

The Day I Used My Face As a Brake Pad

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I was less than two miles into my regular Saturday morning bicycle ride, doing my best Lance Armstrong impersonation. We just had finished warming up and were starting to pick up the pace. I got in the pace line, drafting about 8 to 12 inches behind the cyclist in front of me. I looked down at my bike computer, marveling at how effortless it felt to be riding at the brisk 22-mph pace that we were holding. It was going to be a beautiful day, with the birds chirping and not a cloud in the sky—that was before someone called out, “Branch!”

The problem with that warning was that it came **after** I had watched my front tire run over the branch from a vantage point about three feet above and two feet ahead of my front tire. A slightly altered quote from an Adam Sandler movie ran through my head: “Perhaps that’s something you could have told me 10 seconds ago!” Because I was so close to the rider in front of me, I never saw the branch and didn’t have a chance to maneuver around it.

The force of the collision vaulted me over my handlebars, and I hit the ground helmet-first on the left side of my head and on my left collarbone. The impact forced my helmet to the right side of my head, thus allowing me to continue sliding down the street on the left side of my face at more than 20 mph. Because we were riding so close to one another, the cyclist behind me ran over my head, further grinding my face into the road. The cyclist behind her ran over the inside of my left knee, grinding it down almost to the kneecap.

I was thankful at least the ambulance driver was nice enough not to run over me. I ended up with a three-quarter-inch gap between the broken ends of my collarbone, a few broken ribs, stitches in my left ear (where part of it almost was ripped off), virtually no skin on my left kneecap, and a severe case of road rash up and down the left side of my body.

Looking back, I did a few things right, but there were several things I could have done better. The best thing I did was to wear my helmet; it undoubtedly saved my life. Without it, I probably would have had a crushed skull, either from the initial impact or from getting run over. Despite the seriousness of the mishap, I didn’t receive a concussion, suffer any memory loss, or have any other head injury besides abrasions. The part of the helmet that protects my left ear was broken off.

One thing I could have done to reduce my injuries was to adjust my helmet better. After the wreck, I realized I didn’t have it on tight enough. The helmet was buckled, but the impact moved it to the side of my face. If I had had the nape strap adjusted tighter, the helmet most likely would have stayed in place, and my face would have been spared the abuse it received.

For the most part, cycling is a relatively safe activity, as long as you take proper precautions. It can be unforgiving, however, if you make a mistake and are in an accident. Drafting behind another cyclist is a part of the sport and one that certainly adds risk. If you’re going to draft, you must stay alert and aware of your surroundings, or be prepared for the consequences of not paying attention.

Now that I’ve recovered from my accident, I’m riding more than ever, but I also am more vigilant. I always know what lies ahead of me, especially when I’m in a pace line. I check out my helmet’s adjustment before every ride. Wearing the right safety gear saved my life, and it might save yours, too.

Here are some thoughts of another avid cyclist, Capt. Nicholas Webster, USN(Ret.), former head of the Naval Safety Center’s aeromedical division:



Pace-line riding is enjoyable and a part of high-intensity group riding and racing. Riders in a pace line reduce their workloads by as much as 30 percent, compared to the rider in the lead.

When riding in a pace line, I recommend novice riders keep a distance of one wheel's diameter between their front tire and the rear tire of the rider ahead of them. Your scan in this configuration is intense and should focus down the road ahead of you, not on the next rider's seat or rear tire. Your scan should be far down the road, then moving two or three riders up, then to the rider in front, and then back down the road. You will pick up changes in distance between you and the rider ahead with your peripheral vision and see the road hazards with your central vision.

Please don't suddenly slam on your brakes when in a pace line. You will end up with a pile of angry riders

on top of your rear wheel. If the person in front of you slows down suddenly, gently maneuver around the left side of that rider. The increased breeze will help slow you and will keep the pace line behind from plowing into you.

I prefer to ride in groups with people I know. Use a little crew resource management (CRM) and brief the ride and ensure that all use appropriate hand signals. Be kind to those behind, and call and point out road hazards well ahead of time.

Rules to live by

- Pre-ride check your bike. Check tires for damage, then check their pressure. Also, make sure your wheels aren't out of round, and the quick-release levers are secure. Look at brakes for wear, and ensure they are not rubbing. Have a certified bike mechanic check your bike once a year.
- Always wear a helmet that fits well and is secure. If you ever are involved in a crash and the helmet is hit, replace it, even though it may look fine.
- Follow all the rules of the road: Ride with traffic, and ride single file.
- Ride about 1.5 or two feet from the curb. You'll have a little more room to maneuver (and not run off the road) if you experience an unforeseen obstacle.
- When riding in a group, get to know the riding habits of those around you. Give a novice rider a little more room.
- Be courteous—call your turns, stops and road hazards.
- If you have aero bars on your bike, don't use them in a pace line. You'll be unstable and will injure someone.
- If you have to ride at night, wear light reflective clothing. Ride with a bright head light and taillights.
- Don't ride with earplugs or radios. Use your ears to help identify hazards coming up behind you.
- Check behind before swerving to the left. You don't want to become a hood ornament for a car or truck.
- Don't ride on sidewalks or against traffic. Cars and trucks don't expect something moving at 20 mph to be going the wrong way, and you may end up plastered on the side or front of a massive piece of moving steel and plastic. The larger mass always wins.
- You don't drink alcohol and drive, so don't drink and ride. 🚫