

Introduction to Pacelines

A major component of group riding is drafting, which is when the cyclist in front pushes through the air so that everyone following closely behind benefits from reduced air pressure. Trailing riders exert about 25 percent less energy to keep up the same pace. Popularly known as "sitting on a wheel", "a sleigh ride", or "sucking wheel", drafting acts as an equalizer for a group of cyclists of varying abilities, especially on flat roads.

The primary advantage of riding in a paceline is increasing your speed without expending additional energy. However pacelines also enhance, safety, camaraderie, and the ability to ride longer distances. The essence of a paceline is to take turns at the front of a single-file line of cyclists, push hard or maintain an agreed upon speed, and then move to the left as the other riders pass you. You then "grab on" to the last rider's wheel and rest in the "draft". Cycling in the "slipstream" of another rider, is much easier than "breaking the wind" all by yourself. At 13 mph, or faster, a paceline is an effective way to cover ground with higher speeds and lower energy output. A paceline is also useful when "riding into the wind", as it gives you a periodic rest from the work of pushing through a headwind.

A paceline also enhances safety, as it forces the riders into a single line along the right side of the road. To participate in a paceline, you must be able to ride in a straight line, maintain a steady pace, and have good bike handling skills. Keep the distance between bikes at 12 to 24 inches. The closer the better - but a tighter line requires more practice, skill and concentration. While professional racers often ride within a few inches of each other, it is neither practical nor safe for most of us. At 12 to 24 inches you can maintain an effective, yet safe, margin. Never get closer to the wheel in front of you, than your ability to respond to any situation allows. If your wheel "kisses" the wheel in front of you, you (and some of the riders behind you) will "go down". The rider in front of you usually does not.

Be aware that you may "drop kick" the person behind you if you rise too quickly to pedal out of the saddle. When a cyclist rises out of the saddle and pulls the bike under him, it throws the bike backward. This maneuver could throw your rear wheel back into contact with the front wheel of the following cyclist. If you want to pedal out of the saddle when climbing a hill, gently move your torso forward towards the handlebars without pulling on them. You may also shift into the next higher gear before standing to compensate for the slower cadence. Beginners should not ride directly behind a wheel; stay an inch or two to the side. That way, if there's a sudden deceleration, you can avoid kissing the wheel in front of you. You will also have a better view of the up-coming road.

Don't make sudden moves! They endanger others. Minimize the use of your brakes, by watching and planning ahead. Braking slows down the line. Then you, and everyone behind you, must expend energy to close the gap with the front of the line. This wastes energy - instead of braking, anticipate. Braking hard while riding in a paceline could cause a pile-up. If you must stop or brake for any reason, move to your left, out of the line, before applying the brakes. Never overlap another rider's rear wheel. If the rider swerves and catches your front wheel, you may go down. If you begin to pass the wheel in front of you, "soft pedal" or briefly coast until you regain the correct distance. Another method to reduce speed is to sit up to catch the wind.

Use the smallest gear possible to maintain a constant speed. It is difficult to make small adjustments in speed in a big gear. Using a big gear will create a yo-yo effect. If you find that you are constantly overtaking the cyclist in front of you, shift down one gear and increase your pedaling cadence.

After gaining steady experience as a paceliner, try looking down the road about fifty yards instead of focusing solely on the wheel in front of you. This is sometimes referred to as "looking through" the rider in front of you. Try to use your peripheral vision to keep track of the distance between you and the wheel you are following. It is the lead rider's responsibility to avoid road problems, as the rest of the group follows his/her line. The leader can either point to a problem, or call out the nature of the obstacle, while avoiding it. Common call outs include "glass, hole, rough road, stopping, and runner up". When the line passes a single rider, or another group, the lead rider and the rest of the paceline should announce themselves as they pass by calling out "left" or "on your left".

Invariably, speeds change up and down the paceline due to terrain elevations. When ascending a hill, the speed of the paceline will naturally reduce. If you are the lead cyclist, don't try to maintain the same speed as on flat terrain. All cyclists in the paceline may not climb hills as well as you. By shifting down and maintaining the same effort when climbing hills will help the paceline remain intact. If you are the trailing cyclist and if you cannot maintain the ascending speed, call out, "I'm off the back." to the cyclist in front of you. When this information reaches the lead cyclist, he/she will reduce hi/her speed so that you can regain contact with the pack. On descents, the lead cyclists should continue pedaling to minimize the braking of trailing cyclists.

How long you stay on the front depends on your comfort level and/or an agreed upon limit among the riders. But never stay out front to the point of exhaustion. You must retain enough energy to both catch on to the line when you "peel off", and to hold on afterwards. When you are ready to drop off the front, check for oncoming cars, signal with your left hand to inform the following cyclist of your intentions, and ease over a few feet to the left. Pacelining novices may swing too far to the left after their pull at the front. Reduce your speed 1-2 mph as you drift to the rear of the line. Stay close to the passing paceline to benefit from wind protection of the other cyclists moving ahead. With a new leader, the group will maintain speed as it overtakes you. When you are parallel to the last cyclist, accelerate slightly so you can move to the right and hook onto the line without expending additional energy. Now you can safely rest while being "carried along".

When it becomes your turn to lead the paceline, you may be tempted to increase your speed. Because you have been benefiting from the slipstream, you will feel rested and possibly energetic. Resist this temptation and maintain the agreed upon speed of the paceline. Remember that the cyclist who has just completed a turn at the front is tired. If you increase the speed of the paceline, the cyclist who has just peeled off may not be able to remain in the line. It is not poor etiquette for weaker riders to skip a turn or to take an abbreviated turn at the front. The stronger riders will understand that you are doing all you can to just "hold on". However, if you are capable of taking your turn and fail to do so, you have committed a major breach of etiquette.

This will annoy the other riders big time. The best way to get good at "following a wheel", is to ride with experienced cyclists.

Pacelining has three important rules:

1. Take care of yourself.
2. Take care of your partners.
3. Go as fast as you can while following rules 1 and 2.

Only practice pacelining when you trust the ability of the rider in front of you. It is not always wise to ride in another cyclist's draft unless you are familiar with their bike handling skills. If you choose to ride in another cyclist's draft, it is proper etiquette to inform them that you are behind them and to ask permission to ride there. All it takes to become an effect paceliner is practice, practice, and more practice.