

## **The Dynamics of Group Riding** **by Erv Granahan**

Recently I learned that a Chapter member had been told by an older member that I had a group of people that I preferred to ride with (or a 'clique' in their words). At first I denied and resented this comment. But after considerable reflection on the subject I realized this is true and **that it should not be a negative connotation**. Let me explain why.

First of all, there are many different styles of riding. Some ride in a more relaxed style, others ride more aggressively, still others choose not to ride with a group. I would say I ride fairly aggressively, normally pushing the speed limit, attacking the twisties (Mike Hudnell said I should say that I was increasing my skills instead of attacking as it would be more politically correct, but then when have I been politically correct) and riding fairly long distances without stopping for a break. Some Chapter members ride in a similar style while others prefer a slower pace and stopping more often.

John Baller and I have ridden thousands of miles together. One of the reasons I enjoy riding with John so much is that our riding styles are almost perfectly matched. It is like we are always on the same wave length. It made no difference whether John or I was leading, the other is right behind taking the same line through the corner, at the same speed. In addition, our traveling styles are similar. We were always ready to go at the prescribed time, were ready for a break about the same time and we both liked the same kind of roads, etc, etc. On our recent ride to Branson (and back) Mike Hudnell pushed my limits several times and gave me tips on how to improve my cornering skills and try different techniques which enabled me to keep up with him (well, he let me think I was keeping up... sometimes). And when I started to tense up and feel uncomfortable, I would back off and ride my own pace. Mike would call me on the CB and want to know what happened to me; I would reply that I had slowed down and that "I was smelling the roses".

So why am I telling you all this?? The point I want to make is this; everyone is a little different (we should all know this) and we all ride a little differently. When you are traveling in groups, the challenge is to find someone that has a riding style similar to yours so you are comfortable riding together. Not only do you need to trust and feel comfortable riding with them, but if you are going on a long ride (for just a weekend or for several days) you need to enjoy spending time with them and be compatible (maybe even staying in the same motel room if you are trying to control costs). Again, I will cite traveling with John as an example. When we pulled into the motel at the end of the day and got a room, we would take a half hour or more to freshen up and maybe rest a bit. Then we would head to a restaurant to eat and have a beer or two. After dinner, we would usually walk back to the motel, find a nice spot outside and have a couple more

beers while discussing everything from soup to nuts, then turn in. We had some great discussions, solved some of the world's problems and thoroughly enjoyed the other's viewpoints (although we never could agree on the other's political views but we always respected each other's opinion).

The point is this, we are all different, and to enjoy riding together on longer rides, we need to find someone that has a similar riding style and whose company we enjoy. Otherwise, tension builds, tempers flair and you do not have a good time!

While we are on the subject of riding, what about Chapter or shorter group rides? So what happens when we have a Chapter ride and a more aggressive rider is leading the ride. Well, first of all, it is responsibility of the ride leader not to ride beyond the ability of anyone in the group. And I think all of us try to do that, but sometimes we just don't remember that one (or more) of the riders in our group is uncomfortable riding as fast or aggressively as the pace we may have set. If this happens, the person that is the slower rider should speak up (preferably at the next break but it can be sooner if you are really having a problem) and tell the leader that they are uncomfortable with the pace. The ride leader should then slow the pace down. If you need a break, ask the ride leader for a break; sometimes the ride leader is preoccupied with leading the group and he (or she) doesn't think about taking a break. The other alternative is for the person to advise the ride leader that he/she is dropping out of the group and will follow along behind at their own pace. If you do that, understand you are out of the group; they (the group) are not responsible for looking out for you, you are on your own. By the way my back seat driver, Phyllis, is really good at reminding me that I may have someone in the group that is not keeping up with the pace and that I need to slow down!

On the other hand, I will use the Crater Lake Ride, as an example of a group ride where everyone rode their own ride and had fun. At Shaniko, Oregon, we took a detour out through the canyons and coulees to Condon then back to Biggs. This took us through some pretty twisty roads. Phyllis and I were in the lead and I started to attack the road, riding pretty hard. Soon we were ahead of the rest of the riders and I slowed down. Then I heard Greg Bash tell Kerry to go ahead and not worry about him. The next thing I knew, here comes Kerry blasting through the corners on her Valkyrie. She was using the experience to practice improving her cornering techniques (by following my lines) and was having a blast. She did an excellent job keeping up with Phyllis and me while the others fell back and rode at a more relaxed rate. Now I am sure Kerry was a little tense while doing this but she was challenging herself, learning and having fun. When the road straightened out, the rest of the group caught up with us and we rode together once again. Another variation is what Dave and Bev Wells (former Chapter D Members) used to do. When an interesting piece of road would appear they would advise that they were going to do some "advance scouting" and ride ahead of the group so they could ride more aggressively through the challenging section of road then join up with the group later when the road straightened out.

These are good examples of everyone riding their own ride and enjoying themselves. Hank Smith has told me the difference between us (he and I) is that I ride to challenge the road while he prefers to ride at a slower pace and enjoy the scenery (or “smell the roses”) and that is okay (and we have traveled thousands of great miles together). Hank just falls back many times while we ride more aggressively through the corners. Funny, how we always end up at the same place at the same time, at lunch, potty stop or at the end of the

day! This philosophy works fine when you are riding secondary roads without much traffic.

If you are riding on the freeway with heavy traffic (or a secondary road with heavy traffic) another set of rules apply. In this type of situation, the group needs to stay close together and flow with the traffic. If you have someone in the group that leaves a big space between them and the rider ahead, that invites other traffic (cars and trucks) to cut into the middle of the group, splitting you up. Sometimes, just allowing a minor gap to develop will encourage them to cut in and someone in the group has to take evasive action to keep from being hit (and if you have ridden with a group at all, you have seen this happen). Another instance of requiring a close formation is when you are trying to make a certain exit and you need to move into the exit lane in heavy traffic. Usually the ride leader will ask the group to “tighten it up” so we can fit into a gap in traffic to make our exit. This allows the group to move as one and is safer than everyone trying to find their own way to the exit.

If a member of the group does not feel comfortable riding in close formation under these conditions, then they should excuse themselves from the group at the first opportunity and “ride their own ride”. That way they are not putting themselves at risk of riding beyond their comfort level nor are they putting the group at risk by creating conditions that encourage cars and trucks to cut into the group. I have known some riders that choose not to ride in the group but follow along behind the group at a distance so they can still hear the CB transmissions.

Finally, don't feel that you must stay with the group and ride the way they do. If you are really uncomfortable, you need to do something about it. If the ride leader is exceeding the speed limit (excessively) suggest they slow down, or if you feel that they are putting the group in an unsafe position, make a suggestion for a safer position. If they don't respond properly, take the first opportunity (keep it safe) and disengage from the group. If you are being challenged, try to learn from it but if you are really freaking out, get out. There is no shame in not wanting to ride in an unsafe condition for you! After all, we really do want you around for tomorrow! Some riders may be willing to assume a higher degree of risk or are more skilled riders than you, so what may be uncomfortable for you, may be an every day occurrence for them and perfectly acceptable (as long as they ride

safely). The important thing is that you should be comfortable and safe. For more information on group riding check out the GWRRA Team (or Group) Riding Manual which addresses congested traffic, passing, group size and more. Remember, in Chapter rides everyone is welcome but they need to accept the dynamics of the group they are riding with.

So, if you are not comfortable riding with someone, don't! Ride with different people in the Chapter and you will surely find someone with similar riding preferences as yours. If you watch riders from other Chapters (along with ours) you will notice some people

always ride together because they ride similarly and enjoy each other's company. This article is not meant to discourage anyone from riding in a group or with the Chapter.

What I intended to do is explain the dynamics of a group ride as I know it and in doing so, help each and all of you find others in the Chapter with a similar riding style as yours. By riding in a group I have found that I have increased my riding skills tremendously, that I enjoy riding more and that I enjoy the great camaraderie of the people I am riding with. If you are not comfortable with your skills, talk to a rider whose skills you respect and ask them for help. Or enroll in an ARC or ERC class to sharpen your skills. These activities can improve your skills immensely; I know because I have used them all and I am a more skilled rider as a result. Each time I take an ERC or ARC class I learn a new skill or improve a skill in which I have grown rusty. As I grow older, my reaction times increase, my eye sight has diminished and I am likely not as strong as I used to be. What I have done to offset these declining physical abilities is to improve my riding skills.

I had this all written and sent it on the Mike Hudnell and John Baller for their comments before publishing. Mike made a comment that got me thinking some more so here is another paragraph based on his comments. Mike indicated that he had a revelation the other day as he was working out with an instructor who has been a black belt for over 40 years. He is a Master Karate instructor! Those who have been riding most of their lives, who have actively sought out additional instruction and have ridden with skilled riders over the years, usually, have advanced riding skills. They tend to ride consistently with the skills they have acquired. I used to admire Bill Posey's way of riding and loved to ride in the second position behind him. I used that experience to improve my riding skills. I always thought that the day I could keep up with him would be the day I had reached the pinnacle of riding skills. I think that I could keep up with Bill now but I can't ride like Mike Hudnell, so now I have a new mentor. I would call Mike a Master Rider (not in the sense of the Master Tour Rider in the levels program; that is a whole different story). So look around, find someone you like to ride with and then form your own "riding clique"! Or challenge yourself and ride with a group of experienced riders, watch them, follow their lines, talk to them, ask them to help you and then practice, practice, practice honing

your skills. Take an ERC or ARC course (the Chapter will assist you with the cost of these courses). The better rider you become the more you will enjoy riding.