

Leading Group Rides

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December 2018

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to outline various aspects of leading a group ride so it is safe and enjoyable for everyone.

Ride Captain and Sweep

The Ride Captain's job is to plan the route, provide a pre-ride briefing, separate the group into smaller sizes when the number of motorcycles exceeds eight, designate a Sweep to ride at the end of each group and keep the group together. For larger groups, the Ride Captain should arrange for additional Ride Captains and Sweeps to lead and follow each group. This will all lead to the most important objective – a safe ride.

Planning the Route

Establish a destination. In setting the distance of the ride, use the rule of thumb that for every one hour of riding time there is half an hour when you are not riding – gas stops, lunch, rest stops. If you are planning a 200 mile ride at an average speed of 50 mph, you will need at least 6 hours to arrive at your final destination – 4 hours of riding time and 2 hours of not riding.

Planned stops or breaks of about 15 minutes should be scheduled every hour and a half or so at a location that has a washroom and is off the road so the group can park safely.

When rides are publicized in advance, the Ride Captain should indicate the destination, the location and time of departure, the estimated time of return and the level of difficulty of the route. That way, riders can decide if the ride is appropriate for their skill level and the time they have available that day. At a minimum, the Ride Captain should provide turn-by-turn written directions and, if possible GPS Garmin Zumo route files. When printing route directions, use a large font – 14, 16 or 18 with **LEFT**, **RIGHT**, **STR** (Straight) in **BOLD**. It is also useful to show the number of kilometers to the next item on the route and the total kilometers since the start of the route.

Pre-Ride Briefing

About 15 minutes before the announced departure time, the Ride Captain should call all riders together for a Pre-Ride Briefing. The Pre-Ride Briefing should cover the following topics:

1. Introduction of the Ride Captains and the Sweeps. In the event there is more than one group, introduce the other Ride Captain and Sweep teams. For CB users, the Ride Captain should announce the CB channel being used for the ride that day and remind all CB users to use one language so everyone can understand.
2. Outline the route including the planned stops for rest, gas, lunch etc. Hand out route maps. Google maps or Mapquest directions can be used. Or, the Ride Captain can send Garmin Zumo routes out by email a few days prior to the ride. The Ride Captain and Sweep teams should be familiar with the route, preferably ride the route, prior to the ride.
3. Gas tanks full; bladders empty. At each gas stop, everyone should fill up if they need to so no one runs dry between planned gas stops. The Ride Captain should determine the motorcycle with the shortest range to plan appropriate gas stops.
4. Review group riding rules:
 - ride staggered – two seconds from the motorcycle in the same track and one second from the motorcycle in the other track;
 - hand signals for right turn, left turn, obstacles on the road, emergency stop;
 - you are responsible for the motorcycle behind you;
 - each rider is responsible to ride according to his own skill level and ability.

Group Size

Optimum Group Size

In my opinion, the optimum group size is six motorcycles. At a cruising speed of 50 mph, this means that the Sweep will be about six seconds behind the Ride Captain or about 375 feet. However, this gap will expand to twelve seconds or about 725 feet or one-eighth of a mile when starting from an intersection with a green light or stop sign. To catch up to the normal staggered formation, the Sweep will need to travel at 65 mph for about one minute. So, when starting from an intersection with a green light or stop sign, it is best for the Ride Captain to accelerate slowly to about 40 – 45 mph to allow the rest of the group to attain the normal staggered riding distance of two seconds behind the motorcycle in the same track and one second behind the motorcycle in the other track. Nothing bothers drivers more than a large group of motorcycles blocking an intersection and traveling through a red light based on an unnecessary desire to maintain a parade. So, if the light turns red, stop! If the group is split by a red light, the Sweep is always available to take the lead if needed.

If there are more than six motorcycles, then it is best to split up into groups of five or six. This will avoid a string of motorcycles that is too long and will prevent other vehicles from having to pass a large group of motorcycles and having to complete its pass by inserting itself into the middle of the group. Each group should have a Ride Captain and Sweep.

Creating Groups According to Skill Level and Riding Style

If the number of motorcycles on a ride is greater than the optimum number of six, then there are options for splitting the ride up into more than one group. It is best to group riders according to skill level and riding style.

- the more aggressive riders can form a separate group; and
- the more relaxed or less experienced riders can form another group.

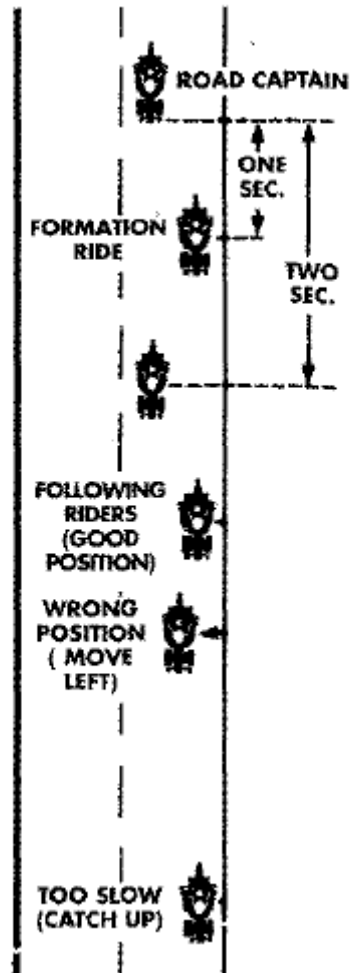
The more aggressive group should go first and the more relaxed riders second. The groups should be separated by five minutes so that there is a large gap of several kilometers between groups. This means that each group will arrive at the same destination within five to ten minutes of each other. As well, this will allow a large gap on the road to permit other vehicles to avoid the annoying situation of a long line of motorcycles that vehicles will be unable to pass as a group or pass at break-neck speed causing them to have to break into the middle of the group.

One way of splitting large groups up is to have each Ride Captain and Sweep create a separate row at the starting location. As riders arrive, advise them to select one of the rows – the first row for the more aggressive riders and the second and subsequent rows for the more relaxed riders. Once a row has six motorcycles, instruct riders to select another row.

Riding in Staggered Formation

Here is a good picture of riding in staggered formation.

Riders can break the staggered formation into single file through a curve in order to straighten the corner and take the best line. At the exit of the corner, riders return to the original staggered formation.



Passing

When passing a slower vehicle, each rider should pass only when the rider feels it is safe. Do not follow the lead of the motorcycle ahead and do not signal the motorcycle behind when to pass. Each motorcyclist should make the passing decision based on his own assessment of when it is safe according to each rider's skill and judgment. When pulling back in after passing, maintain the passing speed for a few minutes to create a large enough gap until that last motorcycle has completed the pass. It is the Ride Captain's job to keep the ride together. So, a motorcycle that is not able to pass will only be a few vehicles behind and will catch up before the next turn. Passing within the motorcycle group should be avoided especially if it is in the same lane. If it is absolutely necessary, then the motorcycle should pass in a separate lane as they would pass a car.

You Are Responsible for the Motorcycle Behind You

Always keep the motorcycle behind you so you can see them in your mirror. If the motorcycle behind you becomes separated by a vehicle, slow down so you can see them in your mirror. When the group ahead makes a turn, you should put your signal on and wait at the side of the road before the turn until the motorcycle behind can see you. The motorcycle ahead should slow down to allow you to catch up after you have made the turn with the motorcycle behind you. This technique will avoid riders missing a turn and becoming separated from the group.

Keeping the Group Together

Going Through Intersections and Getting Separated

David Hough says - “The key to keeping the group together is that at critical intersections, the Ride Captain should patiently hold everyone up until the Sweep catches up. That way, no one feels persuaded to ride faster than their skill level just to avoid getting lost and everyone can socialize together at rest stops”. When separated, avoid pulling the group over to wait at the side of the road. Instead, maintain a slower speed for a few minutes to allow the stragglers to catch up.

When a Rider Stops and the Group Gets Separated

When one rider in the group needs to make an unannounced stop, the group should carry on and follow the Ride Captain. It is the Sweep’s job to pull over to assist the stopped motorcycle. This technique is safer because it avoids several motorcycles pulling over to the side of the road and the inherent dangers caused by braking of vehicles behind you and minimizes the space required at the side of the road. Where possible, always pull off the side of the road into a safe parking area as the side of the road can also be unsafe.

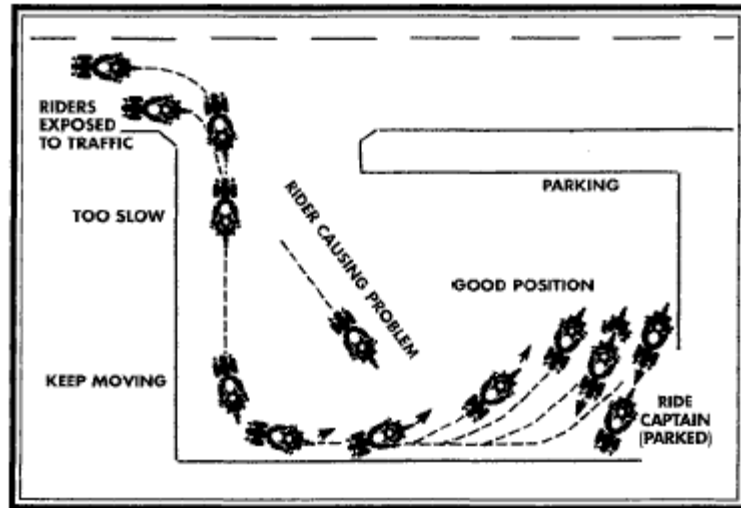
Parking

David Hough says:

“Now, how do you get a long string of motorcycles stopped and parked without creating a traffic hazard? The most important consideration is having a parking area that’s big enough for the whole group to ride into. You don’t want half the group off the road, and leave the other half stranded out there in traffic like sitting ducks. The best scenario is when the group has space to motor into a parking lot and park side-by-side to conserve space. Riders should pull up to the left of each rider ahead, so that everyone can immediately back into the parking space without waiting. When your group pulls into a parking lot, don’t try to be creative. Follow the parking drill with everyone. Don’t ride up behind the next rider, but pull alongside to the left, and immediately roll your machine back into the parking space. Creative parking decisions tend to slow the parking process and leave tail-enders still trying to get off the street. With a little experience, the whole group can get parked quickly, which helps move everyone off the road efficiently.”

Here is a good picture of an effective technique to park quickly and safely.

The “creative” rider slows the parking process and becomes a parking lot hazard to other motorcycles. Everyone should follow this drill.



Leaving the Group

If you plan to break off from the group, the polite thing to do is let the Ride Captain know so that he does not have wait and interview the whole group to find out that you are safe and have decided to break off from the group.

Credits:

Hough, David L.; *Proficient Motorcycling, The Ultimate Guide to Riding Well*; Bowtie Press, Irvine California, 2000.

Hough, David L.; *More Proficient Motorcycling, Mastering the Ride*; Bowtie Press, Irvine California, 2003.

Motorcycle Safety Foundation; *The MSF Guide to Group Riding*; Irvine California, March 2007.

Winokur, Henry S.; Maryland State Certified Instructor and JMA Member.

Rochweg, Sid; Canada Safety Council Chief Instructor (retired) and YOW member.

Smirniw, Nicholas; Safety and Environment Coordinator; Honda Canada Inc.