

Safe Cycling in a Group

The following article is provided courtesy of RoadBikeRider.com and was written by its founders Fred Matheny and Ed Pavelka. Fred and Ed were longtime *Bicycling Magazine* editors, are noted cycling authors and rode together on a world-record-setting Race Across America team in 1996.

Climbing Hills on Your Bike

Vertical terrain is responsible for the biggest thrills — and the most intense pain — in cycling. In races, the crunch almost always comes when the pavement tilts up. Recreational tours such as Colorado's Ride the Rockies feature several thousand feet of climbing each day. And, of course, climbs are followed by swooping, twisting descents where the grin-per-mile quotient is literally sky high. For all these reasons, it pays to get good on hills.

While the following [training tips](#), [climbing strategies](#) and [skills](#) are written from a racing/competitive point of view, they'll help recreational road and off-road riders who would simply like to climb better, too.



Because climbing is a fight against gravity, your ultimate ability is determined by your power-to-weight ratio. Lean, small-boned riders need proportionally less power to climb well compared to big people. That's why great climbers are nearly always diminutive. The few exceptions, such as Lance Armstrong and Miguel Indurain, generate so much power that their greater size doesn't matter.

The good news is that you can improve your climbing regardless of your genetic makeup. In this article, I show you how to use climbing days to your best advantage.

Hold your own on Fast Group Rides

The major activity of any cycling club, racing or touring, is the group ride. As a result, it's important to know how to hang tough on a given ride and make yourself welcome on the next one. Success is often due to more than fitness.

Here's a club cycling primer!

- ∞ **Know the group's traditions.**

Some clubs like to start all rides, no matter how fast they'll eventually become, with 20 or 30 minutes of easy warm-up. If you're impatient early, you can cause hard feelings by chafing at the bit to go faster. When you know the pattern, it's easier to be patient.

- ∞ **Know what kind of ride is planned.**

Will it be a fast training ride? A leisurely spin? Paceline practice? It's disruptive when most of the group is thinking one thing while one or two cyclists are on a different agenda. If an easy recovery ride is scheduled, but you're out for hard training, people are going to get angry. Be certain of the ride's goal before the start.

∞ **Don't be a loco locomotive.**

If you're having trouble taking your pulls at the front, get off quickly and slide back to get maximum draft in the paceline. It's far better to sit on the back and let others do the work than to slow everyone with valiant but sluggish turns at the front.

∞ **Use a racing trick if you often get dropped on climbs.**

As a climb begins, be nestled in the front third of the bunch. Get as much draft as possible. If you can't hold the pace, don't blow up trying. Let yourself slide back through the group but still be in contact at the top.

∞ **Accept help on hills.**

Stronger cyclists may give you a helpful push as they ride by. Don't be embarrassed by their help. They probably got towed up climbs when they were starting, too. A short push often allows you to regain your breathing and climbing rhythm so you can continue on your own.

∞ **Pick a strong rider to follow.**

If you're really having difficulty keeping the pace, get on the wheel of a good rider and mirror his (or her) technique. Use the same gear; stand when he does, take a drink as soon as he reaches for his bottle, and so on. This teaches you good cycling habits. Plus, emulating his movements takes your mind off your own effort and helps you past the hard spots.

∞ **Don't be afraid to say the pace is too hard.**

It's a good bet that other cyclists feel the same way but are reticent to speak up — or can't, because they're breathing too hard to talk! Perhaps even the riders who are setting the pace are having difficulty, but they continue to go hard out of vanity or because they think everyone else expects them to. A little communication goes a long way in making a group ride a more pleasant and productive experience.

∞ **If you always have trouble holding the pace, look for a different group.**

Find one closer to your ability level. There's no shame in rationally assessing your strength and choosing cyclists who share it. You'll actually improve faster if you ride with a group that you are on equal terms with. You'll be able to practice paceline cycling, following a wheel, riding in close quarters, cornering in a group, and other important skills.

∞ **Don't let group cycling hurt your progress.**

Frequently riding with a too-fast group will make you tired. You won't improve as rapidly as you might with more rest. A pace that's too fast will hurt you mentally, too. You'll begin to associate cycling with pain, misery and disappointment. Don't let your ego overpower your better judgment. An appropriate dose of humility now will pay dividends later.

Cycling is a unique sport because its arena is the open road. That's the same place frequented by traffic, potholes, snarling dogs and absentminded pedestrians.

But sometimes we're our own worst enemy. Inattention and poor technique can put us on the pavement as fast as any hazard. Use these tips and you'll be less likely to take a tumble.

Always ride with your head up. While cruising along, it's tempting to stare at the whirling pattern of the front spokes or fixate on your cyclo-computer's numbers. A momentary downward glance that lasts just a second too long can mean riding into a problem that could easily have been avoided.

Focus. The smooth and rhythmic motion of pedaling can become hypnotic. Daydreaming cyclists have crashed into the back of parked cars, wandered far into the traffic lane or blithely ridden off the road. Don't let yourself be separated from the outside world by the vivid canvases created by your imagination. Keep your head in the game.

Keep your bike in top mechanical condition. Repair or replace faulty parts sooner rather than later. It's a loser's game to milk "just one more ride" out of worn brake pads, a frayed cable, or tires with a threadbare tread or bulging sidewall. Your first line of defense against the challenges of the real world is a bike with all parts in good working order. Bring your bike into our shop for a free estimate and expert repair.

Punctures

It's every rider's fate to flat. But it's relatively easy to limit the frequency.

Choose your line with care. The best way to avoid punctures is also the easiest: Steer around broken glass, road rubble and potholes.

Use tires with a Kevlar belt under the tread. Kevlar does a good job of stopping nasty things from penetrating. Inspect the tread after every ride for embedded debris. Remember, most punctures are caused by something sticking to the tread and working through during numerous wheel revolutions. Replace tires before they become so thin that they're virtually defenseless against pointy things.

Check inflation pressure every couple of days. Tubes are slightly porous and may lose several pounds of pressure each day. Soft tires slow you down, corner poorly, wear fast, and don't protect your rims against metal-bending impacts.

Potholes

Hitting potholes can bend your rims beyond repair. If the chasm is deep enough, it will send you hurtling over the handlebar when you bury the front wheel and the bike suddenly stops. Here's a primer on pothole evasion.

Note where potholes lurk on your normal training routes. Plan your line well in advance to avoid them. Don't expect the road to be in the same condition every day. Potholes have a habit of sprouting up out of nowhere, especially in the winter and early spring due to the daily freeze/thaw cycle.

Treat potholes like glass. Ride around them, first checking behind for traffic. Be mindful of riding partners when you change your line. Newly minted potholes present a double hazard — the chasm itself, and the chunks of shattered pavement around it. If the pothole doesn't bend your wheel, the sharp bits of rubble might puncture your tire. Give these highway craters a wide berth.

Jump your bike over a pothole, if you have the skill and are unable to ride around it because of traffic or adjacent riders. Learn this move on a grassy field. Level your pedals, crouch off the saddle, then spring up and lift with your feet and hands. Start by jumping over a line on the ground, then graduate to higher but forgiving objects such as a rolled-up towel or a shoebox.

Railroad Tracks

Unlike most dangers, tracks can't be ridden around. You can suffer an instant crash if your tires slip on the shiny steel rails. Ride with extreme caution and follow these safety tips.

Slow down! Tracks are rough, and even if you don't crash you could get a pinch flat. This happens

when you ride into something abrupt, like a rail, and it pinches the tube between the tire and rim, slicing two little holes in the tube.

Rise slightly off the saddle. Have equal weight on your hands and feet. Let the bike chatter beneath you. Use your flexed arms and legs as shock absorbers.

Cross tracks at a right angle. If the rails are diagonal to the road and you cross them at an angle, your front wheel can be twisted out from under you. A perpendicular passage is essential in the rain. Wet metal tracks are incredibly slippery. The slightest imbalance or abrupt move can send you sprawling.

Jump if you're real good. Racers who need to cross tracks at maximum speed will jump them. They use the same technique that works for potholes, but with more speed and lift because they must clear two rails. Coming down too early means the rear wheel will hit the second rail, guaranteeing a ruined rim or a pinch flat. In most cases, jumping isn't worth the danger. It's better to slow down, square up, and creep across.

Additional Slick Spots

Painted lines. These can be slippery, especially the wide markings for pedestrian crossings at intersections. The paint fills in the asphalt's texture, producing a surface that's uncertain when dry and deadly when wet. The danger is worse when the paint is new.

Dry oil slicks. These may be nearly invisible, but you can spot them as darker streaks on a gray pavement. Be real careful in corners. You aren't safe if you ride through oil on the straights. The greased tread might slip in a corner just ahead.

Wet oil slicks. If it rains, a small oily patch can grow until it covers the whole lane. Be on the lookout for the telltale multi-colored water. There's no pot of gold at the end of this rainbow, only a black-and-blue meeting with the pavement.

Wet metal. If it's been raining and you come upon anything metal in the road (manhole cover, steel-deck bridge, road-repair plate), it's as treacherous as riding on ice. Cross it with the bike absolutely upright. Even a slight lean can cause the wheels to slip. Smart riders walk their bikes across wet steel bridges.

Wet leaves. Be very careful in the fall, or you will. Even if the road is dry, there can be moisture trapped between leaves littering the pavement. When you see leaves in a corner, slow down and round the bend with your bike upright, not angled.

Sewer grates. Some old ones have bars that run parallel to the street and are wide enough to let a bike wheel fall through. If this happens, you can look forward to plastic surgery and possibly a lifetime of lawsuit riches. Many municipalities have replaced such grates with bicycle-friendly versions, but be careful in case a town hasn't gotten the message yet.

How To Survive Road Hazards

Pacelines you see in pro racing are organized. They have specific rules. But in big groups like you find in centuries or charity rides, things will be disorganized. This can intimidate even experienced riders.

Sooner or later you'll find yourself in a big group amid some riders with sketchy skills. It pays to learn how to survive (and also make yourself welcome) in a crowd.

- ∞ **Look for Risky Riders.** These are the unsteady people who wobble, appear nervous, have a tense grip on the handlebar, and frequently grab the brakes. Avoid them! Move up to keep them behind you, or slide to the other side of the road.
- ∞ **Stay at the Front.** This is easy to say but hard to do in some groups. At the front you have more control over your destiny because most crashes occur in the rear two-thirds of the bunch. It may take a bit more work to reach the front and stay there, but it's worth the effort.
- ∞ **Watch the Wind.** Wind direction determines on which side the greatest draft is found. If the wind is from the right side of the road, smart riders move to the left of the wheel in front of them for greater protection. If you're doing this, beware of overlapping wheels with inexperienced riders. They may swerve and take out your front wheel.
- ∞ **Be Wary on Climbs.** A major cause of group crashes is riders who stand abruptly. They slow for a second, causing the rider behind to hit their rear wheel and spill. To avoid this danger, let the gap open a bit on hills or ride a foot to either side. To avoid being the one who causes such a crash, pull your bike forward as you leave the saddle. Don't lunge and make a hard pedal stroke. Keep your speed steady. When sitting again, push the bike forward a bit.

Practice Safety Skills

Cycling isn't a contact sport, but it's not uncommon to have your arm brushed when riding near others in a group. It pays to learn how to bump into other riders without swerving or falling.

First, go with a cycling friend to a large grassy area like a soccer field. Ride side-by-side at a walking pace. Keep both hands on your bar. Start by gently touching elbows, then shoulders. As you gain confidence, lean more vigorously on the other rider. Soon, you'll be bumping each other with abandon and throwing in a few head butts for fun, all without going down. (Of course, always wear your helmet just in case.)

Riding relaxed is the key to absorbing contact without swerving. Have slightly bent elbows, a firm-not-tight grip on the bar, and loose arm and shoulder muscles. If you're relaxed, your body can absorb the shock before it gets to the handlebar.