

CRITERIUM TIPS FOR NOVICE RACERS

criterium racing is a combination of fitness, strength, skill and strategy. The races are short and tight, so things can become pretty hectic at times, but that doesn't mean they should be frightening or dangerous. Here are some tips to help make criterium racing safe and enjoyable, for you and your competitors.

FIRSTLY, BE SENSIBLE AND SAFE

To use John's phrase, you're not racing for sheep stations. Just take it easy for your first few races. Also, contain your agro. Stuff happens in bike races – people will cut you off and *occasionally* crashes will happen. You can yell out to warn people but getting abusive doesn't help. If someone rides in a dangerous way, remember their number and you can quietly report it to the race director afterwards.



DON'T EXPECT TO WIN YOUR FIRST COUPLE OF RACES

Instead, treat it as a learning experience: get the hang of the course, the big bunch, the pace and the corners.

IF YOU GET DROPPED, DON'T BECOME DISHEARTENED

I got dropped from D grade last year and I might get dropped from C this year. The criterium is a strange beast that takes practice and experience to subdue. After the first race make yourself some goals – you might say to yourself, "I'm going to hold on to the bunch for at least 5 minutes next week." After that you might aim to stay on for the whole race, then do some riding up the front.



WORK TOGETHER WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH OTHERS WITH SIMILAR GOALS

For example if you and several others are dropped from the bunch, you all have the same aim – to get back on – so you can organise yourselves to work together to achieve this. Keep an eye out for team mates and give them a hand if you can. For example someone might be looking to slot back into the bunch but can't find an opening. You can leave a gap in front of yourself and let them in.

CHOOSE A GOOD WHEEL TO FOLLOW

Try not to get stuck behind someone who corners too slowly, keeps leaving gaps in front or rides poorly. Remember that big guys provide a better draft than little guys.

THE FRONT GROUP IS THE EASIEST PLACE TO RIDE

You will have noticed how changes in speed get amplified along the bunch. The same thing happens in a race. The front group can take corners fastest, and usually with a better line. The rear of the group will be slowing right down for the corners then having to sprint out of them to rejoin the main bunch. But of course this means everyone wants to ride at the front.

DO YOUR SHARE BUT NO MORE (MAYBE EVEN A LITTLE BIT LESS)

Don't let people pressure you into doing all the work. If you end up on the front do your bit and then pull off. Don't sit there for more than the length of a straight unless you have some sort of a plan. If a break goes, some people might yell at you to chase it down. You don't have to, they are doing this because they don't want to expend the energy themselves. If you end up on the front and you have a team mate out in a break, just sit there and soft pedal – why should you help chase down a team mate? If others want to they will have to ride around you.



LOOK FOR GAPS AND TAKE THEM

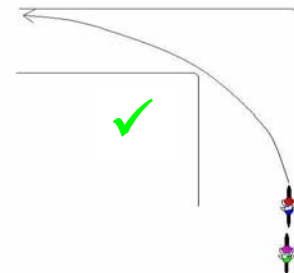
Don't feel you are being pushy if someone leaves a gap to the wheel in front and you want to take it. This is just what racing is about. Sometimes you might pull off from the front and find it hard to get a spot to slot back into the lead group. If someone's not holding the wheel tightly, it's yours. If this fails, gaps will invariably open up after corners.

HOLD YOUR LINE

Don't swing out in front of other riders and don't ride erratically. Just like on the open road, do a quick check to make sure no one is coming past before you pull out. Veering all over the road during a sprint is a good way to get yourself relegated.

DON'T OVERLAP WHEELS

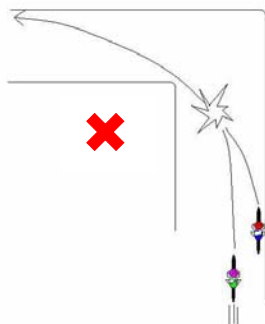
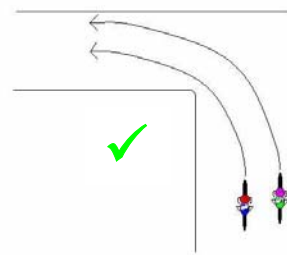
The same as in any form of group riding, overlapping your front wheel with the wheel you are following is a recipe for a fall. This is especially important on the approach to corners when people will start veering to get the best line.



TAKE PARALLEL LINES THROUGH CORNERS

You know what the ideal line through a corner is, but most of the time there will be someone riding to the inside or the outside of you and you will need to compromise your line

accordingly. Effectively, the road you can use is narrowed by the other rider, so your new line should be what the ideal line would be if you could not use the outside/inside of the road. Be sure that the other rider knows you are there, particularly if you have just pulled up alongside. Don't hesitate to call out, "I'm on your right/left!"



Don't brake late and undercut someone's line. Once someone has started into a corner, you can't come underneath them and push them off their line – this is quite dangerous. In the instance shown to the red-helmeted rider has checked that no-one is beside him and starts to take his line through the corner. But the pink-helmeted rider breaks late pushing him off his line – any crash would be the purple rider's fault.

HAVE FUN

If you ask yourself "why do I do it?" I hope the answer you give is "because it's fun". We're not racing for Olympic selection or the next Discovery Team contract (although I still hold on to my dream of one day opening the batting for Australia), so have a good attitude, be friendly and not agro, and don't become disappointed if you don't do as well as you hoped. Have fun out there!

