

## Sidetracked

# PACK MENTALITY: Group Riding

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**Pack mentality** (n.) The tendency for a group of individuals to act together without planned direction.

**H**umans, like many of our four-legged fellow inhabitants of planet Earth, are social animals. We tend to mimic the behavior of those around us. Alone, your pet malamute may be mild-mannered and cuddly. But take him to doggie day care and it could be another story. Pack mentality is that unfortunate tendency of people in groups to do things they would not likely do alone.

“Bill, why don’t you join them?” Dave asks as we watch some 200 riders gear up, most on sportbikes. Engines rev to the limiters, and bikes squirt around the parking lot like a dropped box of marbles. The new motorcycle dealership has invited several clubs to join the festivities during its grand opening. Dave is an old hand at sales but new to motorcycling. I am here to help with the opening.

“I’m not sure you’ve got enough cash in your wallet to get me out there in the middle of that,” I comment as a steady stream of motorcycles pours out onto the street.

“Really?” Dave says, surprised that I am hesitant. “Why not?”

“Too much risk,” I reply. “There are a lot of amped-up and inexperienced riders in that group, and there is no organization.”

Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate the benefits of a good group ride as much as the next guy, and I like high performance machines. But we must use caution when we engage in group rides that place safety low on the priority list. Riding slowly and blocking traffic, leaving no space for other motorists to pass, or blasting down the freeway at speeds much faster than ambient traffic can cause both irritation and accidents, especially when other highway users become aggressive in response to such behavior.

New riders are especially vulnerable to practices that on the surface seem exciting but hold dire consequences for the slightest error. There are conflicting messages about where within the group beginners should ride. While one suggests they be placed behind the leader, another says they should be in the middle, where other riders can “keep an eye on them.” Yet another advises beginners to ride at the back and cites an easy exit as justification. Perhaps a larger question is whether beginners should ride in a group at all. It isn’t a popular position because of the allure of joining the fun, but group dynamics demand significantly more attention from a rider than when riding solo or with one or two trusted friends. Packs surge unpredictably in



the ebb and flow of traffic, and an inexperienced rider can easily be caught unaware and forced to engage skills not yet perfected. Stress levels are high enough without piling on demands such as maintaining relative lane position, remembering hand signals (also not always universal), or keeping up.

Good council suggests that larger groups break up into several smaller ones, not to exceed a dozen or so riders, and only include riders whose skills have solidified to the point where this can be done with some confidence. All riders should be aware and have a plan to exit or deal with a ride they feel is unsafe. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) Quick Tips on group riding is a great source of sound advice.

A well organized group will meet before the ride to set standards, explain signals, and warn riders to allow a time and space margin. Watch for danger signs, decide what kind of group you are joining, and leave or reposition yourself when red flags pop up.

Today’s ride is the perfect example of the energy generated and risk involved when pack mentality gets out of hand. Dave and I stand waiting with hot dogs and soft drinks as the first few riders roll in. “How was your ride?” Dave asks as they dismount.

“You didn’t hear? There were two crashes. A driver brake-checked one of our riders as soon as we hit the highway. I guess he thought we were riding too close. Later, one of the girls ran off the road to miss the rider ahead. They’ll be okay, but both were pretty scraped up. Rob’s bike is totally trashed.”

Dave glances my way. “You don’t need to say a word,” he says. “I get it now.” **RR**