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Coach's Wheel - "Basic road race tactics"

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You have decided to try racing or have been at it for a few seasons. Teammates keep saying "we" should ride more as a team. Few people every explain what this means. Racers at an amateur level don't have directors to dictate the team actions. Or, they think of races as too much an individual effort. The call for teamwork is often repeated but rarely planned for. I put together a few basics to get your team started.

Team awareness

Do not chase breakaways that your teammates are in. If your team is represented in the break, you should be blocking or drafting or waiting for your opportunity to bridge.

Your race is not over because you're not in the breakaway. You can have a tremendous impact on creating a successful breakaway acting as a valued teammate. Blocking or disrupting a chase may be more important to a successful break than the strength of riders in the break.

Sit in about a third or fourth place at the front, but do not help push the pace. Chasing riders will have to work around you which takes more energy and slows down the pack. Go to the front and set a modest pace. You can control the speed of the pack by riding at the front of it.

Be polite about your blocking! Don't swerve around the road. Don't make sudden moves. Don't try and maneuver people off the road. No one need get hurt and you may be one of the chasers very soon.

If the breakaway is caught, take advantage of other teams spending their energy and initiate a counterattack.

Look around. Know who is in front and who is behind you. Shelter a teammate behind you, but do not shelter opponents. This comes into play most often in a crosswind. When riding close to the centerline or the side of the road, moving out a foot or two can be of great support to a teammate. But, if an opponent is behind you ride as close to the line as possible. (Often called riding in gutter.)

Talk to your teammates. Ask how they are feeling. Coordinate a break at the next hill or around the next corner. Don't worry about giving away your plan. Execute and let the legs

decide. Split up the workload covering attacks. You do not have to do everything yourself. Those you help today will help you next time.

Being at the front

You need a reason to be on the front. The person breaking the wind is doing 30% more work than those sheltered behind. Good reasons to be out in the wind are; blocking, riding tempo to control the gap to a break your team is not in, attacking, or to keep an attack going, etc.. Do be out there with out a good reason.

You do want to be near the front as this is the safest and most energy efficient place to be. The race is taking place at the front. There is nothing at the back of the pack that you need to be there for. Because of aerodynamics, the person at the back is doing almost the same work at the person breaking the wind.

Being near the front is a learned skill for most. Being in the top 10 or 15 places takes concentration. Basically everyone wants to be at the front so you have to learn how to flow with traffic and keep that sweet spot. The closer you are to the finish the tougher positioning becomes. If you have a good finisher, a few teammates to help keep them near the front and sheltered from the wind increases your chance of success.

Breakaways

First of all you must recognize that most breakaways do not survive. Repeated attempts are often necessary for a break to become established and stay away. Your team needs to be represented in the breakaway, or at least the one that stays away. Again, share the work with teammates. You individually, do not need to be in every breakaway.

Don't be afraid to work in a breakaway. Successful breakaways require a sustained effort, whether solo or with a small group of riders. Work with other teams as long as you are not terribly outnumbered. Success of a breakaway is very tenuous. Working together increases your chances.

Don't work in a breakaway? If you are in a breakaway simply to mark other riders, don't help them. This will almost assure that the breakaway fails.

Bridging

Bridging requires separation! You must get separation from the field before bridging a gap. Bridging from the front of the peleton is very difficult. The acceleration required to separate yourself from a field is more than most riders can accomplish.

Better to try your attack from three to twelve places back. Do this quietly. If you announce your attack with big movements, dramatic efforts, or obvious shifting, others in the field will recognize your attempts and call you out or follow you. Bringing one or two additional riders with you is not necessarily a bad thing. They can help cover the gap. If they do not contribute, do not continue. No free rides!

Look over your shoulder! Be sure you have separation before continuing your effort to bridge. If you cannot gain separation slowdown and let others do the work. Just like getting in a breakaway, bridging often takes multiple attempts to be successful.

Be patient. Breakaways take time to establish themselves. Your opportunity to bridge should come after other teams and individuals have exhausted their efforts, with your team marking. You will learn to sense when the peleton has given up and starts to relax. This is the time to strike.

Don't chase breakaways that are not working together. This may be the most common waste of energy. Look up the road and determine if the breakaway has the right mix of people and is working together well before spending your energy to join a group that will not survive. You may make the judgment that your efforts added to the break would be the missing ingredient for a breakaway to be successful, but this is far less likely.

Team Sport

Bike racing is a unique sport with its team and individual components. A few minutes before the race discussing a strategy goes a long way. If you truly race as a team, you will be able to adapt to changing circumstances on the road and still have successful races.

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