

That first draft can be tricky

I remember you. It was a windy day in North Texas and you sneaked up behind me. Your labored breathing gave you away.

Slower, faster, it made no difference, you stayed right on my tail. You didn't ask if it was OK, and you took advantage of me for several miles.

And just when I was getting tired, you took off.

Well, overweight middle-aged man in the yellow jersey, that's just not cool. Sure, we all hate riding into the wind. A vicious headwind is a brick wall to a cyclist, worse than the steepest hill.

And it's tempting to fall in behind another cyclist who will break the wind for you. In fact, it's a common practice called drafting.

But there is a certain etiquette cyclists should follow out of courtesy and safety before drafting behind another rider or tagging on to a pace line, which is a group of drafting cyclists in single file.

The first rule

The first rule to ask is if it's OK. Why? Because it involves getting rather close to the person in front of you and there's a danger of getting tangled up and crashing if you don't communicate.

Once you figure out what to do, and how to approach someone, drafting can make your ride easier — especially on windy days — and allow you to go faster. Getting comfortable with pace lines also can help you train with a group.

When you're drafting, you're riding in the slipstream — the area not directly in the wind — created by a leading cyclist or pack, writes Richard Wharton, owner of Online Bike Coach (www.onlinebikecoach.com). This allows you to ride at the same speed as other riders with less effort, he says, meaning you just don't have to work as hard.

If you're drafting behind someone, it's important to take



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Drafting — riding in line with cyclists rotating front to back to take turns breaking the wind — has its own etiquette.

turns or “take a pull.” In a pace line, this constant rotation is vital.

Here's how Mr. Wharton describes it:

Pace lines generally stretch from directly behind the lead cyclist to an area slightly left or right of the lead cyclist.

When the lead is ready to slide to the back of the line, he will signal his intent with a flapping of his elbow, called a “chicken wing” movement, visible to the rider behind him.

The lead should look over his shoulder in the opposite direction to make sure the coast is clear before drifting to the side and slightly dropping speed until he's at the rear.

In a double pace line, where there are two parallel single-file lines, the line is constantly moving. One line buffers the other from the wind. The leader of the “protected” line moves over and drops back in a continual loop.

Pace lines work best in open roadways where riders are spread out; avoid congested urban areas.

Drafting and pace lines demand constant rotation. Expect to be in the lead for no more than 30 seconds to one minute in a pace line, Mr. Wharton says.

More advice comes from Max

GEARING UP



PAULA LAVIGNE

Miley, team coach for Matrix Cycle Club, a Dallas-Fort Worth performance and racing club.

Keep at least 1 foot between the rear wheel of the rider in front of you and your front wheel. However, don't stare at the wheel in front of you when you should be paying attention to the road ahead, Mr. Miley warns.

Practice drafting with a friend first before you jump into a pace line, he says. And if you get there, and you're too tired or just unable to take the lead, let other riders know so they can jump in the pace line in front of you as they fall back. It's OK as long as you communicate; it would be worse to reach the front of the line and not be able to keep pace, he says.

The line leader has a lot of responsibility, such as pointing out holes, cracks and debris, and announcing oncoming cars. He or she also must keep the line tight,

together and steady.

If you want to increase the pace, do it gradually, and never do it on hills, he says.

“Many times you will need to back off slightly on hills if you want to keep the pace line together,” he said. “If there are differing ability levels in the group, they will be exaggerated on the hills.”

A vivid lesson

Allen cyclist Mike Schwitzgebel found that out when he took the lead of a pace line on a hill and soon found himself alone. Give him a break, though; he was still learning.

The 45-year-old cyclist discovered drafting by accident. He was on a prior group ride with the Greater Dallas Bicyclists and ended up trailing about 3 feet behind a friend of his for several miles before taking off.

After the ride, another cyclist approached him and said he was somewhat rude for drafting behind someone for miles without offering to “take a pull.”

“I learned you don't have to be right up on somebody's wheel to get advantage of the draft,” Mr. Schwitzgebel says. “It was an eye-opener to me stumbling into the group, not knowing the correct et-

iquette or techniques.”

The friend he was trailing that day wasn't upset with him, but he has encountered cyclists who are more perturbed about being followed. He recalls a local rally in which he cycled up behind two women and a man, but he hung back because he didn't have the energy to pass just yet. He says he was too far away for anyone to think he was drafting.

“And the guy in the group,” he says, “he just kept turning around, looking over his shoulder, and snapping his head, glaring at me.” He says he wanted to respond, “Hey, I'm not trying to take your wheel, and I don't want your women, so chill out.”

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🔗 **Links:** Log on to view a PowerPoint presentation on drafting by Richard Wharton, owner of Online Bike Coach. Read about how and why drafting works with a lesson in bicycle aerodynamics.

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