

Group Riding by Alan Mossman



You may have read through the section reports in The Journal and seen an underlying trend about the ride-outs of ‘most made it to the finish’ or ‘it was a success more by luck than judgement’. But it doesn’t need to be like that.

Riding in a group is different from riding on your own and in Thames Vale Advanced Motorcyclists (TVAM), we have developed a Group Riding Skills course to cover the roles of the people that make a group ride successful – the **run leader**, **the marker**, and the **back marker** (often referred to in BMW rides as the tail-end charlie).

If you just come along to one of the advertised runs to enjoy the ride, then you will at some point fall into the middle category – **the marker** – and that is the role we will look at in this first article. Subsequent articles will focus on the run leader and back marker roles.

In TVAM we run this course as a classroom session with PowerPoint presentation, then a practice road session. Not very easy to do in a newsletter, so the following text is taken from the course handout, but modified to take out some of the IAM detail. It’s a bit of a slog to get through, but it’s all important stuff.

Introduction to the course

The course aims are to provide you with the knowledge required to be a confident group rider and the opportunity to practise the various techniques. As a competent and confident marker, a leader or back marker you will be a better group rider.

Why have a Standard Approach to Group Riding?

Group rideouts form an important element in activities and social events, often with large numbers of riders.

A standard approach ensures everyone will:

- reach the destination safely without getting separated or lost.
- have the knowledge to apply existing riding skills to those needed for group riding.

- anticipate what others are likely to do.
- ride with more confidence, knowing what is expected.
- know what to do when things go wrong.

Terminology

In any formation of riders on a group ride and regardless of which marking method is used there are 3 key people who through their teamwork, best endeavours and organization aim to maximize the chances of a safe, incident free, successful and enjoyable ride. They are the Run Leader, Marker and Back Marker. With larger runs of 12 or more bikes, a **Sweeper** is often used.

Run Leader (RL)

The RL has only 2 ‘official’ responsibilities:

- to give a pre-run brief,
- to navigate those following to the destination, using a marking technique.

Marker

RL directs the rider following where to stop and this rider – now known as the Marker – is responsible for clearly indicating the direction for others to follow.

Back Marker (BM)

The BM performs 2 functions:

- Releasing or lifting the Markers to rejoin the group.
- Acting as the RL’s deputy, problem solver, and on-scene commander for any incident.

Sweeper

- will ride behind BM, dropping back slightly when BM is releasing a marker in order to create a safer area for the manoeuvre to be carried out,
- will assist BM with any incident.

Marking Methods

There are 2 methods used to mark the route. Both methods share the common aim of ensuring everyone follows the same route as RL without having comprehensive route details.

Drop-Off method is the default method used where there are a large number of riders and ensures all riders can ride at their own pace. Each rider will, in turn, be placed as a marker by RL to indicate the direction for others to follow, re-joining the group again immediately in front of BM.

Buddy method is ideal for smaller groups who know each others’ riding style. The method depends totally on each rider understanding that they will be responsible for and **lead their ‘Buddy’, who is the rider immediately BEHIND them.**

You should be familiar with both the Drop-Off and Buddy marking methods. RL can use both methods on a single run. The changeover will happen as follows:

From Drop Off to Buddy. The group will stop and form up at a designated point off the highway such as a lay-by or rest stop.

From Buddy to Drop Off. The RL will re-commence placing markers.

Drop-Off Marker method in detail

Everybody will be a Marker, so doing it right is fundamental to the success of the ride. If 1 rider points in the wrong direction the whole ride will go wrong.

As 2nd rider, follow at a spacing of between 2-4 secs and avoid blocking RL's mirrors. He will adjust his pace if the group is too spread out. This is the sequence of events you will follow:

1 **The Warning** Approaching the Drop Point RL will use indicators if required, slow and raise either arm, fingers pointing upwards, elbow bent as if firing a starter's gun. Prepare to stop.

2 **The Drop** RL will drop his hand quickly at the point (left or right) where he has selected a visible position for you to stop. If for any reason it is unsafe, move to a better position if possible.

3 **The Confirmation** RL will give a further CONFIRMATION hand-signal plus indicators for the new course direction.

4 Watch where RL goes, then:

- Cancel your indicators/hazards to avoid confusion.
- Take your time to select neutral and park, particularly if there is a risk of over-balancing. There is no rush and the first priority is to maintain full bike control. Chances are you will have a few bikes behind you when you are dropped and they will see where RL went, so don't panic about marking straight away.
- Position the bike so that you can watch approaching bikes either in your mirrors, or by turning your head. [If there are no other riders, RL will wait with you until more riders arrive before setting off]
- Keep your helmet and gloves on.
- On double yellow lines, stay on your bike to be legal.

5 **Mark the route for others** when settled, mark clearly using the standard hand signals when you see bikes approaching.

Straight on Arm vertical, palm facing forward, not edge on or elbow bent. An arm slanted forward cannot be seen from behind.

Right/Left turn Avoid a bent arm, which may be confused as a poor straight ahead.

Slow down – hazard Normal Highway Code hand signal.

Flag down/stop. A mimic of BM's wave. Get off the bike and face BM. Stand in a safe position you think suitable for BM to stop and talk.

6 **The Release** BM will wave to you to pull away. Acknowledge and be ready to move off crisply only after you positively recognise BM. Top tip: this will happen soon after the previous marker has passed by.

- If for any reason you are unable to pull out in front of BM, wave him past to avoid an accident with following traffic. BM will allow you to re-overtake when it is safe to do so.
- Do not race off and leave BM behind. Keep BM in view until you reach the next marker. There is always the possibility that BM may have a problem and need your help.
- In the event of an incident, BM may delegate the last marker to be a Messenger to notify everyone ahead, including RL, of the situation.

Tips

- Any rider may stop and mark an unmarked junction or spot where he thinks other riders may be uncertain and likely to go the wrong way;

RL will appreciate your initiative.

- Do not confuse other vehicles with your hand signals, especially when you are showing the 'turn right' signal. Bring your hand in and make it obvious you do not intend to pull out.
- Be aware of strangers not belonging to your group. If there is a long gap it is easy to stop concentrating or become distracted.
- If the group is spread out, or there has been an incident you may dismount, but be ready as soon as you recognise the approach of BM.

The Buddy method in detail

Remember – your 'Buddy' is the rider immediately BEHIND you.

The Buddy must signal as soon as he has seen where to go by use of indicators or hand signals. Only then can his 'marker' move off. The process repeats with each rider acting as a 'marker' for his 'Buddy' and stops with the arrival of BM.

- Overtaking is not recommended as it confuses the order and who is responsible for whom.
- The spacing between bikes should be constant and each rider able to see or get frequent glimpses of bikes both behind and in front. A long space between riders is not in itself a problem providing there is no possibility of a rider taking a wrong turn, or there is ambiguity at a junction.

There are specific occasions when the Buddy method should be used even for a large group. It is the most practical method where it would be illegal/dangerous or impractical to place a Marker. Some examples are: motorways, dual carriageways/urban clearways/double yellow lines/complex road schemes or at night.

Tips

EVERYBODY must understand how it affects their riding.

- With a group of more than 10 there is a real risk that unless all riders are of similar style and confident to ride as a coherent pack, those towards the back will become separated.

- If a Buddy fails to appear very soon after turning or taking an exit, go back immediately and wait at the junction just like a marker. Eventually RL will realise all riders behind have stopped and can take appropriate action.
- When riders become separated due to traffic, light signals, junctions etc the riders ahead must slow or wait and allow the group to reform. This may involve pulling in to a lay-by or allowing traffic to pass. If riders chase the bike in front, very soon they will be at risk of riding at dangerously excessive speeds.
- The Buddy method will break down either when riders abandon their Buddy by clinging on to the rider in front, or stop in a position where it is too far or late to be seen.
- Unlike the Drop-Off method where each rider can go at their own pace, a rider who is consistently slower will drag down the whole group, or feel pressured to keep up.
- Done well, the Buddy method allows riders to stay together in a coherent group and navigate with the minimum of delay. It is fit for purpose for night riding but is not for novices.

Group Riding Techniques

In the context of group riding each rider interacts with and affects the riding plans of the rest of the group. Because of the proximity of other riders, **there should be no impetuous or over-zealous manoeuvres and nothing should be left to chance.** The safety margin should be such that a minor error by 1 rider should not escalate into a more serious incident involving other members of the group.

Here are some recommended tips to underpin group riding best practice and techniques:

Tips for you:

- Think and ride for yourself, choose your own lines and corner set up,
- make full use of your mirrors to maintain and maximise all round awareness of Safety, Stability, View – (SSV),
- be able to stop in the distance you can see to be clear – often compromised in a tail chase or along minor roads and lanes,
- ride defensively and dominate your space,
- when riding in convoy maintain your position relative to others,
- obey all posted speed limits – it is your responsibility to ride appropriately in NSLs – the RL sets the route, not the pace,
- maintain a positive attitude, be courteous and tolerant particularly of lesser skilled riders,
- a slower rider should recognize when to allow/invite a faster rider through – especially if it is a stranger,
- a faster rider should show restraint before completing an exemplary manoeuvre – a friendly wave is appreciated and sets the standard.
- poor rider etiquette is to prevent an overtake by full throttle acceleration on a straight, only to balk a following rider who is faster through bends. Let the rider pass but don't get sucked into

cornering beyond your level of skill,

- take pride in riding well – it is infectious. A good yardstick is whether you would be comfortable explaining and justifying your actions if stopped and asked to do so,

Tips for the ride and relating to the group

- If at any time you are uncertain what direction the Marker is indicating, stop and ask,
- by wearing an armband you can identify your group and disregard strangers – check the bike you are following is someone in the group.
- if you are an experienced group rider reassure newcomers and help make them welcome.
- at small open roundabouts or mini roundabouts, proceed straight on unless there is marker; at Y junctions and where roads leave on a bend, follow the main carriageway unless there is a marker,
- you may also be placed as a marker to give prior warning of a special hazard,
- if you are not enjoying the ride, or are riding outside your comfort zone, or conditions are too demanding, have the courage to leave the group,
- talk to the RL or BM if you have a ‘concern’ about somebody else’s riding,
- when last bike keep BM in view, as if using the buddy method,
- if you need to leave the group early, tell RL/BM and hand over your armband,
- stop and inform a marker if you know there will be a long wait before the next bike,
- always carry enough information – route, map, satnav – to find your way to the destination in case the marking system breaks down and have the mobile numbers for texting RL/BM.
- it is wise to have bike breakdown cover – the BM is not a breakdown service!

Spacing

- The basic spacing is staggered offset 3–4 secs behind the bike immediately in front,
- in urban riding and heavy traffic, close up to minimise disruption to other road users,
- move into line astern with a longer gap at higher speeds and before taking bends,
- at Stop/Give way lines, stop in pairs 2 abreast to keep the group compact and avoid a long single queue; but allow a clear view and room to wobble!
- go quickly, in the order of stopping,
- leapfrog in turn when filtering and the gap is large enough for 2 bikes; consider making a gap for the following bike.

Common causes for loss of confidence and performance:

It is important to feel comfortable and relaxed. The moment a rider becomes tense or worried, bike control is immediately affected and can lead to a downward spiral – notably failure to make

progress; anxiety when no other riders are to be seen; over cautious and missing overtake opportunities.

Some common issues are:

- the feeling everybody is better than you are,
- nervous/anxious about making mistakes in front of other riders,
- worried that you can't keep up and make everybody wait,
- feeling pressured to keep up and riding beyond your capabilities and outside comfort zone,
- loss of concentration due to boredom, frustration, fatigue, dehydration,
- compromising stopping distance by riding too fast and close for the conditions,
- poor use of mirrors and unsettled by a surprise or aggressive overtake,
- beware 'target fixation' and over reliance on the bike ahead to take the correct course and speed – you go where you look!

Finally, some Dos & Don't s

- Don't ride if you are not feeling well, tired or taking medication.
- Don't be late or keep people waiting while you get into your bike gear.
- Don't ride with a group beyond your capability.
- Don't hang on to the bike in front for fear of becoming lost.
- Do listen to the RL's brief and note all of run details.
- Do start the run with a **full tank of petrol and empty bladder.**
- Do keep a sense of humour.

Marking FAQs

I've never used the Marking System before and am very nervous about getting it wrong. What should I do? *Make sure you stay at the back of the run when it sets off. That way you can watch and see how it works and gain some confidence.*

I marked the way quite clearly but one of our group still went the wrong way. What should I do? *Continue to mark but get off your bike and flag down BM (you could topple-over turning round to talk), explain the situation and await instructions. They will set off to find the "lost" rider. Unless told to do otherwise, make sure you stay where you are until the BM returns.*

I am third bike in the run and I saw the RL put down a Marker. However, the Marker didn't stop. What should I do? *It is imperative that you take the Marker's position and direct the run, otherwise the run will break down. Let the RL know at the next stop that you had to step in.*

I took the turning the Marker indicated, but have come to a junction and can't see another Marker. What should I do? *You have gone the wrong way. Turn around and go back to where you saw the*

last Marker. Keep a lookout for the BM, who may be trying to find you, and let them know you are back on route by giving them a wave if safe to do so. If you think they haven't seen you, carry on to the Marker, pull in safely behind and wait for the BM to come back.

I'm running out of fuel and am getting really worried I'm not going to make it to the planned petrol stop. What should I do? Find a safe place to stop behind the next Marker. Get off your bike and out of the way of the Marker, so that other riders can still clearly see them. Wait for the BM to come along and let them know that you will be stopping at the next petrol station. You can then carry on and get fuel without risk of the BM not seeing you and leaving you behind.

I urgently need to stop. What should I do? Find a safe place to stop THAT IS NOT NEAR A JUNCTION and STOP. Face back the way you have come and look out for the BM. Wave them down so they stay with you until you are happy to carry on with the run.

*I've been marking for over an hour and am getting really worried that the Back Marker has missed me. What should I do? Stay where you are. The BM is probably dealing with an incident and is delayed. Check your phone for messages. Text either the RL or BM to find out what is happening. **DO NOT LEAVE YOUR POSITION AND RIDE OFF.** If you do, you will break up the Run when it finally gets going again.*

*I see the RL parked on the side of the road near a junction. What should I do? Pull in behind, but leave room for him to see in his mirrors.
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End.