

Tuesday, June 24, 2008 6:37:05 AM PT

by Josh Horowitz

You could fill a library with all the rules in the unwritten book of cycling etiquette. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that bike racers don't hit their prime until their mid 30's. It takes that long to learn all the rules before you can really concentrate on riding strong! With the summer months and group rides aplenty, it's time to take a scientifically-proven but tongue-in-cheek look at looking good on the bike...

Billy Crystal and his alter ego Fernando Llamas said it best when he mugged, "It is better to look good than to feel good, dah-ling." The cyclist's version goes something like, "It is better to look good than to ride good." We can't all be world champions or even win the sprint on the local club ride, but at least we can look cool going off the back.

Although I couldn't possibly sum up every unwritten rule of cycling etiquette in just one article, below are the 13 most important rules to remember. Some will actually improve your riding, others will simply make you look good and the rest are just down right snobbish.

Helmets. Face it, helmets just aren't cool. Nothing looks more pro than the tour rider cruising down the boulevard wearing nothing but a broken-in cycling cap. However, concussions and drooling out the side of your mouth are really lame, so wear your helmet. But for heaven's sake, take it off when you walk into the coffee shop! Are you afraid of slipping and hitting your head on the counter? When worn, the helmet should be tilted as far forward on your head as possible and never at an angle. Cockeyed helmets are a sure sign of an amateur.

To look cool, take off the helmet and slip on your cycling cap the moment you arrive at your destination. To look Euro-cool, make sure to always wear your sunglasses on the *outside* of your helmet straps so the television cameras can see the brand logo on the ear pieces. And please, no neon coloured helmets! White is the only acceptable helmet colour.

Legs. We've all been asked a million times, *why do cyclists shave their legs?* Our answers range from aerodynamics to massage to wound care. But we all know the real reason. It makes us look smooth (in more way than one)! So whip out the shaving cream and the Bic and mow the lawn.

For the ultimate in cool, roll up the cuffs of your shorts for that extra 1/4 inch of tanning space. To look Euro-cool, always wear a pair of the ultra-cool Pez cycling socks. And please, no gym socks!

The Kit. Your jersey must match your shorts, which must match your arm warmers, which must match your socks. But under no circumstances should a replica pro team kit or a national/world champion kit be worn unless you've earned it. The only acceptable team kit is your own club kit. Retro wool kits are sometimes acceptable, but even that is iffy.

To look cool if you don't belong to a club or a team, wear a stock Castelli or Assos kit but don't mix and match. To be Euro-cool, wear the kit of an obscure European amateur team, but only if you have a story about how you spent the winter riding with them in Majorca to go along with it. Please, no century jerseys (I'm going to take some heat on that one), nothing with cartoon characters on it and never, under any circumstances, go jersey-less. Especially if you are wearing bibs.

* And a special note for women. As much as the guys on the group ride might like it, a jog-bra is not an acceptable substitute for a jersey. Wear the bra, but please throw a jersey on over it. It's hot. You're hot. But shorts and a jog-bra is just not.

iPods. I should say MP3 players, but let's face it, an iPod is the only cool on-board music system. Of course legally, I have to recommend against wearing headphones out on the road, but since you're going to do it anyway, here are a few guidelines. Never wear headphones on a group ride. Headphones on a group ride say two things. 1) *You people are good enough to ride with, but not good enough to talk to or even listen to* and 2) *I'm not concerned with my own safety and I'm even less concerned with YOUR safety.* There's no faster way to become disliked by a group of cyclist than by showing up on a group ride with headphones, even if the music is off.

To look cool, remember that the smaller the headphone, the better. No 1985 walkman ear muff headphones please. Ear buds are the only acceptable iPod accessory. To look Euro-cool, make sure you are listening to an obscure independent British punk rocker or electronic group. And please, no Kraftwerk!

Clipping out. Hard to believe, but this one actually deserves its own paragraph. One of the easiest

ways to determine the experience level of a cyclist is to see how early they clip out before coming to a stop. A novice rider will clip out as much as a block before a stop sign or red light. A real beginner will clip out a block before a green light, just on the off chance that it might turn red by the time they get to it.

To look cool, let the bike come to a full stop before clipping out. To look Eurocool, never clip out. Track stands are the only acceptable way to wait at a red light. And please, no basket-clips and no mountain bike shoes on the road bike! Wearing sneakers or mountain bike shoes on the road indicates that you intend to spend more time with your feet on the ground than in the pedals. You're a cyclist, darn it, not a pedestrian!

The Friday Ride Hero. Although getting dropped on the hard Saturday group ride isn't cool, there are actually more ways to look un-cool on the easy Friday recovery ride. The best way to look un-cool is by pushing the pace over 19 mph or by doing your intervals off the front of the ride. Friday rides are for recovery and socializing. You're not going to impress anyone by ramping up the pace. Unfortunately, messing up the pace is just as easy to do on the hard group ride and this is where things get really complicated. Sprinting at the wrong moment, setting the wrong pace up a climb or pushing the tempo at the wrong time can draw just as much scorn as pushing the pace on a recovery ride. Get to know the etiquette of a group ride by doing it at least two or three times before even thinking about getting to the front.

To look cool, show up to the Friday ride with a cup of coffee from an independent bohemian coffee shop and sip on it throughout the ride. To look Euro-cool, skip the coffee and blueberry muffin after the ride in favour of an espresso and a croissant. And please, never order any drink that has whip cream spilling out over the top of the cup. You didn't ride hard enough to burn off 20 grams of fat and 600 calories.

Group Ride Etiquette. Have you ever seen a pro team on a training ride? Side by side, shoulder to shoulder, quietly zipping along. Then, there is the club ride. You actually hear it before you see it. *Slowing! Right Side! Stopping! Rolling! Hole!* Then you see it. 25 riders spread out over an entire city block, three, sometimes four, wide. Weaving, swarming cars, running stop signs. Keep your group ride cool with the following four rules of thumb. 1) Never ride more than two abreast. 2) Never allow more than six inches distance between your front wheel to the rear wheel of the rider in front of you. 3) Maintain a distance, no more than 12 inches from your shoulder to the shoulder of the rider next to you. 4) It only takes one person to call things out. This should be the person at the front of the pack. Ideally, a little point of the hand is all it takes to indicate obstructions or turns. It shouldn't take two dozen people yelling at the top of their lungs to make a ride run smoothly.

To look cool, keep the group tight, wheel to wheel and shoulder to shoulder. To look Euro-cool, only ride with other cyclist wearing the exact same kit. If this is not possible, make sure there are no more than three different kits in the pack and that there are at least three riders wearing each kit. And please, never swarm cars at stop lights or steer a large group of riders through a red light. It's just not cool.

Carbon Wheels. Carbon wheels are for racing! Never under any circumstances should they be brought out on a training ride. Training wheels should be strong and heavy with lots and lots of spokes. Carbon wheels say to the group, *I'm not strong enough to do this ride without my \$2,000 feather weight wheels.* If you have the money to tear up a carbon wheel set on the road, then you'd be better off spending it on a coach who will get you fit enough to keep up with the group ride on regular training wheels.

To be cool, ride with Bontrager flat proof tubes. They're about four-times as heavy as regular tubes and they just about double your rolling resistance. To be Euro-cool, don't tell anyone you're riding with them. It's enough to know for yourself that you can keep up with those weenies even on a 22-pound bike. And please, no deep dish carbon clinchers. Carbon wheels are race wheels and clinchers are for training. Tubulars are the only way to go on your carbons.

Ornaments and Accessories. This one is simple. No stuffed animals or figurines mounted to your handlebars no matter what it signifies to you. No mirrors on your helmet or your glasses. No reflector strips taped to your bike. No giant flashing lights (LEDs are ok).

To look cool, ride without a saddle bag. Put one small tube, a tiny pump and a tire lever in your middle back pocket. To look Euro-cool, ride without a saddle bag and with nothing in your pockets. This is cool because it means you must have a team car following you with all your supplies. And please, don't plaster the stickers that came with your shoes or your glasses all over your bike unless your sponsorship contract with those companies specifically dictates that you must.

Cat 4 Marks. Otherwise known as a chain tattoo, this is what we called them back in the day before Category 5 existed. Nothing gives away a rookie faster than a black streak of grease on their calf. The experienced rider can actually get through an entire ride without rubbing up and down on their dirty chain.

To look cool, CLEAN YOUR CHAIN! To look Euro-cool, take your chain off once a week and soak it in degreaser along with the bearings from your bottom bracket and your headset (you old timers know what I'm talking about). And please, it's one thing to get grease on your leg. It's another thing to get it on your hands, your jersey, your face!

Shorts. MEN: there are many rules regarding shorts. First of all, they don't exist. Forget about them. The only acceptable garments to wear are bibs, no exceptions. But please, throw out your bibs when they start to wear out. Enough anatomy is revealed by the skin tight Lycra, we don't need to see a transparent butt panel. And this may seem obvious, but the jersey goes over the bibs!

To look cool, wear bibs, enough said. To look Euro cool, wear bib knickers or even bib tights. And please, don't wear underwear under your shorts!

How to Dress for Weather. If the temperature is below 60 degrees Fahrenheit, you must wear knees or better yet, full leg warmers. If you go out of the house in 50 degree weather with bare legs, it doesn't mean you're tough, it just means you're an idiot. In the summer, no matter how hot it gets, you must never wear a sleeveless jersey. Tan lines are the proud mark of a real cyclist. If you must get some additional ventilation, cut a vertical line along the inside seam of your sleeve with a pair of scissors. Not only will this help you stay cool, but it says, "my sponsors give me so many jerseys, I don't mind wrecking one."

To look cool, if you need to keep the sweat out of your eyes, wear a cycling cap, not a sweat band or a bandana. To look Euro-cool, just don't sweat. And please, no arm warmers with a sleeveless jersey!

When to Dress. Believe it or not there are a whole bunch of rules regarding when to get dressed for a race or a ride. In general, the less time you spend in your chamois, the cooler. If you are riding to the start, you should get dressed just before you leave the house. Don't eat breakfast or walk the dog in the morning in your full kit! The neighbours think you're goofy enough for cycling as it is! If you are driving to the start and it is less than a 45 minute trip, it is ok to wear your bibs under a pair of regular shorts, but not your jersey or your gloves and especially not your helmet. Also, make sure the suspenders on your bibs are hanging down, (preferably on the outside of your street shorts) and not over your shoulders. If it is longer than a 45 minute drive to the start, you must bring all your cycling gear in a cycling specific duffle bag such as a Specialized or Rudy Project bag. Brown paper bags or shopping bags are never acceptable.

To look cool, wrap a towel around your waist when you change. Changing skirts are practical, but not very cool. To look Euro-cool, make sure it's a white, thread bare towel taken from the cheap motel room that you and five teammates crammed into at your last stage race. And please, no bare butts in the parking lot. Once again, we see enough through the skin tight Lycra.

Once last time, *if you can't ride good, you might as well look good.* And please remember, I don't write these rules, I only live by them.