

Batches Of Bikers

Group Riding Skills

By David Hough



Editors Note: Please print this article out and share it with your group.

Given my choice of traveling alone or in a group, I'd prefer to travel alone. When I'm cruising towards the horizon all by myself, life is much simpler. I only have to make decisions for one person. I can change plans instantly without having a roadside conference. When I'm ready to go, I just go. If I want to stop, I just stop. If I run out of gas, I...wait a minute! Who's going to help me if I'm all by myself?

What's more, even if I don't have a bike problem, it gets kind of lonely after a while. When I peer over the rim of the Grand Canyon to absorb the awesome view, or stop at an overlook with Mount Rainier gleaming in the twilight, I feel like sharing the experience with others.

And I can also remember some great group rides. Back in the "good old days" I used to lead the Puget Sound Motorcycle Tour, a three-day ride-to-eat bash where socializing was a big part of the fun. The final tour in 1976 had 120 participants. I've had some great "canyon" rides with small groups of proficient riders. And I can remember a few spectacular rally parades where there were thousands of riders in one never-ending formation. The flip side is that I've also had some group rides that were dangerous, frustrating disasters. I suppose my preference for traveling alone isn't so much that I don't like groups, but that I'm cautious about joining groups that aren't organized well.

Daffy Don

I remember a small group of friends led by a rider who turned a day ride into a nightmare. Daffy Don didn't tell us where we were going, or offer any advice about riding style or speed. Daffy didn't do hand signals, or check his mirrors, or use a radio. Taking off from a stop sign, he would peel out in front of a line of cars, leaving the rest of us riding over our heads trying to catch up. When Daffy instantly decided to make a fuel stop, he dove across two lanes of oncoming traffic without signaling, abandoning the rest of us in the left lane of a busy highway, hoping we wouldn't get run over by passing 18-wheelers. After a couple of hours of that nightmare, I "missed a turn" and got "lost" from the group. Looking back, I wonder what took me so long.

Boss Man Bill

By comparison, I remember a different group I joined for a ride through the mountains and canyons north of Los Angeles. Boss Man Bill explained where we were going, and maintained a pace in traffic suitable for the least experienced member. Bill also explained that once we turned off onto the narrow, twisty "canyon" roads, each rider should ride at his or her own pace. The more aggressive riders could zoom on ahead, enjoying the curves. Average riders could motor along enjoying the scenery. And the slower riders could bring up the rear, riding at their own pace. The key to keeping the group a group was that at critical intersections, Bill patiently held everyone up until the slowest rider caught up. That way, no one felt pressured to ride faster than their skill level just to avoid getting lost, yet we could all socialize together at the rest stops. The difference between the two groups is that Daffy Don had no idea of how to lead a group. Boss Man Bill had an excellent understanding of group riding dynamics, and set some simple rules that allowed everyone to enjoy the ride without creating dangerous or frustrating situations.

The Ride Captain

Most of us have gone for a ride with two or three companions, although we may not have recognized them as "group" rides at the time. If you haven't had the humbling opportunity to lead a batch of bikers yet, you will, even if it's just one other machine. Whether the group is large or small, the ride will go better if you follow some common sense rules. Let's review some of the dynamics, consider some techniques for leading a formation ride, and evaluate some alternate ways to move a group of motorcyclists down the road.

Let's say you are asked to lead a club ride, with a potential for 20 bikes. Hold it! Don't run away just yet. We'll talk you through it. You'll be the leader, or "Ride Captain", but you should arrange for another experienced rider (or "Tail End Charlie") to bring up the end of the group. Now, don't just fire up the engine and zoom into traffic just yet. First, here's a trick question for you:

If you immediately pull out onto the street and accelerate up to 55 mph, how much time will pass before Charlie starts to move, 19 bikes behind you? Well, if there aren't any other vehicles on the road, and riders manage to follow you exactly two seconds apart, Charlie won't be pulling out for 38 seconds. At 55 mph, you'll be 3,078 feet down the road before Charlie eases out the clutch. What's more, if you maintain 55 mph, each following rider will have to go faster than 55 to catch up with you. If Charlie throttles up to 110 mph, he can catch up to the group in maybe 30 seconds. If Charlie is only willing to risk 80 mph, it will take him about a minute and a half to catch up, assuming you hold 55 mph. So you shouldn't be surprised if he's hotter than a rear Heritage header, long before the lunch stop.

Think of a group of motorcycles like a train, with the cars hitched together by ten-foot bungee cords. That's why the sharp ride leader pulls out slowly and creeps along at 30 mph or so, until Charlie finally gets rolling. You can either watch in your mirrors, or listen for Charlie on the CB if you are wired for radio. Once the entire group is rolling, you can pick up the pace to cruising speed. To avoid holding up other motorists, it's wise to maintain at least the speed limit, or the average speed of traffic if the road is busy. You don't want to encourage other motorists to attempt passing the group two or three bikes at a time.

When approaching a slower speed zone, the clever leader decelerates the group well before the speed sign, so that as the first bikes arrive in the slower zone, Charlie has also slowed, and isn't doing a stoppie to avoid jamming his front tire up someone's muffler.

The Formation

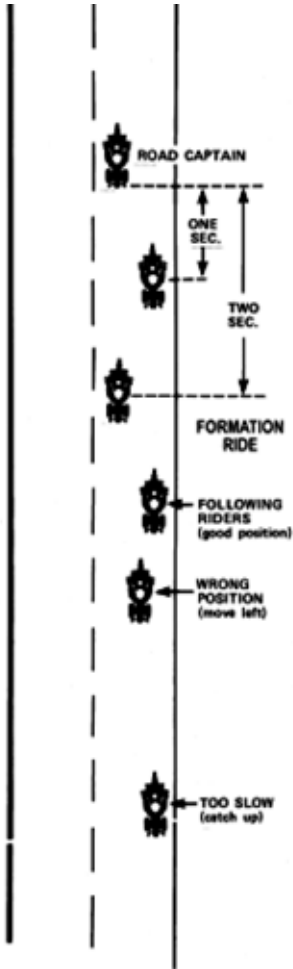
You've probably seen motor officers (and also big bad bikers) riding side-by-side in two columns. The side-by-side formation looks really impressive, but limits both riders' maneuvering room. Even motor cops have had accidents where one bike has bumped into the one alongside. A staggered formation gives each bike more space within the lane. In a staggered formation, you ride in the opposite wheel track from the rider ahead of you. That is, if he's in the left wheel track, you take the right wheel track. Normally, the road captain assumes the left wheel track.

That group of riders coming down the hill are in pretty good "staggered" formation.

The staggered formation moves the same number of bikes in the same road space as a side-by-side formation, but allows machines in either column to temporarily move sideways to avoid a hazard such as a car door, pothole, or edge trap. The staggered formation also provides a



slightly better view of other riders. If you follow one second behind the rider in the other wheel track, that puts you two seconds behind the rider directly ahead of you. Two seconds is the minimum distance to provide a space cushion, while keeping the group as compact as possible. If everyone pays attention, it is easy to establish and maintain a staggered two-second formation. It's the Captain's choice to ride in the left or right wheel track. I prefer leading from the right track, which provides a better view of the formation to oncoming motorists.



The bad news is that we must be prepared for a Daffy Don to join the group. When you are signaling "Start your engines", Daffy may still be nattering with that chickie-babe on the pink Sportster, with his helmet and gloves still parked inside the coffee shop, and his keys in an inside pocket. During the ride, you can expect Daffy to constantly be drifting over into the wrong track, with following riders all doing the lane samba trying to re-establish the staggered formation. If we know Daffy, he will drop back an extra eight or ten seconds, just enough to allow a following car to pass, and cause the last three riders to miss the green light.

To avoid being a "Daffy" yourself, stay in your wheel track, and maintain your 1 second distance behind the next rider.

And of course, Daffy will expect you to find a gas station in a few minutes, because he only fills up after his bike has gone on reserve, and that won't occur for at least another five miles. Don't think you can ignore him-he'll roar up through the formation to tell you when he's ready.

When It's Time To Go, GO!

My suggestion for Ride Captains blessed with a "Daffy", is to expect everyone to conform to the group, and make that clear at the riders' meeting before the ride. Explain your expectations for the ride, along with any rules you think would help. For instance, you might suggest that if any rider in the group can't maintain a 2-second following distance, it is acceptable for following riders to pass. Explain where the group will be stopping, and where the ride is expected to end. Make it clear that when the group stops for fuel, everyone is expected to top up

their tanks and drain their bladders.

When it's time to go, GO! When I was directing tours, I would post some odd start time, such as 8:17 a.m., and then leave exactly at 8:17 a.m., to make it clear that I wasn't kidding. If Daffy is running around in circles back in the parking lot shouting to wait, ignore him and move out. And keep the rest of the group moving when Daffy runs out of fuel during the ride. Maybe poor Charlie will take pity and handle the problem. The point is, don't let Daffy ruin the ride for everyone else.

Getting Through The Green Light

When you're leading a group through controlled intersections in traffic, it is unlikely you'll get everyone through before the light turns red. When following riders see the yellow, the temptation is to speed up to stay with the group, and tail end riders often panic and run the red, too. Explain at the start that riders are expected to obey all traffic signals, and that you will slow down as necessary to let everyone catch up if the group is split by a traffic light. In practical terms, with a series of signal lights, the leader will get stopped as often as the tail end riders, and everyone will pass through all the intersections at about the same rate.

I've been in some big groups where "escort" riders pull over to block the intersection and let everyone run the red light, but I don't recommend that tactic unless the escorts are on-duty cops. The real legal eagles tend to look askance at motorcyclists taking the law into their own hands. Everyone should also come to a complete stop for STOP signs. It's tempting to just slow down and keep rolling through the stop, but when a rider does have to make a quick stop, no one is prepared. It's best if every rider makes a complete-if quick-left foot down stop.

Every rider should make a complete stop for stop signs.

All you usually have to do is keep speed in check as you leave town, to give everyone a chance to catch up before you roll the group up to cruising speed. Once in a while, you may have to creep along in the slow lane, or even pull the group off the road, to wait for riders caught at a long light. With a group of only five or six riders, it is easy to find a place to stop, and also to get rolling again, but with a group of 30 or more the usual tactic is to keep going at a slower speed and let the stragglers catch up.

Don't even think about stopping a group on the shoulder of a busy highway just because one rider has a problem. I've seen some extremely dangerous screwups where a whole gaggle of bikes has come to a screeching halt on a busy freeway, because one rider dropped a glove.



Communication

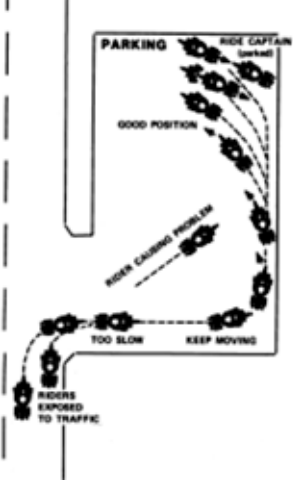
Even if you're just going for a ride with three or four friends, it's a good idea to have a "riders meeting" just before taking off, to explain where we're going, what sort of formation we'll use, the meaning of various hand signals, and what to do in case of a breakdown. That also establishes in everyone's mind who the leader is. If you've made up route sheets, this is the time to hand 'em out. You might also suggest that if anyone needs to split from the group, to inform you in advance, so we won't have to run the whole route backwards looking for a "stranded" rider who has been home for hours sucking on a cold can.

Clubs who ride together on a regular schedule often find it useful to have CB radios. The Captain can explain what's coming up next, and Charlie can report what's happening back at the tail end. For example, Charlie can whine that he's had to stop with Daffy, whose dry battery has finally expired, and would the next participant with a radio kindly drop back and assume the Charlie job?

Signals

Hand and light signals are quick ways to communicate, with or without radios. I once happened to pull into line behind a group of Gold Wing riders during our state's "Governor's Run", and was privileged to observe their proficient group skills. The ride leader maintained a slow enough speed to allow the others to quickly catch up as they pulled onto the road. Once rolling, all riders maintained exact position and following distance in a nice staggered formation. At the sight of a pothole, the leader flashed his stop light twice, and all the others passed the warning signal back. Where the road narrowed, the leader held up one finger, and everyone shifted smoothly into single file. Through a twisty section, the riders cornered briskly at the same pace. Where the road widened again, the leader held up two fingers, and the group immediately changed back to a staggered formation. To change lanes on an urban arterial street, the leader positioned the group next to a space in traffic, and signaled. Charlie immediately signaled, and the whole group moved over as one. Their ride was truly a performance.

Getting Stopped



OK, you got the group rolling, you've managed to herd everyone through eighteen signal lights and twelve intersections without losing Daffy or causing an accident, and it's been a pleasant ride. Now, how do you get a long string of motorcycles stopped and parked for lunch 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 to get half the group off the road, and leave the other half stranded out there 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. With a little experience, the whole group can get parked quickly, which helps move everyone off the road efficiently.

When the group pulls into a parking lot, don't try to be creative. Follow the parking drill with everyone else. 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 down the process and leave tail end riders hanging out in traffic waiting to get off the street.

It's important to locate a parking area that's big enough for the whole group to ride into.

The larger the group, the more important it is to have specific stops arranged. When I led groups of 80 to 100 riders, I would ride the entire route prior to the tour, both to identify specific problem areas such as construction zones, and to find suitable parking areas. If stopping for lunch with more than a dozen riders, I would also either make arrangements for a meal, or call ahead to give the restaurant an opportunity to have enough help on hand. If you are making arrangements for a really big group, you'll need a lot of help to direct traffic.

Photo 3, several hundred bikes in parking lot

A very large group takes a lot of organization.



Back In The Pack

Group rides are a lot more enjoyable when the leader is more like Boss Man Bill, and less like Daffy Don. If you've never ridden in a group, make a point of staying close to the Ride Captain rather than at the back of the pack. It's a lot easier to maintain speed and position if you are no more than two or three bikes from the front. Fill your tank and empty your bladder before the scheduled departure time. When the leader puts on his helmet and gloves, get your key in the ignition and get ready to roll.

Once underway, maintain the requested interval and lane position. Try to avoid drifting back and creating a big hole in the formation. If someone ahead suddenly wakes up to being in the wrong track and moves over, every following rider should immediately re-establish the proper staggered formation. Watch the leader for hand signals. When riders ahead give warning signals, pass the signal back down the line. If another rider has a problem and pulls over, stay with the group and keep rolling unless the leader also pulls over, or asks that you stop to help. It's Charlie's job to deal with the problem.

Alternate Ways To Move A Group

When you think "Group Ride" you may imagine a long string of bikes in formation, but there are other ways to move a group down the road. One technique I have used is printing up route sheets that detail the route and schedule. It's relatively easy to make up route sheets by snipping pieces out of an official state tourist map and adding schedule information alongside. Poker runs and mystery tours are different forms of a group ride, where everyone does their own navigating and rides at their own pace.



A poker run is a good way to move a large number of riders.

Try It, You Might Like It

If you've been avoiding group rides like the plague, consider joining up once in a while as part of your skill improvement program. Maybe you'll even discover some fellow enthusiasts you enjoy riding with. If none of the others measure up to your standards of group leadership, maybe you'll just have to be Ride Captain and show 'em how it's done. But remember, riding in a group once in a while doesn't mean you can't go

droning off towards the horizon by yourself when you feel like it.

*[David Hough](#) is a long-time motorcyclist and journalist. His work has appeared in numerous motorcycle publications, but he is best known for the monthly skills series "[Proficient Motorcycling](#)" in *Motorcycle Consumer News*, which has been honored by special awards from the Motorcycle Safety Foundation. Selected columns were edited into a book "[Proficient Motorcycling](#)" published by Bowtie Press. He is also the author of "Driving A Sidecar Outfit". A pocket handbook, "[Street Strategies](#)" is also on the market now.*