advice in this Guide, and be ready to receive it when you don’t. We need to do these things well. And we will only do that if we all focus on it.

* 1. **Cohesion**

On club rides:

* *Climbing*: If you are at the front of the group on a climb, focus on riding at a consistent **effort** rather than a consistent **pace**. Trying to ride at a consistent pace is likely to stretch or splinter the group.
* *Club kit*: Please wear club kit (or at least a club jersey or gilet) if you have it. It is far easier to maintain a cohesive group if members are in club kit and it looks much better. This is especially important in The Regent’s Park and Richmond Park given the large numbers of cyclists.
* *Briefing*: To ensure that the ride is both safe and cohesive, take a couple of minutes at the start of the ride to ensure that any new members are familiar with the signals (see Section 2 below) and with the other points in this Guide.

1. **SECTION TWO: COMMUNICATION**

OK. So, how do I communicate? And what do all these signals mean?

The key signals, and related actions, are as follows:

* *Slowing*: Wave your hand, palm down, and announce “SLOWING” or “EASY”.
* *Stopping*: Wave your hand, palm down, and announce “STOPPING”.
* *Single file*: Sometimes it may be safer for the group to ride in single file rather than in a double line. Where you want the group to do so announce “SINGLE OUT”. Riders on the left hand (inside) line should then adjust their pace to allow the riders on the right hand (outside) line to move across and form part of the new, single, line. Communicate with other riders to indicate where you intend to move to.
* *Turning*: Extend your arm parallel to the ground to indicate the proposed direction and announce “LEFT TURN” or “RIGHT TURN” (as the case may be).
* *Obstruction (e.g., poor road surface/pothole)*: Slowly move across the road to a position where you, and those following, can avoid the hole, point to where the obstruction is to allow those behind to avoid it, and then slowly move back to the original position on the road. (NB: If the obstruction is a particularly large/deep pothole announce “HOLE”. If you do so, you should also point to the obstruction so that riders behind have a clear idea where it is. Pointing is more accurate, and less startling, than a loud announcement.) More generally, in a large group it is often not possible to avoid many hazards on the road so it is important to be able to ride through small debris and obstacles while maintaining your line.
* *Parked vehicle*: Slowly move across the road to a position where you, and those following, can avoid the parked car, then indicate the presence of the parked car by bending your left arm and placing the back of your left hand on your back, and then slowly move back to the original position on the road. If a person appears to be preparing to open a door you should also warn your fellow riders.
* *Horses*: Announce “HORSES”. In these circumstances the group should also slow so as to be able to pass the horse(s) safely. To do so, give the “Slowing” signal (see above). As you near the horse(s) you should then greet the rider(s), or announce “COMING THROUGH”, to ensure that both horse(s) and rider(s) are aware of your approach. Obviously, please do not shout. One does not want to scare the horse(s)!
* *Mechanical*: Announce “PUNCTURE” or “MECHANICAL” (as the case may be).
* *Oncoming traffic*: It is only necessary to signal oncoming traffic where it seems likely to pass close to the group. To do so, announce “CAR UP”.
* *Passing traffic*: Again, it is only necessary to signal passing traffic where it seems likely to pass close to the group. To do so, announce “CAR BACK”.
* *Pace too high*: If the pace of the riders at the front of the group is too high with the result that other riders are being left behind or the group is starting to split up, announce “EASE UP”. Those at the front of the group should then ease the pace so as to allow the group to re-form. When it has done so those at the back of the group should let the rest of the group know, by announcing “ALL UP”.

Obviously, other than the “Passing traffic” signal, all of the signals are given by the rider(s) at the front and passed back through the group. The “Passing traffic” signal is given by the rider(s) at the back and is passed forwards.

Finally, it is customary to acknowledge other cyclists with a wave or cheery greeting. We are a friendly club and respect the traditions of the sport. Doing so is therefore strongly encouraged.

1. **SECTION THREE: GROUP RIDING TECHNIQUES**

OK. Now I know how to ride safely in a group. How do I ride in formation?

Riding in a group is generally acknowledged to reduce the required effort by up to 30%. Consequently, riding in a group, with all riders taking turns on the front, allows the group to go significantly faster and so to get to the coffee stop more quickly!

Sounds great (especially the coffee bit). So, how do I do it?

We use three basic formations. **The Club Run is more suited to recreational riding. The Paceline and the Chain Gang are more suited to training and racing.**

* 1. **Club Run**

This comprises two parallel lines. Pairs of riders ride alongside each other as close to the riders in front as they are both comfortable with.

To rotate the pace at the front of the group, i.e., to change the riders at the front so that they can shelter from the wind and so that all riders can share the effort, each of the members of the group will, essentially, shift their position in the group anti-clockwise. (Imagine for this purpose that each of the riders in the group represents a bead on a necklace that is being rotated anti-clockwise.).

To do this, one of the riders at the front will announce “CHANGE ONE”. When he or she does so:

* the rider at the front on the left hand (inside) lane will ease his or her pace slightly so that the rider at the front in the right hand (outside) lane can move to the left and occupy his or her position in the group;
* the rider behind the rider who was at the front of the right hand (outside) line will move forward so as to be alongside the rider who is now at the front of the left hand (inside) lane; and
* the rider at the back of the left hand (inside) lane will move right to join the end of the right hand (outside) lane.

Sometimes, one of the riders at the front will announce “CHANGE TWO”. When he or she does so the process is very similar to “CHANGE ONE”, save that each rider will shift their position in the group anti-clockwise by two places (rather than one place).

Other than to rotate the pace in this way riders should not swap lanes.

* 1. **Paceline**

This comprises a single line. Again, riders shift position in an anti-clockwise direction.

Each rider will complete a turn at the front. The length of that turn will vary depending on the speed, the general conditions (including, principally, the wind), and their fitness. They will then move to the left or to the right (depending on traffic or wind direction).

When they do so the rest of the group will maintain their original pace and direction.

Having done their turn and moved off the front the first rider will then ease his or her pace slightly. This allows the rest of the group to pass.

As the last rider passes them, the first rider will move right or left (depending on traffic) to join the back of the line.

3.3 **Chain Gang**

As with the Club Run this comprises two parallel lines. And as with the Club Run riders shift position in an anti-clockwise direction.

So what’s different?

Well, this time the riders’ changes of position are constant, fluid, and are not announced by verbal signals. Essentially, the right hand (outside) lane moves about 1-2kmh faster than the left hand (inside lane). Consequently:

* when a rider reaches the front of the right hand (outside) lane he or she moves to the left to join the front of the left hand (inside) line and then eases his or her pace slightly; and
* when a rider reaches the back of the left hand (inside) lane he or she accelerates slightly and moves right to join the back of the right hand (outside) line.

Sounds complicated. Any tips?

Yes. A few:

* *Accelerate when at the back but not when at the front*: When moving left to join the front of the left hand (inside) line, do not accelerate – Rely on the fact that the left hand (inside) line is moving slightly more slowly to allow you to do so. This is really important! If you don’t do it the Chain Gang will get faster and faster until it breaks up.
* *Pull all the way through*: Keep your pace until you are completely off the front. Another rider is moving up on the outside and you don’t want them to have to swerve to avoid you as you slow down. Doing that will make you very unpopular!
* *Be subtle*: When moving left or right keep your lines shallow – A sharp change of direction is likely to move you into the wheel of the rider ahead of, or behind, you (depending on which way you are moving).
* *Relax*: Look up, and don’t just focus on the wheel ahead. Doing so will enable you to anticipate what is going to happen rather than react to it. And do try not to use your brakes. Yes, really!
* *Communicate*: When there is space for the front right rider to move over, the front left rider should announce “CLEAR”. And when the rear left rider moves right and forward, they should announce “LAST MAN” as they pass the new rear left rider.

1. **SECTION FOUR: EQUIPMENT**
   1. **What to Bring**

* *Helmet*: It is mandatory to wear a cycle helmet (or equivalent protective headgear, such as a Hovding) on club rides.[[1]](#footnote-1)
* *Puncture repair*: If you have a puncture on a club ride you must be able to repair it. Consequently, you should bring a pump/inflator, tyre levers, a couple of inner tubes (with the correct length valve for your rims), repair patches and a tyre boot.
* *Other tools*: You should also bring a multitool with a chain splitter/link extractor.
* *Lights*: Depending on the length of the ride and the time of year you may need lights. If in any doubt, take them.
* *Mudguards*: It is courteous to other members of your group to use mudguards when it is wet. No one enjoys spending the day being sprayed with cold, muddy, water by the rider in front.
* *Food/Drink*:Bring sufficient food and water to sustain yourself for the ride, or at least until the café stop!
  1. **What Not to Bring**
* *Luggage*: Travel light. Leave your rucksack or panniers at home.
* *Bike lock*: Again, travel light. If we stop for lunch/coffee, leave your bike where you can see it.
* *iPod*: You should not wear an iPod while riding in a group (or at all) as you will be unable to hear oncoming traffic and signals by other members of the group. Save the playlist for the turbo train.er, and the turbo trainer for the winter!

1. NOTE: This does not apply to a follower of the Sikh religion while wearing a turban. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)