



Introduction to Bike Racing Tactics

By Paul Wilkinson

The history books teach us that bike racing was founded upon and built around speed and brute strength but also stealth and intelligence. Although power and fortitude are prerequisites for the champion racer, they offer no guarantee of success. If not allied to equal measure of guile and craft they are, ultimately, worthless. Cycling history is littered with extremely talented cyclists who have failed to heed this rudimentary lesson. In cycling, the trick isn't to give as much as you can. It is, as any decent racer will confirm, to do just enough. Procycling, April, 2011

With this in mind we contacted several of the PCC's most experienced and intelligent bike racers to ask them for their favourite bike race tactics. In no particular order and with redundancies left in, here's what they had to say. We hope there's something in there that can help you improve your racing.

1. (If you are just learning) choose a mentor every ride. The goal here is to closely watch a more experienced rider. Try to figure out why she/he is attacking, resting, not working... whatever. A good rider never makes a move without thinking about why they are doing it. They try to never waste a pedal stroke, which is why they go so damn fast when they choose to. Don't just sit on the person's wheel but observe and analyze.
2. Think about a goal before the ride. Actually think about something to achieve rather than just hang on as long as possible and trying to sprint. Could be to bridge to a group at least once. Could be to lead over a particular climb. Could be to ride experiment with effort/recovery cycles. Whatever, just decide on a skill to work on.
3. Strengthen your weaknesses. Do you always get dropped in the same situations? Maybe a crosswind or the top of a climb? Try a different tactic, ask around for advice or try to train that weakness. Every rider has a weakness. The key is to figure out what yours is and improve on it.
4. If you see a break up the road, try to get to it without taking too many people with you.
5. Attack immediately after a break has been chased down.
6. Share the work if the group has an organized pace line to chase a break, if you can't pull through stay out of the pace line until you can.
7. One thing most newbies do is chase everything. Don't chase everything!

8. Bridging is far better than chasing. Decide how far away you are comfortable letting someone get away, then launch off the front and bridge up, don't tow the entire group up to the break.
9. After 'something' gets caught, counter attack right away. Right away!
10. If you see a gap open in front of you, CLOSE IT (if you can).
11. Try stuff and learn from it. If you do the exact same moves week after week, everyone will expect it and it'll be less likely to work. At the same time, try to read other peoples' predictable behaviour.
12. Know thyself, know thy enemy.
13. When chasing back on, do not stop chasing at the back of the group – you will not recover if the group lines out. Go past the back and into the fray so that you can recover in the group with a buffer.
14. Stop caring whether you finish Thursday night with the front group. ATTACK ATTACK ATTACK. You must remember that if you are hurting, so is everybody else.
15. Use the momentum of the group to attack from the front. Attacking from the rear of a group means that you first have to get past the front, thus reducing the amount of distance you can put between you and the group when at A.T.
16. Know and understand the difference between bridging and chasing.
17. If you're getting dropped on climbs, move to the front early on the climb. It's better to drop to the back of the group than it is to be dropped from the group.
18. Be aggressive.
19. Don't be afraid to attack, especially in those moments when the group has just done a hard effort and everyone is slowing down. That's when everyone is at their limit.
20. If you want to ride faster you have to push yourself. Every day is a training day.
21. Sometimes in sports, trying to be super smart all the time is stupid. If you take the time to think about everything, you'll miss everything. Success comes when you just follow your instincts.
22. All this leads to my most valuable piece of advice: DON'T SIT ON ME ALL NIGHT! Watch me, follow me, pull with me, attack me, but don't sit on me. If you do, the only thing that you're accomplishing is ensuring that neither of us goes anywhere. That's boring and helps nobody.
23. Short and Sharp: Bridging not sitting in the middle. If you are going to get across it has to be short and sharp. Get past the group with no one on your wheel and get across to the break as quick as possible.
24. Work: Once in said break you have about two pulls to sit out before you need to get working. Even if you are gassed you need to keep at it and commit yourself.
25. Commit: If you are going to attack – do it to succeed, or get back in the group. Especially near the end of the ride. If you are going to try to stay away in a break one or two km from the finish you shouldn't have anything left to sprint if the group catches you. If you are in a break, do everything you can to make it succeed.
26. Watch: Try to read the group to see what is happening before it happens. Is there a sprint coming up? Is someone starting to wind it up from the back? Understand what is going to happen before it does.

27. Objective: What are your goals for the race? Sometimes I just want to get a workout, sometimes I want to win. Try to figure out your own objectives – and also what other peoples are.
28. If you are ready to attack and think you are going to be marked, try and wait until that person is blocked out by other riders and go then.
29. Often, attacking just close to the top of a climb is best.
30. Even if you think you are not a sprinter, you must be. Maybe you can't win from a bunch, but what if you're in a small breakaway...
31. Once you reach a certain level of fitness and strength, it's easy to finish, say, sixth. But to win, that will almost always require a very painful experience. If you've never done it, it's more than you think. But once you've done it, it still hurts but the mental part is better.
32. Remember that sometimes it's not what you know it's who you know. Being well liked in the group can be useful. You might get let into an important position. You might get a nice lead out. You might not get chased as hard. So, be nice, be respectful and make friends.
33. And lastly, be sharp and be ready. I don't care how strong and smart you may be, there's ALWAYS someone around the corner who's gonna beat you.

Thanks to Tim, Doug, Kieran, Chloe, Carmen, Phil and Mark.