

## Group Riding, Beyond the Basics and Common Sense- Steve Warmath



Group riding is a great experience when common sense, respect for other riders and safety prevail. Riders who choose to ride in a group must do just that, **ride with the group**. As in the military, formation is mandatory. The first two recommendations I have for you, even if you are a seasoned group rider, are to first go to the Tallahassee Hog website under “Activities” and read the “Best & Common Practices” article as a source for the basic rider information. Second, attend both the Group Riding **and** the Road Captain Training held every year, generally around March/ April. Even if you have no desire to be a Road Captain, go to this training anyway as there is a more of an in-depth presentation on the dynamics of group riding with an emphasis on safety. I’m not going to re-hash what you can read for yourself. I want to share with you some of the more “not so obvious” things to think about riding with a group and why they may be important to your safety and sanity.

**Personal Safety-** You are responsible for your own safety. This starts before you leave the house with your physical condition, as well as the mechanical condition of your ride. Both should be in top form. You’ve heard about the “safety-in-numbers” mentality associated with group riding? Well that really refers to “visibility”. This should not be a substitute for blindly following what is happening around you. **Life lesson #1:** When the person ahead of you pulls away from a stop sign, **do not** assume the coast is clear for **you** to go. Stop and look for yourself. Your life may depend on it. This is also true for passing. **Life lesson #2:** When that person does pull out ahead of you, make sure he keeps on going. Let’s say he changes his mind for whatever reason, you’re looking over your left shoulder, decide its ok to roll and the next thing you realize is your front fender is up the rear end of that bike in front of you who decided not to go after all. Ouch.....

**Hand Signals-** “Even if you don’t know what it means, pass it back.” I don’t like this mindset so much although if you don’t know what it means, it is best to do so, and I’m not talking about the “We’re #1” finger salute. I think if you want to ride in a group, you should be able to communicate with hand signals. If you don’t know hand signals, learn them. **Life lesson #3:** Hazardous debris in the road can be very dangerous. If you see a potential hazard in the road and the riders in front of you did not point it out, go ahead and let those behind you know something is coming. It’s ok to do that.

**The Slinky Syndrome-** If you really want to tick off those riding behind you, don’t ride at a constant speed while cruising. If several people speed up and slow down the group can really get spread out and that is not good. It can invite a “cager” to join the ride within the group, also not good. It can take away some of the enjoyment of the ride. The Gunner will also be put way back in the pack. As I stated earlier, formation is mandatory. **Life lesson #4-** If you are new to group riding and are uncomfortable with the 1 second- 2 second staggered formation and want a little extra room, ok, lay back a little. A quarter mile is not acceptable and at least stay at the same speed as the group if you can.

**Don’t Second Guess the Road Captain-** Everyone who is a Road Captain at one time leads their first ride. However, most of the time on a Group Ride, you are being led by an experienced, seasoned Road Captain. There is a pretty good chance he knows where he is going and what he is doing. **Don’t second guess the Road Captain.** Two examples of how this can create problems and unsafe conditions: A Group ride departed the dealership heading south on busy Capital Circle. Less than a mile down the road the Road Captain turned into the Home Depot parking lot. WTF? A number of riders continued on not knowing what to do and ended up going further down the road only to do a U-turn and left turn into heavy traffic to get back to the group. It turns out the Road Captain had lost hydraulics and had very little braking available and needed to get off the road. A new Road Captain was assigned and the Group continued on without incident. Next example- The Road Captain was on one those back country rides when the rider, fourth from the back, decided the Road Captain didn’t know where he was going and pulled off the side of the road and took the two bikes behind him and the Gunner with him. This person ended up going a different route while the others had to catch up to the rest of the group. If a navigation mistake is made, and they do happen occasionally, continue with the group until the error can be corrected **safely**.

**Where’s the Gunner?-** Road Captains understand the duties of the Gunner in a group ride, but what happens when the **Gunner** himself has a problem and has to drop out and he has no radio? There is no forward passing hand signal I know of that means “**Help, I have to drop out**”. I imagine it’s like watching your cruise ship sail away after falling overboard. We brief riders that if the gunner drops out and stays behind they are to assist another rider and the last person in the group becomes the new Gunner. OK, so far. The question now becomes, will the person riding ahead of the designated

Gunner have the presence of mind to recognize that he is now the Gunner and should fall back to render assistance if possible to the original Gunner? If so, then there would be **another** rider having to take on gunner responsibilities (that's 3 so far). Hmmm.....How often do you look in your rear view mirrors? If you are riding in the back of the pack, keep an eye on the gunner and make sure he is still with you.

**Blocking-** This is a bit of a mystery for some and if poorly executed can put riders at risk. This normally is used on multilane roads for changing lanes. If there is no interfering traffic and the Road Captain needs to change lanes, he simply signals, moves over and everyone follows in formation. Simple stuff. Now, where there is the potential for traffic to get tangled up within the group during a lane change, he will give a hand signal to be passed back to the gunner (**the intended recipient**).

All this means is that the Road Captain is asking the Gunner to make the lane change first when safe to do so and “block” the lane so no cagers can slip into the group. Once the RC sees the lane is blocked he will again signal for a lane change and the group is to **follow the Road Captain, not the gunner**. There are separate hand signals for a block left and a block right. I'm tapping my foot, so remember this one.

**Trikes and Sidecars-** OK, I'm going to say it because I am one.....The chapter has no formal policy on where these vehicles belong in a group. The rider safety course used in group riding training and other manuals I have seen simply state that generally, they should ride in the center track and you give them a 2 second interval. That's it. Most of the trike riders in our chapter and others I have talked to prefer riding in the back of the pack for several reasons, better stopping power (4 disk brakes, heavy and lots of rubber on the road), more stable in the corners and on poor road conditions. If one does ride inside the group and you prefer not to ride close to one, just pick another position.

**Getting Separated-** It will happen. Don't panic. Getting away from the departure point will probably include traffic lights. Timing does not always work out for everyone to get through. The Road Captain will keep an eye out for this and if there is a gunner or someone in the back with a radio, they can let him know the status of those caught at the light and when they are back with the group. The Road Captain will typically set a slower pace and allow for the stragglers to catch up even if cars get stuck in between. This will usually be a temporary condition and all will be together again. Road Captains, during training, are reminded when coming to a stop sign, to use this as a waiting point for the rest of the group to come together again before taking off. This is even more important if the group is really stretched out. The RC will then proceed at ~35mph until the group is reformed and on the way again. If the group gets separated out in the boonies, they can get lost if they don't fully understand the route. Again, **group riding is about riding in a group**. Stay together.



Group riding can be a rewarding, pleasant experience where we meet new friends and discover new places. It also is dependent upon those riding in the group to understand how to ride together, communicate and ride safely. If done poorly, it can diminish the experience and add undue stress to what should be an enjoyable ride. Use common sense and do your part to contribute to that end. These tidbits are offered to stimulate your thinking and use of common sense while riding with a group. If you have any suggestions for Road Captains or general safety issues associated with group riding, please send them to Wes, Joe or me.

**The message from HOG National is “Ride and have fun.”**

“Be careful out there....it's a jungle.” *Steve*