

CHAIN GANG TIPS

THROUGH AND OFF

This is the method which is most commonly practiced 'chaingang' rides. Usually involving at least 5 individuals, it works by creating a constantly rotating 'chain' of riders, sharing the wind workload and the shelter provided by the other riders. It is fast moving and relatively intensive, but the speed is higher in return for a greater input of energy than other methods.

How it Works:

The lead rider brings the group up to speed with all riders following. Once a 'race' speed has been reached, the lead rider gently pulls over and eases off the pedals, allowing the following rider to 'tap' through at the same speed, to begin the rotating of the chain. As the 2nd rider passes the first, he also peels over and eases off so that the third rider can come through and so on. This rotation creates 2 lines of riders, one moving towards the front, the other (relatively) towards the back. When a rider reaches the back of the rotating chain, they must make a small adjustment in speed while moving over to join the back of the forward moving paceline of riders. Speed should be consistent and changes smooth within the chain, and riders peeling off at the front should do so in a manner that will place their rear wheel just ahead of the front wheel of the rider who peeled off beforehand.

In the U.K., this method is generally practiced in an anti-clockwise direction - i.e. the forward moving line on the right, while the line of riders who have eased off or 'soft-tapped' is on the left (inside). This is because traffic drives on the left and overtakes on the right in the U.K.

Common problems in Through and Off:

- Failing to 'Soft Tap' after peeling over, requiring the overtaking rider to accelerate to pass. This means the next rider has to go faster still and so on, causing an acceleration down the line until the chain 'breaks down'
- Accelerating when the 'wheel' you are on peels, thereby opening a gap and causing a chain-reaction of acceleration down the line. This can be dangerous as well as inefficient, since riders who sprint to close a gap which has opened may 'overcook' their effort and run into the rider in front of them
- Riders missing turns and no other rider filling the gap. This results in the chain 'breaking', whereupon the last rider is not passed by another and the rider preceding him must then pass again to try and restart the chain
- Riders generally riding too hard or erratically within the chain, disrupting consistent speed and smooth changes
- Failure to observe traffic lights and roundabouts and other road rules on chaingang rides

As all the above result in a breakdown of the chain and a disruption of the cohesion of the group, it is no surprise that riders will get discouraged and 'sit in' rather than taking part in the chain. It needs to be remembered that the chaingang is only a training ride and there are no prizes, so it should not be treated as an exercise in riding others 'off your wheel', but as a practice in riding in an organised pattern, so that it becomes second nature during a race, leaving a rider to give some attention to tactics to try and win. It should also be remembered that a training ride tends to attract a very wide range of riders in terms of experience and ability - which more capable riders should consider when deciding on the intensity of their efforts - whereas a race tends to create a natural selection in which riders of more equal ability will tend to be in a breakaway. In a race too, the same rules apply in terms of consistency of speed and smooth changes between riders in order to keep the chain cohesive and efficient.

BIT AND BIT

This is the method used when the number of riders is small - usually 4 or less, where Through and Off would waste too much energy as the riders would be finding themselves on the front again before they had recovered from the previous effort.

How it Works:

The riders follow the leader in single file for a short period of time, determined by the lead rider who then will flick his elbow to signal the next rider, before peeling off and 'soft tapping' to the back of the line. The next rider will then 'tap' through at the same speed as his predecessor and stay in the lead for approximately the same amount of time before flicking his elbow and peeling over. This 'paceline' method can be observed in 'Team Time Trials' on major stage races, where teams race against the clock as a unit. The method allows a longer rest between turns on the front, thereby using the riders energy more effectively and reducing the wasted energy which would be incurred by the constant changes in position in Through and Off (from the backward moving line into the forward moving, and vice versa).

Although this method tends not to generate as high a speed as Through and Off, it allows the riders to keep a high speed for a longer period. A group of four or even 3 might resort to Through and Off to raise the speed if near to the finish with chasers close behind. The Bit and Bit method can also be observed during for instance, a stage race when one or more teams are setting 'Tempo' on the front of the bunch in order to keep a breakaway from establishing too large a gap.

Common problems in Bit and Bit:

- Accelerating past the leading rider instead of 'tapping' through at the same speed while the previous leader peels off and decelerates slightly. This usually creates a surge down the line, resulting in the former pacesetter struggling to 'jump' on the back of the line to pick up the pace again
- Overtaking before the leading rider has signalled and/or peeled off, resulting in the rest of the group having to 'ride around' the first rider to follow the new leader through. This often results in riders missing their turns

- Stronger riders driving too hard on the front resulting in the other riders struggling to maintain the pace when it is their turn and/or missing turns