

Surviving Your First Road Race

(continued from page 23)

somewhere between 10 to 15 riders from the front. That's simply the place to be until you're ready to go off the front or you're forced off the back. Everywhere else can "place you in a spot of bother." Ego demands to go to the front will end up having you expend a lot more energy than is needed (you'd be surprised at the difference in the draft in position 10 versus position 3 and you're actually more vulnerable to attacks. Farther back and you're trapped among the tired, desperate or scared ... all of whom provide an "accident rich environment." Don't drift back, and you may have to go to the front to stay in this relative position, but it's worth it.

Pay attention. The rule above all rules – Pay attention. Watch the rider ahead of the rider upon whose wheel you're riding. This will give you time to react. From time to time look to each side and know where the people next to you are. Don't overlap wheels and anticipate changes. For example, if the pack is going up a hill, the rider in front of you will stand (if you're watching up the peloton, you'll see the ripple of this happening. When the rider in front of you does this, most probably, his rear wheel will apparently move back (toward you) a couple of inches. Knowing this will probably happen, can prevent crashes.

Before you move anywhere but straight ahead – look. If the attack comes by, look back to make sure the area is clear before you pull out to join in. This doesn't mean you have to turn around in your saddle, but it does mean you have to turn your head and look. Never assume where you want your bicycle to be will be clear.

Be aggressive – not stupid or reckless. If you're lucky enough to be the strongest guy in the race and decide to prove it by pulling the entire time, more than likely, you'll lose. If you don't pull at all, you may not be able to help sustain the break, bridge up to one or even keep the pack fast enough to ward off attacks from within. Do your share, when

it makes sense. Don't listen to other people telling you what to do, do what's right for you or your team. Teammate up the road, not your duty to help pull the pack or even to pull through no matter what anyone says. If you're in the break and you're tired, it's okay to miss a pull once in a while.

Learn to use holes not make them. Sooner or later if you're trying to make holes in the pack rather than exploit gaps, you'll either develop a reputation for being dangerous or crash. It takes time and experience, but recognize when there's space and use it. Usually if you take time to think about it, though, the gap will disappear. This should be part of your training in groups. When in doubt, it's probably best not to push the point. You have to finish the race to win it.

Take a flyer. To win you have to risk defeat. If you're feeling strong and you see that the pack is asleep or concerned with something else or has just caught the previous flyer – go for it. There is nothing like feeling the wind in your face and hearing the guys in the pack yell "outside, outside" when you go whizzing by. If you get caught, see if they can help you keep it alive ... if not you've probably put a few off the back. Don't over do this because you've got to have the strength to respond to others' attacks, but to sit in is not to race.

Bike racing is a lot like life. What goes around, comes around. Almost everyone in this sport gets to know everyone else. You've got balance what is good for yourself and what is good for the team and good for the race. You're really a part of all three. Don't feel obliged to pull till you're dead, but don't refuse to take your turn when you have to. If no one else will start the response to an attack, you should try – if you don't the attack may succeed. If you find yourself doing all the work, stop. They will either pick it up or not, but either way you'll be a part of the group, not off the back. If you sandbag, don't do your share or tell people one thing, but do another – just like in life, that will happen to you.

Finally, remember you paid to do this and it's fun. You'll begin to read a pack and be able to react quickly or even predict behavior. You'll find that balance between risking yourself and letting others do the work. You'll see a moment to exploit and have the strength and knowledge to exploit it.

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