

Group Riding Guidelines for Street Bikes

Group Riding: Why?

There are several advantages for motorcyclists who ride street bikes in a group:

- a group is usually more visible to other drivers than a solo rider;
- other vehicles can predict what a rider in a group will do because all members generally maintain fixed positions and fixed intervals between riders;
- in case of a mechanical problem or an accident, help is available immediately to the rider. A member of the group may carry a cell-phone. Usually some riders in a group are trained in First Aid and CPR. They are often aware of safety information and accident management procedures that non-riders may not know -- for example, not to remove the helmet of a downed rider unless breathing is inhibited, where to find particular medical information for a downed rider; how to manage an accident scene to prevent complications, etc.; and
- it can be a lot more FUN!

In addition, motorcyclists tend to learn a great deal from each other about their sport. Planned stops along the way offer a fine opportunity to socialize and to share valuable tips and techniques.

Group Riding: Why Not?

Group riding is not for everyone. It requires a certain level of skill and self-discipline. It restricts an individual rider's options as to speed, changes in route, and lane positioning. To attempt to ride in a group without having good basic riding skills and a good sense of what others in the group are likely to do -- and what they expect you to do -- is an invitation to an accident, one that may involve damage and injuries to more than one bike and one rider. It is also a matter of personality, in that group riding requires good communications, courtesy among riders and a willingness to look out for the safety of others while riding your own ride. Those who don't wish to ride in a group but who wish to arrive at the same destination as their friends may serve as a scout if they have a CB radio, or they may just prefer to travel solo and meet up with their friends at the day's end.

Rules: Who Needs Them?

The following guidelines for riding in a group are not gospel. There are situations in which they don't apply. Some organizations may have different terms for these concepts, as well. These guidelines have been tested for many miles, however, in clubs whose members ride all brands and models of motorcycles, and they have sound safety rationales to support them.

If you as a rider find yourself in a group which does not follow these guidelines, you can

usually find someone who will explain what rules that organization follows, if any, or how they differ from what you learn here. At most responsible group rides, a riders' meeting will be held prior to departure, in order to clarify what is expected of all the riders who are to participate. If you find yourself uncomfortable with the riding style of a group at any time, DROP OUT. Your safe arrival at your destination is far more important than conforming to rules you don't like or don't understand.

People who ride in a group usually appreciate knowing what they are expected to do, and what to expect from others who are taking part in a hazardous sport in close proximity to them. Road Captains and those who frequently ride lead or drag are particularly urged to become familiar with these terms and guidelines in order to explain them to other riders who may show up for a scheduled ride without having any group riding experience.

Some Common Group Riding Terms

Pack: a number of motorcyclists who ride together, generally without maintaining fixed positions or distances between bikes. Packs are occasionally seen with 20-50 motorcyclists in a single formation.

Group: a small number of motorcyclists who ride together maintaining a generally fixed distance between bikes and maintaining fixed positions within the formation (usually no more than six per group). On rides in which participation by a large number of motorcyclists occurs, it is common to have riders divided into several groups and to name them Group 1, Group 2, etc. This facilitates radio communication when several groups are listening to the same broadcasts and traffic coordination on the same CB channel.

Road Captain: a person who devises group riding rules or guidelines for a club or chapter of a motorcycling organization, who communicates these guidelines to the club, and who generally plans and lays out group rides. The Road Captain may or may not ride lead for a particular ride.

Lead Bike: a person who rides in the most forward position in a group and who relays information to all other riders in the group via hand signals and/or CB communications. The Lead Bike determines the group's direction, speed, choice of lane, and formation. He or she often must make quick navigation decisions in the face of road hazards, changes in road surface conditions, poor signage, construction and other obstacles while maintaining control of his or her bike and communicating to those following. It is the responsibility of the Lead Bike to select a Drag (Sweep) Bike with whom communications will be coordinated during a ride. If there are three groups on a ride, there will be three Lead Bikes. If at all possible, the Lead Bike should be equipped with a CB.

Drag Bike or Sweep: a person who rides in the last position in a group and who relays information to the Lead Bike regarding the other riders in the group, traffic patterns, equipment problems, etc. he or she observes. The Drag Bike must secure a lane for the rest of the group during lane changes into faster traffic (move first to block oncoming traffic) and close the door (move to block passing traffic) when a lane is lost in a merging lane

situation. Usually this is the most experienced rider in a group, for the Drag Bike is the rider who stops to assist a rider who has mechanical trouble, loses control, or drops out of a ride for some other reason. The Drag Bike should be prepared to render aid to a downed or disabled rider in a group while communicating the problem to the Lead Bike and others in the group. If at all possible, the Drag Bike should be equipped with a CB and, preferably, will have a co-rider who can assist with communications or traffic control if a serious problem arises. If there are three groups on a ride, there will be three Drag Bikes. The rider in this position is sometimes called the tailgunner.

Cage: any vehicle that is not a motorcycle, but particularly an automobile.

Four-wheeler: any vehicle that is not a motorcycle except an 18-wheeler, a hack or a trike.

Group Parking: a formation in which all bikes in a group follow the Lead Bike in single file into a parking lot, making a U-turn such that they can all line up next to each other in the space available with the rear of their bikes against the curb or edge of the lot, the front tires pointing outward.

Parade formation: a formation in which all the motorcyclists in a group ride two abreast.

Single file: a formation in which all the motorcyclists in a group ride in one track of a lane.

Slot: any position within a group of riders in the right track of a lane, farthest from oncoming traffic.

Staggered formation: a formation of motorcyclists in a group in which the Lead Bike rides in the left track of a lane, the next bike in the right track or slot, and the next bike in the left track, and so on. Bikes in a group generally maintain a minimum interval of two seconds travel time between bikes in the same track, and one second travel time between each bike in the group. In a staggered formation, a rider still commands and may ride in the entire width of his lane as needed. Group riders may also ride single file or two abreast. The Drag Bike may ride in the left or right track depending on the number of bikes in the group. It is preferable for the Drag Bike to ride in the left track, so as to have the same visibility line as the Lead Bike.

Station keeping: maintaining a fixed position and interval within a group of riders but not riding as Lead Bike or Drag Bike. Riders without a CB usually ride as station keepers in the middle of a group. Positions within a group are initially assigned by the Lead Bike based on the experience level of the rider, particularly his or her group riding experience.

Track: the zone of a lane in which a rider maintains his position in a group. A lane of traffic is divided into five zones: the left track is the second zone from the left, the middle of the lane (generally not used) is the third zone, and the right track is the fourth zone from the left. Two zones on the sides of a lane serve as margins. A rider may vary his path of travel from his normal track as is required by a road hazard or by an incursion into the group's

lane by other vehicles.

Two abreast: a formation in which the members of a group ride adjacent to each other in pairs, used when riding in parade formation. Used after stopping at signs and traffic signals so that riders can get through an intersection quickly and together if possible. When departing from a stop, the rider in the left track normally pulls out before the rider on the right, returning to a staggered formation.

Road Captain's Job: Preparing for a Group Ride

When a number of motorcyclists are invited for a group ride, the riders and their co-riders gather at the appointed time and place, often without knowing their specific destination or route from that point on. The Road Captain for that ride will have a route in mind and will usually have pre-ridden the route within the past week in order to look for construction and road surface problems and other situations which might affect the safety of those who are to participate. The Road Captain should determine roughly the experience level of each rider in the group before departing, putting the rider with the least experience in the group in a position that the rider feels most comfortable. Ideally, the least experienced rider should be in the last slot position available, away from oncoming traffic.

The Road Captain will sometimes provide a Route Memo or will have copies of maps or directions to give the members of the group and will have a rough idea of times and distances to be traveled, suggestions for rest stops, food and gas, etc. The Road Captain will have available HOG release of liability forms for chapter rides, to be filled in and signed by non chapter members. He or she will then conduct a short riders' meeting to briefly review group riding guidelines, to alert the riders of potential hazards, to discuss communications within and between the groups, to review hand signals for riders without CBs, and to answer any questions about the ride.

Rider's Job: Preparing for a Group Ride

Riders are expected to arrive on time at the departure point with a full tank of gas, in proper attire for the conditions, and physically ready to ride (potty stop made, medications packed if needed, sober and alert). Motorcycle endorsements and insurance should be up to date, and the bike should be in street-legal condition. The Road Captain may ask a rider not to join a group ride if these basic conditions are not met (for example, if a rider is drunk or a bike is mechanically unfit to ride).

If a rider brings a passenger for a group ride, he or she is expected to manage and attend to that passenger's needs personally, before the riders' meeting. The following guidelines are suggested for preparing a passenger for a group ride:

Do not permit a passenger to mount the motorcycle until all riding gear is on and fastened securely (beware of outside pockets!). The passenger should not mount until the rider is seated and holding the motorcycle vertically, and then not until the rider nods that he or she is ready for the passenger to get on. The passenger should avoid contact with hot exhaust

pipes, wiggling out of position once seated, and shouting or making sudden movements of the upper body during the ride. The passenger's feet should remain on the pegs or floorboards designed for them at all times, until disembarking.

A passenger needs to know generally what he or she should and should not expect in terms of comfort and safety considerations. If the passenger wishes to communicate with the rider, the rider should explain how to do this: by thumping on the rider's head? Intercom? Shouting in the rider's ear? Will the passenger be responsible for copying hand signals given by the rider to others in the group?

Suggested jobs for the passenger during the ride: Watch out in traffic for anything that may detract from a safe ride: two pairs of eyes are better than one. Do not assist the rider by leaning in turns, but look over the rider's inside shoulder on curves. Wave at all other bikers, children, anyone who shows interest in the riders, and law enforcement officers on their feet. And -- smile!

In group riding, if the rider (with or without a passenger) wishes to slow down or stop during the ride, for any reason whatsoever, he or she may drop out of the ride. If at any time a passenger becomes uncomfortable during the ride and wants the rider to slow down or stop, for any reason whatsoever, the rider should be prepared to do so as quickly and as safely as possible. It is courteous to notify or signal to the other riders in the group before doing this unless it is not convenient or possible to do so. Unless the Sweep clearly understands the reason for a rider's decision to drop out, normally the Sweep will notify the Road Captain of a problem and will stop with the rider who is stopping, to render aid if needed, or to determine his intentions about rejoining the group ride.

Normal Group Riding Maneuvers

Entering Traffic

When the Road Captain sees that all riders are helmeted, sitting on their bikes, motors running, and ready to depart, he or she will check for traffic and enter the roadway. Usually the Road Captain will not attempt to exit a parking lot unless there is room for all or most of the group to follow immediately. If the group is split, the Road Captain will normally take the slow lane and keep the speed relatively low until the group can form up in the positions the riders will keep for the duration of the ride. This may mean traveling slower than surrounding traffic, to encourage four-wheelers to pass and allow the group to form up. Occasionally this cannot be accomplished until the group has made a lane change or entered a freeway, depending on where the entrance ramp may be.

Regardless of the Road Captain's signals, a rider is responsible for his or her own safety at all times. Ride Your Own Ride.

Once all members of the group are together, the group will take up a staggered formation and will stay in it most of the time during the ride, unless the Road Captain signals for a change or the need for a change is obvious. Reasons for changing out of a staggered

formation could be a passing situation or poor road surface (single file), dog or other animal charging the group (split the group), or coming up to a traffic signal (two abreast while waiting for a light).

Changing Lanes

When a group of motorcycles is changing lanes, many safety considerations come into play. Should every rider move into the adjacent lane at the same time? If not, should the Road Captain go first, or should the Sweep move first to “secure the lane”? When the Sweep radios to the group that the lane is secured, is it really? What if another vehicle sees a gap in traffic and tries to cut into the group? If part of the group gets separated from the other riders, should everyone change relative positions? The recommended procedure for a group lane change maneuver depends on how the surrounding traffic is moving at the time. The goal for the bike which moves first is to create a gap into which the other bikes can fit.

Regardless of what other riders in the group are doing, each rider must personally check to see that the new lane is clear of traffic before entering it.

Changing Lanes as a Group

There is virtually no time (absent an emergency) when a group of riders should all move at the same time into a different lane, in regular traffic conditions. The wide gap required for a whole group to move is difficult to find in heavy traffic, and if it exists, it will be an invitation for other drivers to jump into it, perhaps while the group might be moving. Additionally, such a maneuver could be interpreted as “parading”, which may arguably not be covered under some insurance policies.

Changing Lanes into Slower-Moving Traffic

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In most jurisdictions traffic laws prescribe that, on a road in which there are two lanes of traffic moving in the same direction, the lane on the right will be the slower lane. If a group of motorcyclists is going to move into the slower lane from the faster one, the first bike in a group which moves is responsible for creating a gap into which all the following bikes can fit. This is accomplished by maintaining a constant speed in order to enlarge the gap after the first bike moves. Each bike moving in succession should also be aware of this dynamic. Thus, the group moves from first to last. (An exception is the Sweep, which may move on its own for reasons explained later.)

The first bike to move under these conditions will be the Road Captain. The maneuver is accomplished in this way: the Lead Bike signals for the lane change and announces to the group via CB and/or hand signals that the group is moving to the right, front to back. Then, after checking by actually turning the head to see that the new lane is cleared of traffic sufficient for one bike to safely enter it, the Road Captain moves across the tracks of the

current lane, taking up a position in the left track of the new lane where the Road Captain usually rides. By maintaining the maximum speed which the traffic in that lane will allow, the Road Captain creates a gap into which the next bike in the group can insert, moving into the right track there. Each succeeding bike follows this pattern: signal right, move right in your own lane, head-check, enter new lane, maintain speed to create gap, and take up regular position (left or right track) in the new lane.

The Sweep in this pattern is normally the last to enter the new lane, unless “closing the door” was possible. As the bikes move quickly and re-form their group, it is rare that a four-wheeler will move up into the gap in the new lane. If a cage moves into the gap, the next bike to move must tuck in behind it and wait for the group ahead to slow up, encouraging the cage to pass. When the cage passes the slower forward group, the whole group can re-form into a normal riding configuration.

Breaking Up is Hard To Do

If a lane change results in the group’s changing formation -- the bike which was unable to move into the new lane slows down and becomes for a time the lead bike for the left lane, while the rest of group moves ahead in the slower lane -- or, the bike which was unable to move right is forced to PASS the slower group -- should the new lead bike take the left forward track?

Ordinarily, no. Only if the group breaks into two obvious sub-groups and becomes separated for a substantial period of time should the “new lead bike” move into a new track to the left, if that has not been that rider’s normal position. Otherwise, this will be only a temporary break in formation, and the riders will quickly enter the new lane and re-form as usual behind the lead bike, in the positions they had originally.

Why doesn’t the “new lead bike” change tracks? Because during any period in which the bikes are changing tracks, the spacing between them is cut in half, drastically reducing the reaction time and space available to the rider in case the bike directly ahead of him becomes a problem. In a lane change, this period is fairly short. If the “new lead bike” shifts position and all the bikes following attempt to adapt to the new configuration by changing to a different track, they will then have to change back when the original group re-forms. There is no real reason to put the riders in additional jeopardy this way in order to have the “correct” formation, just for short periods.

Forcing all the bikes in the rest of the group to change track position is especially hazardous in the case of a new group rider who has become accustomed to riding in the protected “slot” as opposed to facing oncoming traffic in the exposed left track position. In most cases, anyone who is riding in a group will quickly adapt to this change of conditions and track positions, but there may be times when a new rider who is trying to learn this whole concept will be very uncomfortable changing tracks. The Sweep should pay special attention to inexperienced riders under these conditions.

This pattern may occur not only during a lane change, but also during a passing maneuver or when a group gets separated in traffic because of signal lights and traffic flow.

The Sweep will usually notify the Lead Bike and the rest of the group after a brief separation by one or more riders that the group has re-formed by saying, "We're family."

Changing Lanes into Faster-Moving Traffic

The same basic lane-changing principle for entering slow-moving lanes also applies when a group is entering faster-moving traffic where at least two lanes of traffic are moving in the same direction; that is, moving from the right lane to the left. The first bike to move creates a gap for the remaining bikes. Since traffic is pulling away from the group as each member enters the lane, this maneuver is done back to front.

The maneuver is accomplished in this manner: The Road Captain signals for a lane change and announces to the group via CB and turn signals that the group will be moving to the left, back to front. Then the Road Captain asks the Sweep to "secure the lane" to the left to which the Sweep should normally respond with "Stand by." All station-keeping bikes maintain their position while this occurs, putting their own turn signals on to indicate the move to be made. The Sweep then moves first when a space in the lane to the left opens up and radios to the Road Captain and the group, "The lane is secured."

No one is to change lanes at this point, however! First, each rider must make certain the lane is clear by actually turning his head to insure that there is no other vehicle still approaching the group in the left lane. If a vehicle is still moving up beside the group, the Sweep will usually say, "After the red truck," or "After the station wagon," etc. Whether or not a warning is given by the Sweep (who may have other concerns with the traffic to his rear), each rider must do a head-check before entering a faster-moving lane.

The second bike to move will be the one in front of the Sweep. That rider moves across the tracks of the current lane, does a head-check, changes lane and then takes up a position in the track of the new lane where he was originally riding. By dropping to a speed slightly slower than the rate at which traffic in that lane has been traveling, each bike creates a gap into which the next bike forward can insert. Each rider follows this pattern: signal left, move left in your own lane, head-check, enter new lane, maintain (slower) speed to create gap, and take up regular position (left or right track) in the new lane.

The Road Captain in this pattern is normally the last to enter the new lane. As the bikes move quickly and re-form their group, it is rare that a four-wheeler will move up into the gap in the new lane. If a cage moves into the gap, the next bike to move must wait for the cage to pass, so that a gap appears again. Then the maneuver can be completed and the group can re-form into a normal configuration.

Passing

On a busy two-lane road, oncoming traffic typically prevents a group from passing a slow-

moving vehicle while in formation. Each member of the group must accomplish two lane changes in order to pass, and this usually is done on an individual basis.

Regardless of what a rider is told by others in the group about oncoming vehicles, each rider must personally check to see that the oncoming lane is clear of traffic before entering it.

If oncoming traffic requires the group to pass individually, the Road Captain will signal the group to move into a single-file formation and will announce that the group members are to pass the vehicle one at a time. The forward members of the group will gradually position themselves in single file in the left track to prepare to pull into the oncoming lane. The Road Captain will usually wait for a gap in oncoming traffic that is big enough for more than one bike to pass, but this is not always possible. When a safe interval is observed, the Road Captain will put its left turn signal on and pull into the oncoming lane. After passing the “obstacle,” looking in the rear view mirror for clearance and actually turning the head to be sure the lane is clear, the Road Captain then signals that it is moving into the right lane and does so, taking its normal position in front of the slower vehicle(s) in the left track. The Road Captain must then maintain or even slightly increase its speed.

As with a lane change to the right, each bike should be aware of the need to create a gap into which the next bike in succession can fit after overtaking an obstacle. For this reason, each bike should maintain speed after passing, until the Sweep has passed and the group has re-formed.

Special care should be taken when passing not to focus on distant oncoming traffic to the point of establishing “target fixation.” The rider should continue to scan the environment for hazards and should plan escape routes in case of the unexpected; for example, the “obstacle” may come to life again when he sees motorcycles passing him and may accelerate while the rider is still in the oncoming lane, exposed to additional risk.

After he has passed the slower moving vehicle, the Sweep will usually notify the Road Captain that the group is intact again by saying, “We’re family.”

Number One Rule (The ‘Prime Directive’)

In a group ride, the primary job for every rider is to **not hit the motorcycle in front of him.**

Spacing Out

Especially on less-congested rural backroads, the riders in a group may spread out to create larger intervals between motorcycles. This allows a rider to relax a bit, to enjoy the scenery and the ride. If no four-wheelers are trying to pass the group, this is fine. However, the riders should remain close enough to each other to be able to see hand signals being passed back from the Road Captain. Also, if a group is large and the riders spread out too much in hilly terrain, CB communication between the Road Captain and the Sweep may be severely

tested or lost. The Road Captain and Sweep cannot work together if they can't communicate.

It is possible that a rider will also "space out" in terms of losing his concentration and will forget to practice safe riding strategies. If the rider has become too fatigued to ride properly, the Sweep will usually notice this first and will advise the Road Captain that a rest stop is needed. If a rider is not riding safely enough to avoid endangering others in the group (because of lack of experience, medical problems, fatigue, or some other reason), the Road Captain will usually discuss the problem privately with that rider at the next stop. If a problem cannot be solved reasonably in this way, the Road Captain has absolute discretion to request that a rider leave the group and is entitled to expect the group to support this decision. In the case of a mechanical or minor medical problem, it is not unusual for another rider to accompany the distressed rider to get help. Sometimes if the Road Captain just re-assigns the riders to new positions within the group, this is enough to bring a spaced-out motorcyclist back to a state of alert awareness.

Checking Out The Curves

On any stretch of curvy road and in any corner, a group may ride in single-file momentarily, to enable each rider to corner at his own speed and to have as much room as possible for maneuvering. This is especially important to riders with little experience in a group, as they may "wobble" or be nervous about making turns with another bike to their side or riding close behind them. This is an accepted variance to staggered formation; usually the Road Captain will not signal for single-file at each turn but will expect the riders to choose their own path of travel.

Odd Formations and Maneuvers

Odd formations may be necessary in group riding when there is a member of the group which is not a standard, two-wheel motorcycle -- an "odd duck." This includes three-wheeled motorcycles ("trikes"), bikes with a sidecar ("hacks"), bikes towing a trailer, or four-wheelers.

In each case, other than for four-wheelers, it's a good idea to place the odd duck at the rear of the formation, in the last available slot. The group should also allow extra clearance and reaction time for a bike towing a trailer. Instead of a one-second interval between that bike and the next, and a two-second interval between it and the bike directly behind it in the same track, these minimum times should be doubled. For trikes and hacks, it is not so important to position these riders in a slot, but it is still a good idea, because these vehicles do not handle turns in the same way a motorcycle does. If a rider has difficulty handling an "odd duck" vehicle, the bike following it may need extra time to react, and the "odd duck" should not worry about being hit from the rear by a group member while he solves his problem. If there are several bikes towing trailers in a group, they should generally be riding at the back of the group, even if they are not all in slot positions.

When a four-wheeler is a part of a group, it should trail the group behind the Sweep. It helps if the four-wheeler is equipped with a CB radio. Additionally, that vehicle should drive with its headlights on at all times, to enable the Sweep to distinguish it from other cages if possible.

In the next newsletter we'll talk about Hand Signals, Danger Signals, Exceptions to the Norm, and Rubberband Effect. I'll also reintroduce you to our next Head Road Captain. I'll see you at the next group ride.

Billy Anderson