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Understanding the big picture

'Riding a bicycle' is not a very detailed description of what a person does with a bicycle. In most people's minds, riding a bicycle is something they learned as a child. It was their first means of personal freedom. Riding a bicycle enabled them to go where they wanted, quickly and easily. And if you were good at it, you went fast! As you grow older, riding a bicycle becomes the easiest way to get a long distance on your own. You can go places you would not be able to walk to easily, in a reasonable amount of time. But then many of us reach an age where riding a bicycle changes. Some of us decide that riding a bicycle is just not cool, or too much work. We would rather get a ride from our parents, or better yet, our friends.

Then there are those of us who decide that riding a bicycle isn't just a way to get there on our own. Riding a bicycle becomes a means to adventure. Packing the necessary food and drink and heading off down long roads with interesting scenery. The challenge becomes longer distances, with perhaps over night stays and friends going with us. Riding a bicycle becomes 'Touring on a bicycle' and the world is our wonderland.

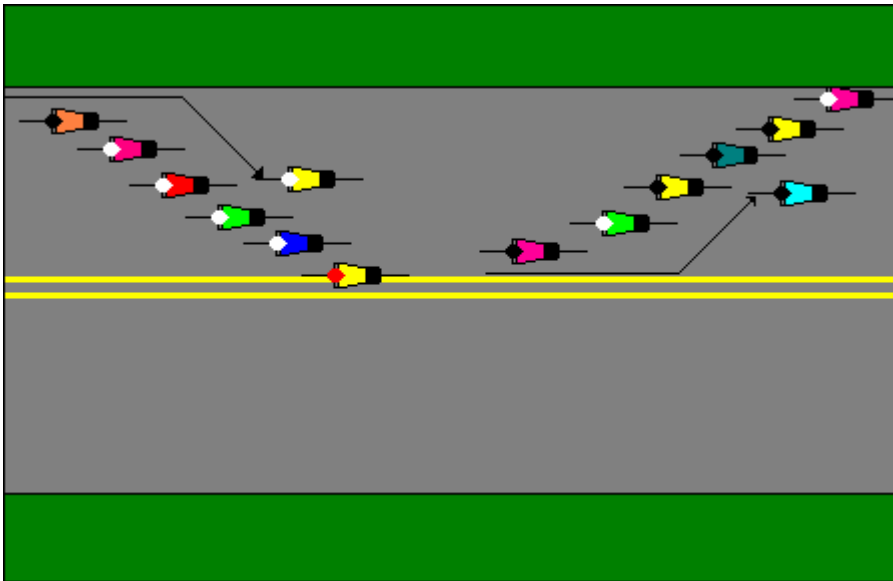
Finally, there are those of us who find 'riding a bicycle' turns into 'racing a bicycle'. It doesn't matter if it is a BMX bike, a mountain bike, a cyclocross bike, a road racing bike or a track racing bike. We just want to go fast! As fast as we can possibly go. We make ourselves get up at the crack of dawn. We go out and push ourselves to exhaustion in an effort to go even faster. During our efforts of training we meet others, who like us want to go faster. Some of them have made the commitment to compete and ride to prepare themselves for those competitions. Some join in the group, not because they want to compete, but because they enjoy the challenge of keeping up. They also like the social aspects of a like minded group.



That is really where a problem can arise. Not every group is the same and not all the people in the group are there for the same reason. In the region where our shop is located there are quite a few group rides. Some of them are made up of riders who just want to get some good exercise and stay fit. They don't race, but they don't like going slow either. They also don't like to get up at the crack of dawn, so they meet later in the morning. They all stay together and nobody gets dropped. If someone has a mechanical problem, they work together to repair it.

Then there are a few groups that are a mixture of people who do race and people who want to work hard. The dynamics here become a bit complicated compared to previous group. Athletes in any sport are not all created equal. Some may have very high talents and abilities. They may have been involved in the sport for a longer period of time and so have a greater level of experience and performance. When you mix competitive athletes with non-competitive athletes in a group ride, you can have difficulties. Newer athletes or non-competitive athletes can sometimes be unaware of certain aspects to a group ride that come from racing. Competitive athletes often use group rides to hone their racing skills or push their fitness in an effort to race faster. Trying to keep a group of athletes together, when they are on different levels of ability, can be a problem. If an athlete does not have the bike handling skills of the people around them, they can become a hazard to others and themselves. Not knowing what is going on within the group can not only become a problem for the athletes in terms of safety, but personally as well.

We all go through stages of learning in our lives. If we are smart, we keep learning our entire life. When it comes to being in a group ride, there is a need for a lot of learning and patience. I have ridden with several groups over the years. In every case I had to teach somebody and I had to learn from somebody. Some group rides were like races and it was understood that it would be ridden that way. Other groups had a more laid back approach and people were discouraged from riding aggressively (fast). I have also been in a few groups where it was sometimes a mixture. The ride might start out easier and then heat up, but if someone had a problem, everyone stopped.



Seeing the big picture in your group can make or break the experience for everyone. Not just the people you have been riding with for years, but the new people as well. If you want your group ride to be worth doing, you need to be getting new people. Sure there can be difficulties with a new person acclimating to the group, but there is growth as well.

Each individual can bring something important to a group ride. Ideas are golden and the more ideas the better. Even if a particular athlete seems to be completely mismatched to the group,

they can learn. It just takes a little time to understand the big picture of that group.

For years I have been teaching bike racing tactics using little diagrams with stick figure bikers on them. They are a good way of explaining how a group behaves on the bike. I was happy to see VeloNews covering the spring classics in Europe and using this same type of diagram to explain the dynamics of races like Paris-Roubaix. VeloNews always writes about these races, but these little diagrams do a much better job of showing just what happened. Although your group ride may not have the same complexity of Paris-Roubaix, the idea of using a little diagram may help to bring understanding to that new athlete in your group ride. There is a reason why "one picture is worth a thousand words" has become a cliché. It's because it is true. Having to pour out a

thousand words can also create an unneeded tension between two athletes. Instead of bringing new ideas to the group, the individual looks for a different group.

If you are part of a group ride, or you are looking for a group ride, look for the big picture. Take the time to see what dynamics are at work within the group. Offer ideas and listen to suggestions. Even if the suggestions sometimes sound blunt. Competitive cycling is a sport that demands patience on the part of the athlete. Study the big picture and see how it helps you to ride and race better.

Good Luck!