

# Paceline Rules to Remember

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[By John Marsh, Editor & Publisher](#)

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Last week, one of our regular contributors wrote us with a question about paceline rules. Specifically, he asked if there are any hard-and-fast rules about rotating based on wind direction.

Like most (but not all) of us, he's a very experienced rider. But the fact is, we can all use a reminder from time to time of all the intricacies that add up to safe, fun road riding. Heck, even the pros crash in pacelines on occasion. (So maybe even they would benefit from a refresher, too!)

I should also say that this paceline primer includes a combination of advice from me, our Tech Talk columnist **Jim Langley**, and **Coach Fred Matheny**, by way of the Coach's [Solutions to Road Cycling Challenges](#) eBook.

**A paceline is a pact.** When you form up into a paceline, you've made an implicit agreement and a promise to everyone else in the group. The agreement: You'll work together, safely and steadily, to further the group's goals. The promise: That you know the basic rules of paceline riding and that you're alert and ready to ride together.

**No false moves.** The essence of paceline riding is predictability. Any abrupt moves or unexpected actions dangerously disrupt the paceline. If a rider near the front gets squirrely, the reactions can radiate through the paceline like a sports crowd doing the wave.

**Don't get grabby on the brakes.** If you're getting too close to the wheel in front of you, soft pedal to let your bike slow slightly, then smoothly resume applying power. If that's not enough, feather the brakes lightly. Never grab them. Or move over gradually till you're slightly out of the draft, and sit up

slightly so your chest catches more air. You'll slow gently and regain the correct spacing to the next wheel.

**Follow the leader(s).** The leaders or riders in front determine which way to rotate depending on the wind and traffic, usually. If the wind is from the side, you would want to rotate into it – if traffic allows. If the side wind is strong, riders may overlap wheels in the formation known as an echelon (assuming there's enough space on the road, and traffic allows for it). If the wind is straight on, you rotate on whichever side is safest, based on traffic. In many cases, traffic alone will dictate the rotation side – regardless of wind direction. It should be easy to just follow what the leaders set as the "rules." And, if they know what they're doing, it'll be the most efficient way to ride down the road, and the fastest, too.

**Keep some safety space.** Unless you're riding with cyclists you know and trust, there's no need to ride just inches from the wheel you're following. Allowing a gap of 2 feet or so gives you room to maneuver in case of mishaps or obstacles in the road. This is especially important on organized and other rides where you're likely to form up with riders you don't know, and can't necessarily trust like you can your buddies.

**Look up the road.** Don't fixate on the rear wheel just ahead. Look around that rider and up the road so you can anticipate things (turns, potholes, traffic) that may cause a reaction by those ahead of you. Let the lower edge of your peripheral vision monitor the gap in front of your wheel.

**Protect Your Wheel.** Touching wheels with the bike in front of you is one of the leading causes of crashes in a paceline. And you are more likely to crash, not the rider in front of you! Protect your wheel. But if you do happen to touch wheels, don't panic. Remember to turn into – not away from – the wheel you're rubbing, as you ease off the pedal pressure to fall back just enough to get clear of the wheel you're following. Then smoothly apply power to get back to your proper position. If you do this right, the rider in front of you might not even realize you've touched.

**Don't Get Distracted.** Most crashes in pacelines are caused by distractions outside the paceline. For example, a dog running from a yard toward the line, which causes riders to lose focus. The key thing is to always remember that the biggest hazard is that rider in front of you, not anything on the side of the road or up the road or behind you. Your job is to pay attention to that rider directly in front of you.

**Ride in the drops.** Doing so keeps you in the most aero position, which helps with the overall energy savings you'll reap, and the overall efficiency of the paceline – the reasons you ride in a paceline. But riding in the drops has the added benefit of protecting you from being “hooked” by another rider's bar. As riders are moving back down the line, or sometimes in a double paceline, there's the chance of being hit from the side and getting your bar hooked by someone else's bar – which can take you down in an instant. In effect, riding in the drops, you “seal off” the bar ends with your arms, making hooking impossible.

**Communicate!** Pacelines are often quiet, except for double pacelines rolling at a conversational pace. When groups are going faster—and the danger is greater—let your fellow riders know what's going on. There's no need to shout out obstacles. Merely pointing at them is sufficient. But if there's a question about the next intersection, or a turn, it's far better to tell, or ask, than to guess.

**Don't increase the pace on your pull.** The biggest mistake novice riders make is getting all psyched up when they hit the front and increasing the speed several miles per hour. This opens gaps between riders and could blow some of them off the back. It makes the paceline ragged and wastes energy as riders have to surge to close gaps. Granted, it can be tough to know how hard to pedal when you're suddenly feeling the wind. But the solution is easy: Take a quick glance at your computer when you're the second rider in line. When the leader pulls off, simply maintain that speed (assuming there's no wind or terrain change).

**Don't take monster pulls.** There's no reason to sit on the front for 10 minutes, trying to impress everyone but exhausting yourself. Generally, give up the lead after 1-3 minutes and let other riders have some fun. Sometimes, though, a couple of riders may be much stronger than the others. Then it might be appropriate for them to pull for 5-8 minutes while the rest take short pulls or none at all. Discuss this so everyone knows what's going on.

**You're the eyes and ears at the front.** As the lead rider, you're the eyes and ears of the group. You are responsible for the whole group's safety. You must point out road obstacles and watch for traffic at crossroads, shouting a warning if necessary. Try to be an "early warning system," keeping in mind that a shout may take several seconds to trickle down the line, and may be "lost in translation" along the way.

**Responsibility at the back, too.** When you rotate to the back of the paceline, you still have a special responsibility. It's your job to check behind periodically for approaching traffic and calling out "Car back!" when a motorist is approaching. If the group is in a double paceline on a narrow road, someone will yell "Single out" or "Single up," and the double paceline will form into a single line so the motorist can pass safely. But when there are no traffic concerns, being last in line is a privileged position. Because no one is behind you to be disrupted by your actions, now's the time to take a drink or sit up and grab a snack from your jersey pocket. Need to remove a vest or peel your arm warmers? Do it while at the back.

**No aero bars!** Aero bars are fine for time trialing or long solo rides where they help you cut through the wind and take pressure off your hands. But aero bars are unwelcome in pacelines. A cyclist using aero bars in the paceline is less steady, and hands are far from the brake levers. They present particular dangers, both to themselves and to the other riders – and they should self-select out of pacelines.

**John Marsh** is the editor and publisher of **RBR Newsletter** and

**RoadBikeRider.com.** A rider of "less than podium" talent, he sees himself as RBR's Ringmaster, guiding the real talent (RBR's great coaches, contributors and authors) in bringing our readers consistently useful, informative, entertaining info that helps make them better road cyclists. That's what we're all about here—always have been, always will be. Click to read [John's full bio](#).