



It's a Group Thing!

When we think of motorcyclists, the romantic movie image of a strong, silent loner often comes to mind. Get real. Bikers are social animals! Motorcycle clubs have sprung up all over the place, and group rides have become increasingly popular. Many enjoy riding as part of a small group, or even in a large, organized rally. This can be a great way to share your love of motorcycling with like-minded people, but it does bring a few new challenges because you're constantly watching and interpreting the people riding with you, as well as watching the road.

Group rides can be categorized into three basic types: destination-oriented rides, route-oriented rides, and benefit-oriented rides. A destination-oriented ride focuses on a specific place, like a restaurant. Route-oriented rides tend to be more free-form, usually without a fixed timetable, endpoint, or plan, and is organized only for the joy of riding together. This type of ride is ideal for small groups of



similarly matched riders. Benefit-oriented rides are usually organized to raise money for a charity or other special interest group. These rides are typically large in scale, with plenty of publicity.

There's no room for egos when you're on the road with other people. You must take into account the needs and abilities of the other riders – especially their riding experience, skill levels, and general comfort on the road and around other motorcycles. Everything from where to position your bike on the roadway to effective communication takes on a larger significance when you're riding in close proximity to others.

Arrive Prepared

Nothing will annoy your group more than waiting for you to get your act together. Arrive on time with a full tank of gas and everything you will need to complete the ride. Introduce yourself to the group leader and also the sweep rider, who brings up the rear. If there's a route map, study it and make note of any fuel, meal, rest, or lodging stops. Ask what hand signals will be used during the ride and remember to use them. Riding in a group can be overwhelming, but preparing properly will help you avoid problems.

Resist the temptation to show off! Most likely, you'll only end up looking like a dope, and you could put others at risk. Ride responsibly and impress others with your cool head and self-control.

Riding in Formation

A group's riding formation on the road plays a huge

part of maintaining safety during a group ride. The staggered riding formation includes maintaining a proper space cushion between motorcycles so that each rider has plenty of time and space to maneuver and to react to any hazards that may come up.

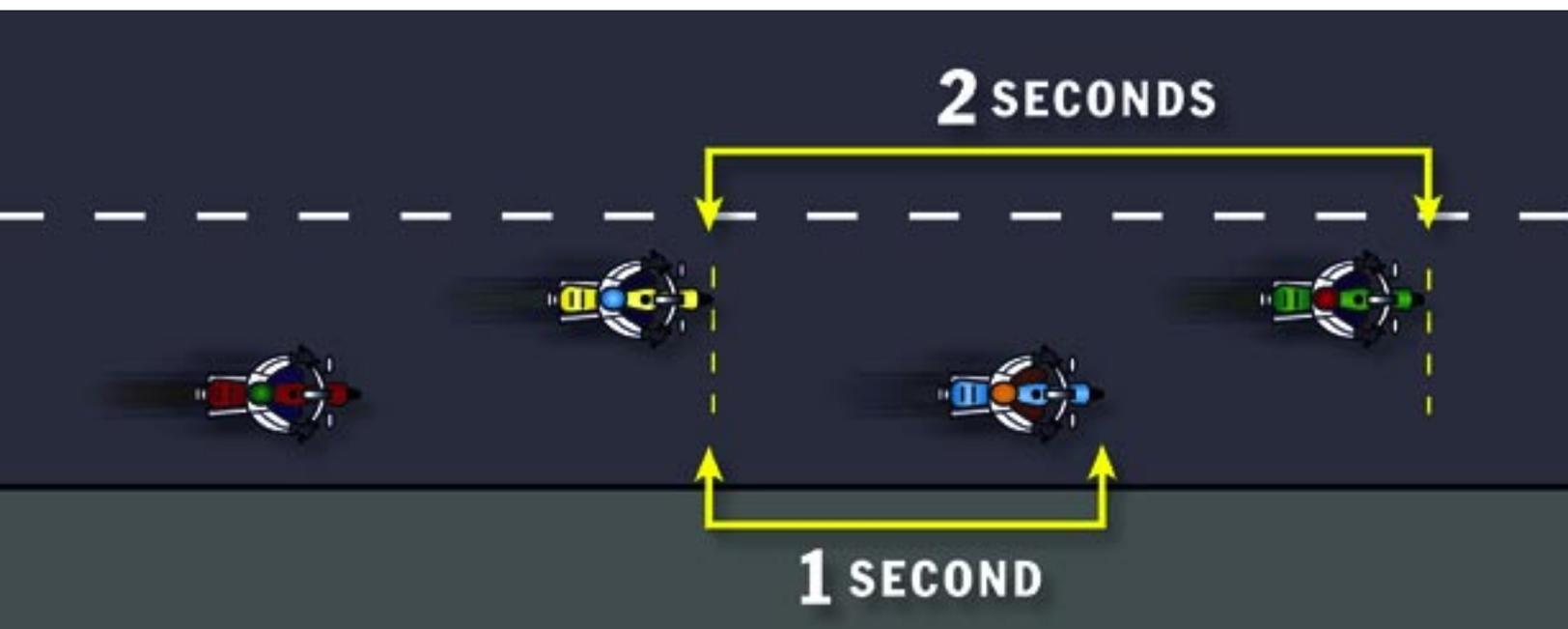
Compared to a single-file line, a staggered formation takes up less space on the highway, is easier for cars to see, and protects the lane better to lessen the chance of the group being split up by other traffic. Side-by-side formations are never a good choice, as these greatly reduce the space cushion to the side. If the guy to your left wipes out, chances are good you will, too.

A staggered formation can be tight or loose, depending on traffic. During heavy traffic, a tighter formation is best, keeping riders together with traffic. However, keeping the group together isn't as important as safety.

In good riding conditions, you should keep a two-second following distance between you and the rider directly in front of you. In a staggered formation, the leader rides in the left third of a lane, while the next rider stays at least one second behind in the right third of the lane, with the rest of the group following in the same pattern behind. If you're doing it right, the third rider is two seconds behind the leader, but only one second behind the second rider.

In some situations, a single-file formation is best. If you need more room to maneuver, such as on a curvy road, or under poor visibility conditions, entering or leaving highways, or on roads with poor surfaces, it's a good idea to ride single file.

No matter what formation you're riding in, pay attention to the riders in front of and behind you. Periodically



check the riders following in your rearview mirror. If you see someone falling behind, slow down and allow them to catch up. Think of the group as a rubber band – the line of riders may stretch out or tighten up from time to time, but overall, if everyone uses this technique, the group should be able to maintain a fairly steady speed without anyone feeling pressured to ride too fast to catch up.

Intersections

They can be deadly – whether or not you're with a group. At least you have increased visibility when riding with others, but there are important things to remember about intersections when you're part of a pack.

When turning at intersections with traffic light turn arrows, tighten the formation to allow as many riders as possible to pass through while still maintaining a single file or tightly staggered formation. Unfortunately, if your group is more than a few bikes strong, there's a good chance some will be caught by the red light. Discuss beforehand what to do if you're separated by a light. Plan to stop at a predetermined point up ahead to keep riders from feeling pressured to run the light or speed to catch up.

At lights without a turn arrow, proceed with caution and in single file, turning only when it's safe and legal. Lead riders should slow down after turning to allow the group

to reform after everyone is safely through the intersection. Remember – blocking an intersection without permission or without an appropriate escort is illegal in most circumstances.

At red lights where you intend to proceed straight through without turning, it may be appropriate to close formation and sit side-by-side while waiting to proceed. When the light turns green, the rider on the left leaves first, then the following riders, in order to reestablish the staggered formation and space cushion as the riders depart.

Interstates and Freeways

High speeds and the increased potential for hazards make riding in a staggered formation essential on freeways and interstates. Enter these roadways single file and form up after safely merging. Once on the highway, be alert for entering and exiting cars that might cut through your formation. You might be tempted to close up your formation, but resist this urge and maintain your space cushion. Exiting an interstate requires a single-file formation that allows you to better merge and respond to whatever is at the end of the exit lane.

Passing

Group passing dynamics differ, depending on the type of roadway. Whether on a freeway or interstate, it's



Photo by Master Sgt. Jim Varhegyi, USAF

acceptable for the group to pass as a unit, provided this pass is safe and legal. When the opportunity arises, the lead rider should signal the lane change once it has been determined that the group can pass as a unit. The other riders should then follow this lead and signal one at a time and move into the next lane.

Passing slower-moving traffic on a two-lane roadway presents a greater challenge. In this situation, the members of the group should pass one at a time. The leader should signal his or her intention first and then pull out and pass only when it's safe. After the pass is completed, the leader should return to the left lane position and continue at a speed that leaves room for the next rider to tuck in between him or her and the vehicle being passed. The next rider should then move up to the left position and wait for a safe chance to pass – each rider should only pass when it feels safe.

Separation Anxiety

Signals, traffic and mechanical problems are only a few of the reasons that you might find yourself separated from the group. Don't panic! Your group should have a pre-planned procedure in place to regroup. Don't feel pressured to catch up, especially if it means breaking the law or riding beyond your skills. It's always preferable to finish a group ride alone than to wind up in trouble.

If you have plans to separate from the group before the end of the ride, make sure to notify the group leader in advance. Make sure the rest of the group knows when you

plan to depart, so they know you haven't had a problem and aren't in need of assistance. When you do depart, the rest of the riders should adjust the formation to maintain the proper space cushion and following distance. This may require some riders to change their position to the opposite side of the lane.

Trouble!

Reacting to hazards in the roadway is especially important in a group. For this reason, maintaining the proper space cushion and following distance throughout the ride is essential to allow riders to adjust their lane positions if you encounter debris. If your staggered formation comes across a hazardous area, such as a construction zone, it is best to transition to single file. Avoid riding over debris unless there's no other choice. Not only could you damage your tires or bike, but you also risk throwing debris into another rider's path. Not cool.

If a group member does have a problem with roadway hazards, the riders behind should stop, including the designated sweep rider at the back of the pack. It's best for the riders ahead of the incident to continue on to the next scheduled stop area, since turning around and doubling back could cause additional problems. It's the responsibility of the sweep rider to assess the situation and, if it appears there will be a delay, send another rider ahead to inform the rest of the group. If medical assistance is necessary, use a cellphone to call 911 right away. ■



Photo by A1C James Bell.

Know Your Group Ride Hand Signals

Stop - arm extended straight down, palm facing back.



Slow Down - arm extended straight out, palm facing down.



Follow Me - arm extended straight up from shoulder, palm forward.



Speed Up - arm extended straight out, palm facing up.



You Lead/Come - arm extended upward 45 degrees, palm forward pointing with index finger, swing in arc from back to front.



Single File - arm and index finger extended straight up.



Double File - arm with index and middle fingers extended straight up.



Hazard in the Roadway - on the left, point with left hand; on the right, point with right foot.



Pull Off - arm positioned as for right turn, forearm swung toward shoulder.



Highbeam - tap on top of helmet with open palm down.



Fuel - arm out to the side, finger pointing to tank.

