

Group Riding Lane Positioning

By Mark Caldwell

Most of the time, when we ride in a group, we are riding in what is known as staggered formation. That is, the lead bike rides in the left 1/3 of the lane; the second bike is one second behind (in good weather) but is positioned in the right 1/3 of the lane. The next bike is on the left, the next on the right, and so on., alternating or staggering lane position. This provides safe following distance from the vehicle directly ahead of you in your lane position, while at the same time helping keep the group compact.

When riding in staggered formation, it is important to be committed to your lane position, but not overly committed. What does that mean? Think of it this way: Bill, Frank, and Ted are out riding in staggered formation, but Frank is not really committed to his lane position. Frank tends to wander back and forth within the lane for no apparent reason. Frank is now endangering himself, and Bill and Ted. First of all, he's unpredictable, which tends to make everyone a bit more nervous. But more importantly, when he wanders from the right lane position (where he should be, as the #2 rider) into the left lane position, he has now cut the following distance in half between himself and Bill and between himself and Ted. If either Bill or Frank has a problem, Ted will probably run them over, and then everyone has a bad day. So Frank needs to remain committed to his lane position, as long as it is safe to do so.

And there is where the second part comes in. Frank cannot be overly committed to his lane position, because sometimes that is not safe either. There are essentially two situations where Frank should not remain firm in his lane position, and neither Bill nor Ted should expect him to. The first, of course, is when there is an obstacle in his portion of the lane. Whether it is a large pothole or some piece of debris like the shovel I saw in the road this weekend, Frank needs to move for his own safety. Now, if Bill was paying attention, he saw the obstacle first, since he's the lead rider, and he signaled to Frank that it was there so Frank was not taken by surprise and had plenty of time to move. Ted also would have send Bill's signal and would back off a little, expecting Frank to move into his path temporarily. Everyone knows what is going on, and everyone continues on the ride safely.

The second situation where Frank should move out of his track is a little less obvious, but equally important, and that is, while going around corners. The safest route, requiring the least amount of side-friction, around a corner is the high-low-high cornering maneuver. In the high-low-high approach, you approach a curve or corner from what would be the outside of the curve (the left side of a right-hand curve and vice-versa). As you enter the curve, slowing appropriately, when you are able to see the apex of the curve, you begin to move across the lane toward the inside of the turn, also known as the low point. Then as you exit the curve, you go back to the high point momentarily. This technique flattens out the severity of the turn and thus it uses less side-friction and is safer to perform than for a rider to attempt to rigidly maintain his staggered position all the way around the curve.

So, while you're enjoying the camaraderie of group riding, stay committed to your position when you can, but in the curves, feel free to maximize your safety by using the entire lane for your positioning. After all, that is one of the many reasons that we don't ride side-by-side.

Ride safe, so you can come back and tell us your stories!